

God's Part and Ours in Living the Christian Life

I. Introductory Biblical Text

Rom. 11:33-36 (God's Sovereignty in human history and our salvation in the context of ch. 11)

Rom. 11:19-23 (Human responsibility within God's decreed purpose)

These two dominant themes are at the root of all biblical theology and pervade all Scripture. Eternity has broken in upon time. The Infinite (God) has entered into relationship with the finite (us). Thus, for us God's ways are "past finding out." And yet He has revealed Himself and does reveal Himself in terms that we can understand!

In fact these two themes of God's sovereign action and our initiative not only pervade Scripture, but they also are at the foundation of what it means to live a balanced and fruitful Christian life. The various aspects of Christian living, including the fruit of the Spirit, gifts of the Spirit, prayer, evangelism, knowing and doing the will of God all presuppose the tension that truly does exist between God's part and our part in living the Christian life! How should we understand these two as operative *together* in Christian experience? That is our topic this evening.

The philosopher may speak of dialectic or paradox in such an understanding of the Christian life. . By "dialectic" we mean two opposites that together form the whole picture. Similarly, "paradox" can refer to a statement that is seemingly contradictory but may be true. Biblically speaking, it is a statement that appears to us to be contradictory, but which nevertheless accords with ultimate reality in God's eternal wisdom and ways. Thus, let us consider *God's* part and *our* part in living the Christian life.

II. First, two illustrations of this paradoxical divine-human relationship by referring to events in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A. The Division of the Israelite nation into two kingdoms: the North and the South

1 Kings. 11:11 (with vss. 1-2)--*God* divided the nation into two.

1 Kings 12:16, 19 (with vss. 1-5, 11)--*North decided* to separate from Judah in the South.

But note how the text explains the choice that Israel in the North made, in verse 15! It was a turn of events from the Lord. Did Israel freely decide what to do? Was it *their* decision? Yes. Did they pray about it first? There is no record of this. It is highly unlikely. It appears to be a very human political reaction to Rehoboam's arrogance. But was it a *divine* act? The Scripture say it was brought about by God.

Here is a vivid Old Testament example of God's sovereignty interfacing with human decision.

B. In the New Testament we can vividly see this interrelationship between God's act and human choice. For instance we can look at the Gospel according to John.

In 6:37, 39 all who come to Jesus do so because they have already been given to Jesus by the Father, and the Father's will is that none of them will be lost. In fact according to verses 44 and 65 none are able to come to Jesus unless they have been drawn by the Father and this decision has been granted by the Father.

Where is human responsibility in this? Interestingly enough, Jesus seems to presuppose this when he says to Jews who wanted to kill him: You are unwilling to come to me that you may have life (5:40). He adds: How can you believe when you receive glory from one another (5:44). Jesus apparently places the responsibility of their rejection of Him squarely on them! But later we read in chapter 6 that all the Father gives to Jesus WILL come to Him! How do we put these two together?

This is the paradox of divine and human initiatives. **God accomplishes His will, but it is through the decisions of people who are accountable for the decision they choose to make.**

We could draw upon many other biblical texts to illustrate both sides of this paradox.

III. So what is the value of considering this basic theology of Scripture?

Whenever we emphasize one side to the neglect of the other, we are in danger of becoming unbalanced in our *living* the Christian life!

William Carey is remembered as the Father of modern missions. The story is told that in the latter part of the 18th century, Carey went to a group of Baptist church leaders in England and asked for support for doing pioneer work in opening up India to the gospel. As the story goes: He was told: "Sit down young man. When God gets ready to convert the heathen, we will do so without your help." They had a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, but it was unbalanced with the exercise of human initiative. As we know, Carey did go to India and was marvelously used to open up India to the gospel, including translation of the Scriptures into an Indian dialect as part of his work. He is known for preaching a famous missionary sermon: "Expect Great Things from God; Attempt Great Things for God," ("Carey, William," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Zondervan, rev. 1978)

I recall hearing a story of D. L. Moody, who had promised God that he would tell someone about Christ every day. One evening he remembered that he had not kept his promise that day. So before retiring he called out into the street something like: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. The story goes that someone did hear that word and it contributed to that person eventually coming to the Lord! Here is an apparent example of what we might call *human initiative* being used by the Lord! By the way, D. L. Moody came to Christ himself, we are told, through the influence of his Sunday School teacher ("Moody, Dwight Lyman," *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*)

IV. Now let us consider how this two fold understanding of biblical theology makes a difference in the *specific* areas of the Christian life.

A. Godly character: The “Fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22)

According to the New Testament, for example Galatians 5:22, the godly attitudes and behavioral characteristics of a Christian (love, joy, peace, patience, etc.) are produced by God Himself in the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. These are fruit *of the Spirit!* Thus when Paul writes to the Christians at Thessalonica he says no one need write them about loving other Christians, because *God* has taught them to do this (1 Thess.4:9-10)! But when Paul writes to the Corinthians he gives the famous “love” chapter (13) and then says “Pursue Love” (1 Cor. 14:1). In other words, it was *their responsibility* to see that they related to each other in loving ways. We could show the same thing about other aspects of the Spirit’s fruit in believers. Likewise 1 Peter 4:8: “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another.”

So what should *we* conclude about our Christian lives? We could well ask: if love is *God’s* work, why do Paul and Peter say it is the Christian’s responsibility? It is clear that the attitude and emotion of “love” in how believers relate to each other comes from God. Thus we are able to love each other, because God is working in us to this end. But it does not happen as it ought, unless we think of ways in which we can express love in tangible ways to others. That is our part! This is the paradox of Christian maturity. *Practically speaking, it is because God is at work within us that WE ARE ABLE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.*

B. Let us look at another aspect of the Christian life—what Paul calls the “gifts” of the Spirit. The distinct manifestations of the Holy Spirit for the good of the church are developed primarily in three New Testament passages: Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Peter 4. Even as we find both God’s part and our part in living a godly Christian life, so in the life of Christian service and ministry we find this same interplay between God’s part and our part.

Paul speaks of the “*gifts* of the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit gives to each as He wills, according to 1 Cor. 12:11. So God decides what spiritual gifts believers are to have. That is *God’s* decision. But notice what Paul says at the start of chapter 14: “Desire earnestly spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” He concludes this chapter by stating: “Desire earnestly to prophesy,” verse 39. My question is: Why should I seek to have spiritual gifts and particularly desire one of them, if it is God who decides what I should have? But that is precisely what we are talking about! God’s initiative works in relation to my desire and sanctified ambition. Of course God may sovereignly give us certain gifts without our asking. But it is normative, according to Scripture, for God to work through what we ask for and seek. (In chapter 14 Paul discusses this interrelationship further in the operation of spiritual gifts.)

C. Likewise prayer is both the work of God and decided by human initiative. In Romans 8:26-27 Paul says that believers do not know how to pray as they should, but that the Spirit makes intercession according to the will of God. In Ephesians 6:18 Paul says to pray at all times “in the Spirit.” Presumably the Spirit in this case would guide the prayers. But Paul continues and says to pray for him (6:19). In other words, you

make sure that you include me in your prayers. In fact in Matthew 6 we are given an outline of how to pray, which we call “the Lord’s prayer.” How does this coincide with the Spirit leading us in our prayers? Both are true! And we need to experience both to have a “balanced” Christian life. *In fact could it be that when we take responsibility to pray for certain requests, the Spirit will use that initiative and pray through us? This is something we learn by experience—by praying.*

D. What about this divine and human initiative in evangelism—introducing others to Jesus Christ?

We have already seen from John’s Gospel that God is at work in those who will come to faith. So in a sense we are “co-laborers” with God, as fantastic a thought as that is! According to Acts 16:14 it was *God* who opened Lydia’s heart to respond to the gospel that Paul was bringing. And from what we read elsewhere in the New Testament, that was not an unusual way for people to come to Christ. It is God who is at work in people’s hearts and lives, though at the time they may not know this.

But did Paul and the others in the New Testament wait for God to tell them specifically who would accept the gospel before they gave out the word? Not at all. In fact just the opposite, as we see Paul saying to those rejecting the gospel in Acts 13: “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles,” verse 46. So our part is share the good news when there is opportunity. God’s part is to enlighten those whom He has already arranged to be saved. Years ago Paul Little of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship provided a small booklet entitled: *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God. The reason our outreach is successful, whenever it is, is because God is at work in people’s hearts and lives. But our part is to share the good news.*

In conclusion, the whole of our Christian life should be understood as God wondrously and sovereignly at work within us, but with what happens *at the same time* dependent on the decisions and spirit we have in our living out our salvation.

For a final text, let us look at Philippians 2:12-13: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Both in our personal lives and as a church, we can know that God is sovereignly at work for His good pleasure. But our part is to be open to the leading of His Spirit, while at the same time actively moving ahead according to the light we have of what is within the will and purpose of God. Thus will the kingdom of God be promoted to the glory of God.