

7 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN SALVATION

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Introduction:

Misconception 1: God's goodness and God's sovereignty are competing attributes.

Many Christians have a secret, unverballed idea that God's sovereignty and God's goodness are at war. However, God's goodness doesn't go on holiday while His sovereignty acts. Sovereignty is not an evil or ugly part of God.

Romans 8:28-30

Never break the link between God's promise of good in Romans 8:28 and His sovereign, saving acts in Romans 8:29-30.

Exodus 33:18-19

When Moses asked to know God's glory, God declared to Moses two things.

1. His infinite goodness
2. His complete sovereignty over whom He does and does not forgive.

In God's mind, His goodness and His sovereignty go together: when He is being sovereign, He is being good.

Misconception 2: Salvation is possible apart from God's sovereign intervention.

To remove *election* from your doctrine is to remove *salvation* from your doctrine.

Evidence from Romans:

Romans 1:18 Mankind's universal problem—truth suppression.

Romans 3:10-12 Mankind's universal problem—stubborn waywardness.

Will it take God grabbing us by the scruff of our necks, refusing our refusal of Him, and sovereignly regenerating us so that we will love and submit to His Son? Indeed, it will take exactly that.

Whenever you explain the sovereignty of God in salvation to a sceptic, you should always start with a biblical understanding of man's sinfulness.

Romans 8:6-8 Man's universal problems

- hostile toward God
- unwilling to submit to God
- constitutionally unable to obey God
- unable to please God

The Pelagian view: Romans is wrong about man.

The Arminian view: Romans is right about man, but...

The Arminian halfway salvation or semi-regeneration view:

Christ's death is applied to *all* sinners in a halfway manner. In so doing, God doesn't actually save them. He only changes or regenerates them enough, so that they are now free to choose to believe in Christ on their own. At that point God leaves off His work, leaving it up to each individual to decide whether he will or won't believe in Christ.

Problems:

1. God doesn't get all the glory, i.e., boasting is possible (Eph 2:8-9; Rom 3:27; Gal 6:14; 1 Cor 1:29-31).
2. No text teaches this halfway salvation or semi-regeneration view.

The only way that truth-suppressing, unrighteous, ignorant, God-rejecting, hostile, unable-and-unwilling-to-obey-God sinners can be saved is for God to refuse their impenitent, immutable rejection of Him, omnipotently regenerating them.

Summary: A biblical view of *sin* presses you irresistibly to a biblical view of *salvation*.

Misconception 3: If God is sovereign, He should do more to save sinners.

If God just did a little more, tried a little harder, then more would be saved: "[God,] Thou hast tried once to convert me from sin; now try again, and try harder." (Quoted in Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 267-68). In this view, blame is placed on God: He hasn't done enough to draw sinners to Christ.

The unjustness of the accusation:

Romans outlines three powerful testimonies that God has given sinners to draw them to Himself.

Romans 1:18-20	Creation
Romans 2:14-16	Conscience
Romans 3:21-26	Christ

Misconception 4: A belief in God's sovereignty undercuts the motivation to evangelise.

The accusation: If election is true, then Christians have no motivation to preach the gospel.

2 Responses:

1. Christ's command to evangelise is motivation enough.
2. In 2 Timothy 2:10, Paul said that he considered election a primary motivation for evangelism, arguing exactly the opposite as many Christians today argue. Paul knew that if God *hadn't* sovereignly elected some, *no* sinner would believe.

J. I. Packer:

The sovereignty of God ... is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless Can you or I give life to the spiritually dead? No. Can we hope to convince sinners of the truth of the gospel by patient explanation? No Our approach to evangelism is not realistic till we have faced this shattering fact ... that evangelism, regarded as a human enterprise, must be expected to fail. (Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 106-110)

3. Many of the great evangelists of church history were staunchly committed to the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Misconception 5: If God is sovereign, then He'll save me when He wants to.

This is a misconception clung to by many religious unbelievers. "My unbelief is really God's fault, and since He's the One who'll have to change it, I'll just keep living in wicked disregard of Him and His ways until He turns on the switch, and I get saved."

Response:

When it comes to judgement, the Scripture emphasises that sinners are judged because of their own choices and actions.

John 3:18, 36

"What if I want to believe but I'm not elect?" If you believe, you're elect! (Acts 16:31).

Misconception 6: God can choose to be less than sovereign.

It is popular in some theological circles to say that God is sovereign, but in salvation, God has chosen to set aside His sovereignty, allowing men to choose for themselves. God is sovereign, but at this critical juncture, God suspends His sovereignty and grants men a determinative choice.

Clark Pinnock and the idea of *shared* sovereignty (from *Most Moved Mover*, 42, 53, 56, 93):

- *God showed himself willing to share power. He does not insist on being the only power.*
- *There is no single and all-determining divine will that calls all the shots.*
- *We are not asked to believe that God exercises all-controlling sovereignty ...*
- *God exercises sovereignty by sharing power.*

Response:

The idea of a "shared sovereignty" is simply a contradiction in terms. God cannot abandon His sovereignty at some points, turning it off like a faucet or a light switch. God cannot be less than sovereign any more than He can be less than eternal or less than omnipotent or less than love.

The biblical emphasis on the *all-encompassing* nature of God's sovereignty:

Ps 103:19

Is 43:13

Lam 3:37

Matt 28:18

God's all-encompassing sovereignty applied to salvation specifically:

Eph 1:11

It is a misconception to believe that God has chosen—or even *could* choose—to be less than sovereign in regard to salvation.

Misconception 7: Either God is sovereign or man is responsible; both can't be true.

The biblical tension: Is God sovereign or are men responsible?

Illustrations of similar tensions in Christian theology:

- the Trinity
- the God-man union in Christ
- pray and sovereignty
- sanctification—God's work or man's (Phil 2:12-13)

Principle: When infinity touches finiteness, there are going to be some things we don't understand. When a sovereign God interacts with responsible men, there is going to be a gap, some things we can't explain.

Sovereignty and responsibility side by side:

Romans 9 and 10 Is 10:5-7 Hab 1:6-11

Acts 2:23; 3:13-15 John 1:11-13 Rev 20:11-15

Summary: The relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is not *either/or*; it is *both/and*.

Conclusion: The seven misconceptions restated in terms of right, biblical thinking:

1. God's sovereignty and His goodness go together; they are not at odds with one another.
2. We are so dominated by sin, the only way we can be saved is by a divine, sovereign overruling of our sin-captivated wills.
3. God has given sinners more than enough opportunities to believe.
4. Rightly understood, election doesn't undercut your motivation to evangelise.
5. The fatalistic idea that, "God will save me when He wants to," is perverted sinner-logic, and is no excuse for refusing to repent.
6. God can't be less than sovereign, anymore than He can be less than eternal, omnipotent, holy, or love.
7. Sovereignty and responsibility are not an either/or issue. Both are clearly taught in the Scripture; we must embrace both and deny neither.