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every event for the fulfilling of his own eternal plan. To deal with such a subject in full, one would have to take soundings in the depths, not merely of providence, but also of predestination and the last things, and that is more than we can or need do here. The only aspect of divine sovereignty that will concern us in these pages is God's sovereignty in grace: his almighty action in bringing helpless sinners home through Christ to himself.

In examining the relationship between God's sovereignty and the Christian's task of evangelism, I have a specific aim in view. There is abroad today a widespread suspicion that a robust faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is bound to undermine any adequate sense of human responsibility. Such a faith is thought to be dangerous to spiritual health, because it breeds a habit of complacent inertia. In particular, it is thought to paralyze evangelism by robbing one both of the motive to evangelize and of the message to evangelize with. The supposition seems to be that you cannot evangelize effectively unless you are prepared to pretend while you are doing it that the doctrine of divine sovereignty is not true. I shall try to make it evident that this is nonsense. I shall try to show further that, so far from inhibiting evangelism, faith in the sovereignty of God's government and grace is the only thing that can sustain it, for it is the only thing that can give us the resilience that we need if we are to evangelize boldly and persistently, and not be daunted by temporary setbacks. So far from being weakened by this faith, therefore, evangelism will inevitably be weak and lack staying power without it. This, I hope, will become clear as we proceed.

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## DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

I do not intend to spend any time at all proving to you the general truth that God is sovereign in his world. There is no need; for I know that, if you are a Christian, you believe this already. How do I know that? Because I know that, if you are a Christian, you pray; and the recognition of God's sovereignty is the basis of your prayers. In prayer, you ask for things and give thanks for things. Why? Because you recognize that God is the author and source of all the good that you have had already, and all the good that you hope for in the future. This is the fundamental philosophy of Christian prayer. The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God's hand, but a humble acknowledgment of helplessness and dependence. When we are on our knees, we know that it is not we who control the world; it is not in our power, therefore, to supply our needs by our own independent efforts; every good thing that we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God, and will come, if it comes at all, as a gift from his hands. If this is



true even of our daily bread (and the Lord's Prayer teaches us that it is), much more is it true of spiritual benefits. This is all luminously clear to us when we are actually praying, whatever we may be betrayed into saying in argument afterward. In effect, therefore, what we do every time we pray is to confess our own impotence and God's sovereignty. The very fact that a Christian prays is thus proof positive that he believes in the lordship of his God.

Nor, again, am I going to spend time proving to you the particular truth that God is sovereign in salvation. For that, too, you believe already. Two facts show this. In the first place, you give God thanks for your conversion. Now why do you do that? Because you know in your heart that God was entirely responsible for it. You did not save yourself; he saved you. Your thanksgiving is itself an acknowledgment that your conversion was not your own work, but his work. You do not put it down to chance or accident that you came under Christian influence when you did. You do not put it down to chance or accident that you attended a Christian church, that you heard the Christian gospel, that you had Christian friends and, perhaps, a Christian home, that the Bible fell into your hands, that you saw your need of Christ and came to trust him as your Savior. You do not attribute your repenting and believing to your own wisdom, or prudence, or sound judgment, or good sense. Perhaps, in the days when you were seeking Christ, you labored and strove hard, read and pondered much, but all that outlay of effort did not make your conversion your own work. Your act of faith when you closed with Christ was yours in the sense that it was you

who performed it; but that does not mean that you saved yourself. In fact, it never occurs to you to suppose that you saved yourself.

As you look back, you take to yourself the blame for your past blindness and indifference and obstinacy and evasiveness in face of the gospel message; but you do not pat yourself on the back for having been at length mastered by the insistent Christ. You would never dream of dividing the credit for your salvation between God and yourself. You have never for one moment supposed that the decisive contribution to your salvation was yours and not God's. You have never told God that, while you are grateful for the means and opportunities of grace that he gave you, you realize that you have to thank, not him, but yourself for the fact that you responded to his call. Your heart revolts at the very thought of talking to God in such terms. In fact, you thank him no less sincerely for the gift of faith and repentance than for the gift of a Christ to trust and turn to. This is the way in which, since you became a Christian, your heart has always led you. You give God all the glory for all that your salvation involved, and you know that it would be blasphemy if you refused to thank him for bringing you to faith. Thus, in the way that you think of your conversion and give thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge the sovereignty of divine grace. And every other Christian in the world does the same.

It is instructive in this connection to ponder Charles Simeon's account of his conversation with John Wesley on December 10, 1784 (the date is given in Wesley's journal): "Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I



have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions. . . . Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?" "Yes," says the veteran, "I do indeed." "And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?" "Yes, solely through Christ." "But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?" "No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last." "Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?" "No." "What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?" "Yes, altogether." "And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?" "Yes, I have no hope but in him." "Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree."<sup>1</sup>

There is a second way in which you acknowledge that God

is sovereign in salvation. You pray for the conversion of others. In what terms, now, do you intercede for them? Do you limit yourself to asking that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves, independently of him? I do not think you do. I think that what you do is to pray in categorical terms that God will, quite simply and decisively, save them: that he will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Savior. You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation. You would not dream of making it a point in your prayer that you are not asking God actually to bring them to faith, because you recognize that that is something he cannot do. Nothing of the sort! When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith. You entreat him to do that very thing, and your confidence in asking rests on the certainty that he is able to do what you ask. And so indeed he is: this conviction, which animates your intercessions, is God's own truth, written on your heart by the Holy Spirit. In prayer, then (and the Christian is at his sanest and wisest when he prays), you know that it is God who saves men; you know that what makes men turn to God is God's own gracious work of drawing them to himself; and the content of your prayers is determined by this knowledge. Thus, by your practice of intercession, no less than by giving thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge and confess the sovereignty of God's grace. And so do all Christian people everywhere.

There is a long-standing controversy in the church as to whether God is really Lord in relation to human conduct and

<sup>1</sup>*Horae Homileticae*, Preface: i.xvii-xviii.



saving faith or not. What has been said shows us how we should regard this controversy. The situation is not what it seems to be. For it is not true that some Christians believe in divine sovereignty while others hold an opposite view. What is true is that all Christians believe in divine sovereignty, but some are not aware that they do, and mistakenly imagine and insist that they reject it. What causes this odd state of affairs? The root cause is the same as in most cases of error in the church—the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic. People see that the Bible teaches man's responsibility for his actions; they do not see (man, indeed, cannot see) how this is consistent with the sovereign lordship of God over those actions. They are not content to let the two truths live side by side, as they do in the Scriptures, but jump to the conclusion that, in order to uphold the biblical truth of human responsibility, they are bound to reject the equally biblical and equally true doctrine of divine sovereignty, and to explain away the great number of texts that teach it. The desire to oversimplify the Bible by cutting out the mysteries is natural to our perverse minds, and it is not surprising that even good people should fall victim to it. Hence this persistent and troublesome dispute. The irony of the situation, however, is that when we ask how the two sides pray, it becomes apparent that those who profess to deny God's sovereignty really believe in it just as strongly as those who affirm it.

How, then, do you pray? Do you ask God for your daily bread? Do you thank God for your conversion? Do you pray for the conversion of others? If the answer is "no," I can only say that I do not think you are yet born again. But if the answer is "yes"—well, that proves that, whatever side you may have taken in debates on this question in the past, in your heart you believe in the sovereignty of God no less firmly than anyone else. On our feet we may have arguments about it, but on our knees we are all agreed. And it is this common agreement, of which our prayers give proof, that I take as our starting point now.

Our aim in the present study is to think out the nature of the Christian's evangelistic task in the light of the agreed presupposition that God is sovereign in salvation. Now we need to recognize right at the outset that this is no easy assignment. All theological topics create puzzles for the unwary, for God's truth is never quite what men would have expected; and our present subject is more treacherous than most. This is because in reaching it through we have to deal with an anomaly in the biblical revelation, and in such circumstances our human minds are more than ordinarily apt to go astray.

What is an anomaly? The Shorter Catechism teaches that we believe in "A contradiction between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, which is not really logical, consistent or necessary." For our purposes, however, the definition is not quite accurate, for



opening words of the book "an appearance of contradiction." For the whole is not an antinomy—in theology at any rate—because it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths. As often we find what a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them, each rests on clear and solid evidence, but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. Let me give an example. Modern physics faces an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles, but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other, and so two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tiny minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts.

It appears, therefore, that an antinomy is not the same thing as a paradox. A paradox is a figure of speech, a play on words. It is a form of statement that seems to unite two opposing ideas, or to do something by the very terms in which it is expressed. Many truths about the Christian life can be expressed as paradoxes. A *Book of Common Prayer* collect, for instance, declares that God's "service is perfect wisdom."

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can go further through becoming a slave. Paul states without number one of his own Christian experiences: "I am weak, yet always ready, as those who are weak, yet possessing everything." (2 Cor. 12:10) "I am weak," but

## DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

not real, and a logician might show how it can be eliminated and the same idea expressed in unparadoxical form. In other words a paradox is always dispensable. Look at the examples quoted. The *Book of Common Prayer* might have said that those who serve God are free from all dominion. In 2 Corinthians 12:10 Paul might have said that wisdom at circumstances and by the God are constantly combined in his

Our aim in the present study is to think out the nature of the Christian's evangelistic task in the light of this agreed presupposition that God is sovereign in salvation. Now, we need to recognize right at the outset that this is no easy assignment. All theological topics contain pitfalls for the unwary, for God's truth is never quite what man would have expected; and our present subject is more treacherous than most. This is because in thinking it through we have to deal with an antinomy in the biblical revelation, and in such circumstances our finite, fallen minds are more than ordinarily apt to go astray.

What is an antinomy? The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable or necessary." For our purposes, however, this definition is not quite accurate; the



opening words should read “an appearance of contradiction.” For the whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. Let me give an example. Modern physics faces an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles, but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other; the two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts.

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man goes free through becoming a slave. Paul states various paradoxes of his own Christian experience: “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything”; “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 6:10; 12:10). The point of a paradox, however, is that what creates the appearance of contradiction is not the facts, but the words. The contradiction is verbal, but not real, and a little thought shows how it can be eliminated and the same idea expressed in nonparadoxical form. In other words a paradox is always *dispensable*. Look at the examples quoted. The *Book of Common Prayer* might have said that those who serve God are free from sin’s dominion. In 2 Corinthians 6:10 Paul might have said that sorrow at circumstances and joy in God are constantly combined in his experience, and that, though he owns no property and has no bank balance, there is a sense in which everything belongs to him, because he is Christ’s, and Christ is Lord of all. Again, in 2 Corinthians 12:10, he might have said that the Lord strengthens him most when he is most conscious of his natural infirmity. Such nonparadoxical forms of speech are clumsy and dull beside the paradoxes which they would replace, but they express precisely the same meaning. For a paradox is merely a matter of how you use words; the employment of paradox is an arresting trick of speech, but it does not imply even an appearance of contradiction in the facts that you are describing.

Also it should be noted that a paradox is always *comprehensible*. A speaker or writer casts his ideas into paradoxes in order to make them memorable and provoke thought



about them. But the person at the receiving end must be able, on reflection, to see how to unravel the paradox, otherwise it will seem to him to be really self-contradictory, and therefore really meaningless. An incomprehensible paradox could not be distinguished from a mere contradiction in terms. Sheer paradox would thus have to be written off as sheer nonsense.

By contrast, however, an antinomy is neither dispensable nor comprehensible. It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is forced on us by the facts themselves. It is unavoidable, and it is insoluble. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as not rival alternatives but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other. Be careful, therefore, not to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other (such deductions would, for that very reason, be certainly unsound). Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference (i.e., the area delimited by the evidence from which the principle has been drawn). Note what connections exist between the two truths and their two frames of reference, and teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality

itself has proved actually to contain them both. This is how antinomies must be handled, whether in nature or in Scripture. This, as I understand it, is how modern physics deals with the problem of light, and this is how Christians have to deal with the antinomies of biblical teaching.

The particular antinomy which concerns us here is the apparent opposition between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, or (putting it more biblically) between what God does as King and what he does as Judge. Scripture teaches that, as King, he orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with his own eternal purpose (see Gen 14:8; 50:20; Prov 16:9; 21:1; Mt 10:29; Acts 9:27-28; Rom 9:20-21; Eph 1:11, etc.). Scripture also teaches that, as Judge, he holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues (see Mt 25; Rom 2:1-16; Rev 20:11-13, etc.). Thus, hearers of the gospel are responsible for their reaction; if they reject the good news, they are guilty of unbelief. "Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed" (Jn 3:18; cf. Mt 11:20-24; Acts 13:38-41; 2 Thess 1:7-10, etc.). Again, Paul, entrusted with the gospel, is responsible for preaching it; if he neglects his commission, he is penalized for unfaithfulness. "Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16; cf. Ezek 3:17ff.; 33:7ff.). God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught to us side by side in the same Bible; sometimes, indeed, in the same text.<sup>1</sup> Both are thus guaranteed to

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lk 22:22: "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined (to his death), but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" Cf. Acts 2:23.



us by the same divine authority; both, therefore, are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other. Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antinomy in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism.

To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable. It sounds like a contradiction, and our first reaction is to complain that it is absurd. Paul notices this complaint in Romans 9. "You will say to me then, 'Why does he [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?'" (Rom 9:19). If, as our Lord, God orders all our actions, how can it be reasonable or right for him to act also as our Judge, and condemn our shortcomings? Observe how Paul replies. He does not attempt to demonstrate the propriety of God's action; instead, he rebukes the spirit of the question. "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" What the objector has to learn is that he, a creature and a sinner, has no right whatsoever to find fault with the revealed ways of God. Creatures are not entitled to register complaints about their Creator. As Paul goes on to say, God's sovereignty is wholly just, for his right to dispose of his creatures is absolute (Rom 9:20-21). Earlier in the epistle, he had shown that God's judgment of sinners is also wholly just, since our sins richly deserve his sentence (Rom 1:18ff., 32; 2:1-16). Our part, he would tell us, is to acknowledge these facts, and to adore God's righteousness, both as King and as Judge; not to speculate as to how his just sov-

ereignty can be consistent with his just judgment, and certainly not to call the justice of either in question because we find the problem of their relationship too hard for us! Our speculations are not the measure of our God. The Creator has told us that he is both a sovereign Lord and a righteous Judge, and that should be enough for us. Why do we hesitate to take his word for it? Can we not trust what he says?

We ought not, in any case, to be surprised when we find mysteries of this sort in God's Word. For the Creator is incomprehensible to his creatures. A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all. For what the God of the Bible says is this: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, / neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. / For as the heavens are higher than the earth, / so are my ways higher than your ways / and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9). The antinomy which we face now is only one of a number that the Bible contains. We may be sure that they all find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God, and we may hope that in heaven we shall understand them ourselves. But meanwhile, our wisdom is to maintain with equal emphasis both the apparently conflicting truths in each case, to hold them together in the relation in which the Bible itself sets them, and to recognize that here is a mystery which we cannot expect to solve in this world.

This is easily said, but the thing is not easily done. For our minds dislike antinomies. We like to tie up everything into



neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out. Hence we are tempted to get rid of antinomies from our minds by illegitimate means: to suppress, or jettison, one truth in the supposed interests of the other, and for the sake of a tidier theology. So it is in the present case. The temptation is to undercut and maim the one truth by the way in which we stress the other: to assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or to affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man. Both mistakes need to be guarded against. It is worth reflecting, therefore, on the way in which these temptations arise in connection specifically with evangelism.

There is, first, the temptation to *an exclusive concern with human responsibility*. As we have seen, human responsibility is a fact, and a very solemn fact. Man's responsibility to his Maker is, indeed, the fundamental fact of his life, and it can never be taken too seriously. God made us responsible moral agents, and he will not treat us as anything less. His Word addresses each of us individually, and each of us is responsible for the way in which he responds—for his attention or inattention, his belief or unbelief, his obedience or disobedience. We cannot evade responsibility for our reaction to God's revelation. We live under his law. We must answer to him for our lives.

Man without Christ is a guilty sinner, answerable to God for breaking his law. That is why he needs the gospel. When he hears the gospel, he is responsible for the decision that he makes about it. It sets before him a choice between life and

death, the most momentous choice that any man can ever face. When we present the gospel to an unconverted man, it is very likely that, without fully realizing what he is doing, he will try to blind himself to the gravity of this issue, and thereby to justify himself in shrugging the whole thing off. Then we have to use every legitimate means in our power to bring home to him the seriousness of the choice that confronts him, and to urge him not to let himself treat so solemn a matter in an irresponsible way. When we preach the promises and invitations of the gospel, and offer Christ to sinful men and women, it is part of our task to emphasize and re-emphasize that they are responsible to God for the way in which they react to the good news of his grace. No preacher can ever make this point too strongly.

Similarly, we ourselves have a responsibility for making the gospel known. Christ's command to his disciples, "Go . . . and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), was spoken to them in their representative capacity; this is Christ's command, not merely to the apostles, but to the whole Church. Evangelism is the inalienable responsibility of every Christian community, and every Christian person. We are all under orders to devote ourselves to spreading the good news, and to use all our ingenuity and enterprise to bring it to the notice of the whole world. The Christian, therefore, must constantly be searching his conscience, asking himself if he is doing all that he might be doing in this field. For this also is a responsibility that cannot be shrugged off.

It is necessary, therefore, to take the thought of human responsibility, as it affects both the preacher and the hearer



of the gospel, very seriously indeed. But we must not let it drive the thought of divine sovereignty out of our minds. While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves. It is God who brings men and women under the sound of the gospel, and it is God who brings them to faith in Christ. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that he uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument. We must not at any stage forget that. For if we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray.

Let us work this out. If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts—to evangelize, not only faithfully, but also successfully—our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. We should conclude that our basic equipment, both for personal dealing and for public preaching, must be twofold. We must have not merely a clear grasp of the meaning and application of the gospel but also an irresistible technique for inducing a response. We should, therefore, make it our business to try and develop such a technique. And we should evaluate all evangelism, our own and other

people's, by the criterion not only of the message preached but also of visible results. If our own efforts were not bearing fruit, we should conclude that our technique still needed improving. If they were bearing fruit, we should conclude that this justified the technique we had been using. We should regard evangelism as an activity involving a battle of wills between ourselves and those to whom we go, a battle in which victory depends on our firing off a heavy enough barrage of calculated effects. Thus our philosophy of evangelism would become terrifyingly similar to the philosophy of brainwashing. And we would no longer be able to argue, when such a similarity is asserted to be a fact, that this is not a proper conception of evangelism.<sup>2</sup> For it would be a proper conception of evangelism if the production of converts was really our responsibility.

This shows us the danger of forgetting the practical implications of God's sovereignty. It is right to recognize our responsibility to engage in aggressive evangelism. It is right to desire the conversion of unbelievers. It is right to want one's presentation of the gospel to be as clear and forcible as possible. If we preferred that converts should be few and far between, and did not care whether our proclaiming of Christ went home or not, there would be something wrong with us. But it is not right when we take it on us to do more than God has given us to do. It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can

<sup>2</sup>As D. M. Lloyd-Jones argues in *Conversions: Psychological and Spiritual* (I.V.F., 1959), against the thesis of Dr. William Sargant.



accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Spirit, and to exalt ourselves as the agents of the new birth. And the point that we must see is this: *only by letting our knowledge of God's sovereignty control the way in which we plan, and pray, and work in his service, can we avoid becoming guilty of this fault.* For where we are not consciously relying on God, there we shall inevitably be found relying on ourselves. And the spirit of self-reliance is a blight on evangelism. Such, however, is the inevitable consequence of forgetting God's sovereignty in the conversion of souls.

But there is an opposite temptation that threatens us also: namely, the temptation to *an exclusive concern with divine sovereignty.*

There are some Christians whose minds are constantly taken up with thoughts of the sovereignty of God. This truth means a great deal to them. It has come to them quite suddenly, perhaps, and with the force of a tremendous revelation. They would say that it has caused a real Copernican revolution in their outlook; it has given a new center to their entire personal universe. Previously, as they now see, man had been central in their universe, and God had been on the circumference. They had thought of him as a spectator of events in his world, rather than as their author. They had assumed that the controlling factor in every situation was man's handling of it rather than God's plan for it, and they had looked on the happiness of human beings as the most interesting and important thing in creation, for God no less than for themselves. But now they see that this man-centered outlook was sinful and unbiblical; they see that, from one standpoint, the whole pur-

pose of the Bible is to overthrow it, and that books like Deuteronomy and Isaiah and John's Gospel and Romans smash it to smithereens in almost every chapter; and they realize that henceforth God must be central in their thoughts and concerns, just as he is central in reality in his own world. Now they feel the force of the famous first answer in the Westminster *Shorter Catechism*: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and [by so doing, and in so doing,] to enjoy him for ever." Now they see that the way to find the happiness that God promises is not to seek it as an end in itself, but to forget oneself in the daily preoccupation of seeking God's glory and doing his will and proving his power through the ups and downs and stresses and strains of everyday life. They see that it is the glory and praise of God that must absorb them henceforth, for time and for eternity. They see that the whole purpose of their existence is that with heart and life they should worship and exalt God. In every situation, therefore, their one question is: what will make the most for God's glory? What should I do in order that in these circumstances God may be magnified?

And they see, as they ask this question, that, though God uses men as means for achieving his purposes, in the last analysis nothing depends on man; everything depends, rather, on the God who raises men up to do his will. They see, too, that God is handling every situation before his servants come on the scene, and that he continues to handle it and work out his will in it through each thing that they do—through their mistakes and failures, no less than through their personal successes. They see, therefore, that they need never fear for the ark of God, as Uzzah feared for it, for God



will maintain his own cause. They see that they need never make Uzzah's mistake, of taking too much on them, and doing God's work in a forbidden way for fear that otherwise it would not get done at all (2 Sam 6:6-7).<sup>3</sup> They see that, since God is always in control, they need never fear that they will expose him to loss and damage if they limit themselves to serving him in the way that he has appointed. They see that any other supposition would in effect be a denial of his wisdom, or his sovereignty, or both. They see, also, that the Christian must never for one moment imagine himself to be indispensable to God, or allow himself to behave as if he were. The God who sent him, and is pleased to work with him, can do without him. He must be ready to spend and be spent in the tasks that God sets him; but he must never suppose that the loss to the church would be irreparable if God should lay him aside and use someone else. He must not at any point say to himself, "God's cause would collapse without me and the work I am doing"—for there is never any reason to think this is so. It is never true that God would be at a loss without you and me. Those who have begun to understand the sovereignty of God see all this, and so they seek to efface themselves in all their work for God. They thus bear a practical witness to their belief that God is great, and reigns, by trying to make themselves small, and to act in a way which is itself an acknowledgment that the fruitfulness of their Christian service depends wholly on God, and not on themselves. And up to this point they are right.

They are, however, beset by exactly the opposite tempta-

<sup>3</sup>Uzzah transgressed the prohibition of Num 4:5.

tion to that discussed above. In their zeal to glorify God by acknowledging his sovereignty in grace, and by refusing to imagine that their own services are indispensable to him, they are tempted to lose sight of the church's responsibility to evangelize. Their temptation is to reason thus: "Agreed, the world is ungodly; but, surely, the less we do about it, the more God will be glorified when at length he breaks in to restore the situation. The most important thing for us to do is to take care that we leave the initiative in his hands." They are tempted, therefore, to suspect all enterprise in evangelism, whether organized or on the personal level, as if there were something essentially and inescapably man-exalting about it. They are haunted by the fear of running ahead of God, and feel that there is nothing more urgent than to guard against the possibility of doing this.

Perhaps the classic instance of this way of thinking was provided two centuries ago by the chairman of the ministers' fraternal at which William Carey mooted the founding of a missionary society. "Sit down, young man," said the old warrior; "when God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid, or mine!" The idea of taking the initiative in going out to find men of all nations for Christ struck him as improper and, indeed, presumptuous.

Now, think twice before you condemn that old man. He was not entirely without understanding. He had at least grasped that it is God who saves, and that he saves according to his own purpose, and does not take orders from man in the matter. He had grasped too that we must never suppose that without our help God would be helpless. He had, in other



words, learned to take the sovereignty of God perfectly seriously. His mistake was that he was not taking the church's evangelistic responsibility with equal seriousness. He was forgetting that God's way of saving men is to send out his servants to tell them the gospel, and that the church has been charged to go into all the world for that very purpose.

But this is something that we must not forget. Christ's command means that we all should be devoting all our resources of ingenuity and enterprise to the task of making the gospel known in every possible way to every possible person. Unconcern and inaction with regard to evangelism are always, therefore, inexcusable. And the doctrine of divine sovereignty would be grossly misapplied if we should invoke it in such a way as to lessen the urgency, and immediacy, and priority, and binding constraint, of the evangelistic imperative. No revealed truth may be invoked to extenuate sin. God did not teach us the reality of his rule in order to give us an excuse for neglecting his orders.

In our Lord's parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), the "good and faithful" servants were those who furthered their master's interests by making the most enterprising lawful use that they could of what was entrusted to them. The servant who buried his talent, and did nothing with it beyond keeping it intact, no doubt imagined that he was being extremely good and faithful, but his master judged him to be "wicked," "slothful" and "unprofitable." For what Christ has given us to use must be put to use; it is not enough simply to hide it away. We may apply this to our stewardship of the gospel. The truth about salvation has been made known to

us, not for us simply to preserve (though we must certainly do that), but also, and primarily, for us to spread. The light is not meant to be hidden under the bushel. It is meant to shine; and it is our business to see that it shines. "You are the light of the world," says our Lord (Mt 5:14-16). He who does not devote himself to evangelism in every way that he can is not, therefore, playing the part of a good and faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

Here, then, are two opposite pitfalls: a Scylla and Charybdis of error. Each is the result of partial vision, which means partial blindness; each reveals a failure to face squarely the biblical antinomy of the responsibility of man and the sovereignty of God. Both unite to warn us not to pit these truths against each other, nor to allow either to obscure or overshadow the other in our minds. Both unite to warn us also against reacting from one extreme of error into the other. If we did that, our last state might well be worse than the first. What are we to do, then? To direct our course along the narrow channel that leads between Scylla and Charybdis; in other words, to avoid both extremes. How? By making it our business to believe both these doctrines with all our might, and to keep both constantly before us for the guidance and government of our lives.

We shall proceed now according to this maxim. In what follows, we shall try to take both doctrines perfectly seriously, as the Bible does, and to view them in their positive biblical relationship. We shall not oppose them to each other, for the Bible does not oppose them to each other. Nor shall we qualify, or modify, or water down, either of them in terms



of the other, for this is not what the Bible does either. What the Bible does is to assert both truths side by side in the strongest and most unambiguous terms as two ultimate facts; this, therefore, is the position that we must take in our own thinking. C. H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends." Friends?—yes, friends. This is the point that we have to grasp. In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are friends, and they work together. I hope that what I am to say now about evangelism will help to make this clear.

## 3

## EVANGELISM

We shall now try to answer from Scripture the following four questions concerning the Christian's evangelistic responsibility. What is evangelism? What is the evangelistic message? What is the motive for evangelizing? By what means and methods should evangelism be practiced?

## WHAT IS EVANGELISM?

It might be expected that evangelical Christians would not need to spend time discussing this question. In view of the emphasis that evangelicals always, and rightly, lay on the primacy of evangelism, it would be natural to assume that we were all perfectly unanimous as to what evangelism is. Yet, in fact, much of the confusion in present-day debates about evangelism arises from lack of agreement at this point. The root of the confusion can be stated in a sentence. It is our widespread and persistent habit of defining evangelism in terms, not of a message delivered, but of an effect produced in our hearers.