

A photograph of a sailboat on the ocean at sunset. The sky is filled with large, white and grey clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The water is dark with some ripples. The sailboat is positioned in the middle ground, slightly to the left of the center.

J. I. PACKER

FOREWORD BY MARK DEVER

EVANGELISM
AND THE
SOVEREIGNTY
OF GOD

BY THE AUTHOR OF *KNOWING GOD*

J. I. PACKER

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AND THE
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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426

World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com

E-mail: email@ivpress.com

2012 by J. I. Packer

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Cover design: Cindy Kiple

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ISBN 978-0-8308-6674-8 (digital)

ISBN 978-0-8308-3799-1 (print)

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FOREWORD

Before J. I. Packer became an evangelical superstar with the publication of *Knowing God* in 1973, he had already made important contributions to evangelical readers. Packer had a knack for addressing key topics succinctly and powerfully. What others would do in long and ponderous tomes, Packer would address, fairly and squarely, with a little volume of three or four chapters. The clarion call for “God-centeredness,” long before John Piper’s *Desiring God* or even Packer’s own *Knowing God*, was Packer’s little introduction for the republication of John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. The loss of faith in Scripture he met with the little volume “*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*.” And, in July of 1961 appeared the book you now hold in your hands—*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.

The title both summarizes the content and invites the reader perfectly. Various people are called to read the book

by this simple title. Are you interested in evangelism? This book will address it directly by explaining what it is, and the need for it, in terms that are both simple and theologically careful. It will help you evangelize better.

Are you interested in the doctrine of God's sovereignty? This book is for you. In the most basic yet informed way, Packer addresses the simple question, "If God is in control, why should we do anything at all? Why should we work? Why should we pray? And especially, why should we evangelize?"

Packer addresses this question so clearly and biblically that this book is good for anyone who is beginning to wrestle with questions of how God's sovereignty can fit with any area of human responsibility. I've often recommended this book to faithful Christians who are confused about how they are to think about prayer, missions, giving—any area in which our efforts could be wrongly pitted against God's own necessary action. Packer introduces us to clear truths, handles Scripture with exemplary care, and supplies us with just the right amount of illustrations and application.

In this book, an antinomy is helpfully distinguished from a paradox. Opposites are explained. Cheap theological points are never scored. Packer insists that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are doctrines that need no reconciling. Instead, they are, as Packer calls them, "friends."

Throughout this volume, agreement is graciously assumed as Packer leads us to lay aside old divisions and, again, consider together the Bible, and the Bible's God. Though written almost fifty years ago, this book is timeless. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* was written out of a warm Christian

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experience, and it assumes the reader is reading out of that same affection for God. In this book, speculation fades and trust increases. And as that happens, we find ourselves becoming more faithful—and more frequent!—evangelists.

If you would like to share in that experience, do what so many other readers have done, what I have done, what many I've given this book to over the years have done: pray, and read on.

Mark Dever

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PREFACE

The nucleus of the following discourse was an address given at the Pre-Mission Conference of the London Inter-Faculty Christian Union on October 24, 1959. It has been expanded in the hope of giving it a wider usefulness. Its origin, and the practical nature of its subject matter, accounts for its homiletical style.

Lest its purpose be misconceived, may I say at the outset what it is not.

It is not a blueprint for evangelistic action today, though it sets out relevant principles for determining any evangelistic strategy.

It is not a contribution to the current controversy about modern evangelistic methods, though it lays down relevant principles for settling that controversy.

It is not a critique of the evangelistic principles of any particular person or persons, though it provides relevant principles for evaluating all evangelistic activities.

What is it, then? It is a piece of biblical and theological reasoning, designed to clarify the relationship between three realities: God's sovereignty, man's responsibility and the Christian's evangelistic duty. The last of these is its proper subject; divine sovereignty and human responsibility are discussed only so far as they bear on evangelism. The aim of the discourse is to dispel the suspicion (current, it seems, in some quarters) that faith in the absolute sovereignty of God hinders a full recognition and acceptance of evangelistic responsibility, and to show that, on the contrary, only this faith can give Christians the strength that they need to fulfill their evangelistic task.

It must not be thought that on all the points with which I deal I am trying to lay down some sort of "I.V.F. orthodoxy." The limits of "I.V.F. orthodoxy" are set out in the Fellowship's doctrinal basis. Beyond those limits, members of the Fellowship are free, in John Wesley's phrase, to "think and let think," and no opinion on any subject can be regarded as the only one permissible. On the subject now to be dealt with, it may well be that some members of the Fellowship will think differently from the present writer. Equally, however, an author has a right to his own opinion, and he cannot be expected to conceal his views when he believes them to be biblical, relevant and (in the strict sense) edifying.

J. I. Packer



INTRODUCTION

Always and everywhere the servants of Christ are under orders to evangelize, and I hope that what I shall say now will act as an incentive to this task. I hope, too, that it will serve a further purpose. There is in Christian circles at the present time much heart-searching and dispute about ways and means of evangelism. I want to speak about the spiritual factors involved in evangelizing, and I hope that what I say may help toward resolving some of the current disagreements and debates.

Evangelism is my proper subject, and I am to speak of it in relation to the sovereignty of God. That means that I shall not be speaking of the sovereignty of God further than is necessary for right thinking about evangelism. Divine sovereignty is a vast subject: it embraces everything that comes into the biblical picture of God as Lord and King in his world, the One who “works all things according to the counsel of his will,” (Eph 1:11), directing every process and ordering

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.



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."¹

There is a second way in which you acknowledge that God

¹*Horae Homileticae*, Preface: i.xvii-xviii.

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

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.