

Today is February 15, 2007. I wrote this back in February 5, 1987. In the last 5 years or so I've changed my mind. I was an Arminian. I wasn't a Calvinist. I agreed that you don't just sit on a fence. You have to have one of two different positions. I was basing a doctrine of the Bible not on the Bible but on a person or at least a doctrine of a person. I was taking on a philosophy over the Bible. After reading Dr. DA Carson's book called *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspective in Tension* I decided to base divine sovereignty and human responsibly on the Bible. So, along with DA Carson I realize that the Bible teaches both ways at the same time! This doesn't make much since to me (or most if not all the people). But, the doctrine is as the Bible says it is. I must believe with what God says even when I don't agree! (However, I lean toward the "Arminian" side (though I believe in God's sovereignty) and DA Carson, I think, leans toward the "Calvinist" side. Dr. Carson's and my leanings are wrong, I believe.)

Anyway, you'll be reading my paper when I was an Arminian...

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**"Sovereignty and Responsibility in John"**

## Sovereignty and Responsibility in John

What are the questions we must answer in this issue?

1. How does John's universalism affect our understanding?
2. How does John use "encounter" in the Gospel?
3. Is a person overwhelmed by God's grace in salvation?
4. Does a person's faith-decision have anything to do with it?
5. How does God's sovereignty fit in with all of this?
6. Does John believe in "eternal security"?

This issue can be expanded very easily to include much more than what is expressed above or outlined below. This is really only a starting place!

- I. John's Universalism greets us right away in 1:7 and is also seen in 1:9, 29, 3:16-17, 4:42, 6:33, 51, 8:12, 12:32, 47, 17:21.
  - A. 1:7 - "...that all might believe..." John the Baptist came to bear witness to the light (Jesus) so that ALL (everyone, all people) might believe.
  - B. 1:9 - "...enlightens every man..." The true light (Jesus) gives a general illumination to every individual person.
    1. "every man" is therefore the object of Christ's illumination to some degree.
    2. Although those who do not believe are said to still be in darkness, God does reveal something of Himself to everyone so that no one is without blame if they reject Him. (Rom. 1:20)
  - C. 1:29 - "...takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus, the lamb of God, removes completely the totality of the world's sin. (Morris)
    1. "takes away" - setting aside the guilt of others. Includes here the idea of forgiveness.
    2. The question that must be asked whenever John uses the word "kosmos" is, "Is there anything in the context that might further define or limit what is being referred to?"
      - a. The use of the word "world" must be understood to be referring to all of mankind unless the context indicates otherwise.
      - b. There is nothing in the context here that would suggest that the scope of "world" should be limited in any way.
      - c. This is the case for all of the following references unless stated otherwise.

3. Therefore, the "sin of the world" is the sin which belongs to ("kosmou" - Possessive Genitive) all the people in the world.
  4. Here we see the comprehensiveness of Christ's atonement. "It is completely adequate for all men." (Morris)
- D. 3:16-17 - "For God so loved the world..." and "...that the world should be saved..." God's love is directed to all those who are in the world and his desire is that they all might be saved through the sacrifice of his only Son.
1. God does not confine his love to certain people or groups of people; it is for all of the world (every person).
  2. God loved the world in such a way that he gave his only Son to come into the world and to die on a cross. This shows us how much the Father loved everyone in the world!
  3. Verse 17 emphasizes that God's purpose in sending his Son was that the "world" might be saved. Jesus says the same thing in 12:47. "(I came) to save the world."
    - a. This is a very strong statement in these contexts.
    - b. The same "world" that Jesus says he did not come to judge (as if some people might expect this) is the "world" that he came to save!
    - c. "World" is emphasized in both cases because it is used more than once when a pronoun could have been used. It (all those who are in it) is the object of God's salvific will.
    - d. "World" in this case (those who are saved) will be limited to "he who believes in him (Jesus)". (3:16, 18 and 12:46)
  4. God's love and his desire to save people are wide enough to embrace all of mankind. (Morris)
- E. 4:42 - "...this One is indeed the Savior of the world." The Samaritans recognized that Jesus was the Savior of the whole world.
1. Could be that John means that Jesus broke down all barriers between "races" in terms of offering salvation. (Jesus ministering to Samaritans.) Therefore, "of the world" means that Jesus is the Savior of more than just Jews but also of the Samaritans, etc.
  2. Could also mean that Jesus is meant to be the Savior of every person in the world. (Thus, taking "of the world" as referring to every person in the world.)

3. Could be both in this case. The context favors the first one (with the Samaritans being the first example of the universality of this) but it doesn't limit the meaning to only that. John has already shown that God is "interested" in everyone in the world.

F. 6:33 - "...the bread of God (Jesus)... gives life to the world." Jesus came to give life to the world.

1. Again, "...'the world' indicates the scope. Here is no narrow particularism but a concern for all mankind." (Morris)

2. Jesus is talking to the Jews (see vs. 31). He is not just saying that he is the bread of God for more than just the Jews. He wants to include all people.

G. 6:51 - "...the bread also which I give for the life of the world is my flesh." (Almost a repeat of vs. 33)

1. "flesh" refers to Jesus' death on the cross which was aimed at giving life to the "world" (i.e. every individual).

2. The extent of the atonement seems to be unlimited here. This occurs in a context where encountering Christ is the focus. All must encounter him.

H. 8:12 - "I am the light of the world ;" Jesus' revelation and mission are to the "world". (Osborne)

1. The universal aspect is again seen without any limitation suggested but that to have this "light of life" one must follow Jesus.

I. 12:32 - "And I...will draw all men to myself." Jesus foretold that he would die on the cross and that because of it he would draw all men to himself.

1. Interesting - Here we see "draw" (a word associated with Sovereignty) used in a context that seems to stress John's universalism.

2. But all men (in the sense of every one) are not drawn to him to the point of salvation. Therefore, two further questions must be asked:

a. In what sense does John mean "draw"? (to draw by appeal or to draw by force?) and in what sense does he mean "all men"?

b. "All men" probably means people from every nation or group. The multitude that Jesus was talking to included Greeks (see vs 20). But there is nothing else in the context that would have to limit it to just that as opposed to "all individuals".

- c. Is the divine "drawing" always "successful"? The answer must be "no, it can be resisted" because Jesus is using "lifted up" as a parallel to Moses lifting the serpent up in the wilderness in which the people could have resisted looking at it to be saved. (see also 3:14-15) (Osborne)
  - d. One way is to take "draw" as an attraction that draws men to Christ; then to take "all men" as referring to those who believe in Christ (on the grounds that they have all believed because they have all been drawn).
  - e. Another way is to take "draw" as something which does affect "all men" (in the sense of everyone). In this case the "drawing" would have to operate in such a way as to not be coercive to the point of salvation yet could be said to be the reason for the coming of those who do believe.
  - f. Either of the above two ways is possible. It is also clear that "draw" does not have to be taken as a coercive force (though it is possible if the sense of "all men" is that of point b. or c.) to maintain the element of God's sovereignty in that God initiates the process by his "drawing".
- J. 17:21 - "...that the world may believe..." Jesus prays that both present believers and future believers would "be in us (the Father and the Son)" that the result might be that the "world" may believe.
- 1. The "world" must be taken here also to mean everyone (all people).
  - 2. Jesus' desire was/is not just for some people to believe from all over the world but for all people of the world to believe.

II. Next we want to ask "How does John use 'encounter' in his Gospel?" An Arminian might say, "In order to 'force' a person to make a decision." A Calvinist might say, "The 'encounter' is the means that God uses to confirm his choice of an individual."

Note: This question is also related to two other questions: "Is a person overwhelmed by God's grace in salvation?" and "Does a person's faith-decision have anything to do with it?"

- A. "Encounter" is a main theme in John and he, in fact, sums it up for us in two verses towards the end of the Gospel.
  - 1. 19:35 - John seems to be addressing his readers when he says that the testimonies given about Jesus' death are for the purpose "that you also may believe."
    - a. "The production of faith in the readers is the main purpose of the writing of this Gospel." (Morris)

2. 20:31 - John tells us that the things he has included in his Gospel are for this purpose: "that you (the reader) may believe...and that believing you may have life..."
  - a. This is John's purpose in writing the Gospel. His desire is that all who read it may believe based on the evidence and the testimonies that he sets forth.
- B. "Encounter" can also be seen in Jesus' many challenges (ex. 1:43 "Follow me"; etc).
  1. The reader identification is with the person who is addressed. All readers are to ask themselves if they are willing to follow Jesus as a disciple.
- C. 1:50 - Jesus asks Nathanael if he believed because Jesus saw him under the fig tree. Jesus then seems to imply that based on greater things which he will see there will be even more reason to believe.
  1. Here we see that Jesus expected that believing (at least in some sense) would follow from seeing his signs. (Also in 14:11 and elsewhere.)
- D. Shortly after this the reader is presented with the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana.
  1. (2:11) - John says that this manifested his (Jesus') glory and as a result "his disciples believed in him."
  2. This is the first of the "greater things" that Jesus said they would see (in vs. 1:50) and so believe.
- E. 2:23 - This is said after the cleansing of the temple in vs. 2:15. Many people believed in him as a result of beholding his signs.
  1. John is asking his readers through this, "After 'seeing' his signs will you believe too?"
- F. 4:41 - Jesus stayed two days with the Samaritans after his meeting with the woman at the well. "And many more believed because (as the result of) his word;"
  1. Jesus' words are added to his signs as reasons for believing.
- G. 4:48 - Believing as a result of signs is just the beginning; Jesus expected that people would take the step into deeper faith by putting their trust in him.
  1. In 4:50 we see this happen as the royal official had to take Jesus at his word that his son was healed.

2. In 4:53 the man "himself believed, and his whole household" after finding out that his son was healed at the very moment that Jesus gave his word.
  3. John is showing the reader here that we can (and must) believe Jesus' word as the man did even if we have not seen any "signs" firsthand.
- H. There are many more examples of "encounter" in John that could be sighted. Some of these are found in 5:40, 44, 46-47, 6:27-29, 7:5-6, 31, 37, 8:21-24, 30, 51, 9:35-41, 10:9, 41-42, 11:25-26, 40-42, 45-46, 12:10-11, 25-26, 46-48, 13:19, 14:11, 29, 20:29.
1. As can be seen there are many examples of "encounter" and it is not surprising that it has been recognized as a main theme!
  2. There are examples of people who did not believe as well as examples of people who did believe. But always there is the underlying question, "Which group are you (the reader) going to belong to? Are you going to believe?"
- I. After looking at a number of verses pertaining to John's use of "encounter" we are ready to attempt to answer the question we asked at the beginning of this section. (II.)
1. In all cases, both Jesus and John (in his editorials) seem to expect that people will believe on the basis of what was said or done. There seems to have been an expectation that people had to make a decision (to believe or to not believe).
  2. This understanding fits best with the answer to our question that the Arminian would give.
    - a. The "encounter" was a challenge for people to respond to the truth about Jesus.
    - b. The whole drama that John builds from beginning to end as well as individual encounters seems to stress "faith-decision".
  3. The Calvinist's answer seems to be an artificial construct.
    - a. John, at least in these passages, gives no indication that God uses "encounter" as the means of confirming a limited number of individuals whom he has chosen as his own while they really have no say in the matter.
    - b. It seems to be an invention that is posited to deal with situations that don't fit into their system well. In fact, it seems to be directly opposed to what John is trying to do by using "encounter".
  4. But, before we can begin to think about answering the question definitely, we need to look at another group of verses. This brings up our last two questions.

III. "How does God's sovereignty fit in with all of this?" Our focus now shifts to verses that seem to show God's sovereignty over who actually will be saved.

Note: This is also related to questions 3 and 4 (see the discussion under section II.) as well as our question "Does John believe in 'eternal security'?"

A. 3:27 - John the Baptist is speaking here after being told about all of the people that were going to Jesus.

1. What John responds with almost sounds like a proverb because it is so general.
2. It could be applied to Jesus' success, John's waning success (in terms of numbers) or more generally, anything that anyone receives (including, for our present discussion, salvation).
3. Although it may have been a general proverb the question is "How did John the Baptist mean it?"
4. I think that John is applying this to himself here.
  - a. The context shows that John's ministry was going along parallel to Jesus'.
  - b. John still had disciples. His disciples come to him and tell him about all of the people that were coming to Jesus. They seem to be concerned about John's reputation and his importance.
  - c. The climax of John's response is vs. 30 while vs. 27 seems to be an intro to what he is about to say.
  - d. He is telling his disciples that concerning this issue he can not be anything more than what God has given him to be. What has been given to him by God is that he was to go "before him (Jesus)" (vs. 28).

B. 6:35-40 - "All that the Father gives me shall come to me" Jesus makes this statement, after feeding the five thousand, in a discourse about the fact that he is the "bread of life" ("bread which is life" - Epexigetic Genitive).

1. Here we see the predestination theme come out. Although "all that" is neuter, it includes people who will believe not just "things". (Morris)
2. The certainty of the "coming" based on the Father's "giving" is clear. What is not clear is the extent of the "coming". (Osborne)

3. Man's part seems to be emphasized in verses 35-36 and 40 while God's part seems to be emphasized in verses 37-39. It appears that *both* human responsibility and God's sovereignty are involved!
  - a. Eternal Security seems to be involved in vs. 39 where Jesus says, "that of all that he (the Father) has given me I lose nothing."
  - b. Yet in 17:9 and 12, Jesus names his disciples among those whom the Father has given him but Judas was "lost". Could it be that "lose" is something passive that could not violate a person's will to depart?
  - b. Persevering seems to be involved in vs. 40 where two present tense participles are used for "beholding" and "believing". (Osborne)
4. Considering that both aspects seem to be present here, we must ask how they might fit together. Is Jesus saying to the people here that the Father has chosen only a few of them to be given to Jesus and there is nothing that they can do about it?
  - a. No, vs. 35 is an appeal, an invitation for ALL to come to the one who is able to satisfy spiritual hunger! To this the human will must answer.
  - b. But, those who believe in Jesus do so only because the Father has given them to "come" to him. (Not that he has not given others to also "come" to him.) Salvation starts and ends with God. In this way he is sovereign!
- C. 6:44-45 - "No one can come to me, unless the Father draws him" (See the discussion of 12:32 above for comments on "draw").
  1. As in 35-40 we see the divine initiative in salvation. The "drawing" is not coercive; its completion is dependent on a person's cooperating will.
  2. In vs. 45 we see that the "drawing" is equated with "hearing and learning from the Father." What a person does with that knowledge influences their destiny.
  3. Yet the truth is from the Father and so salvation again is seen as beginning with him.
- D. 6:63-65 - "...no one can come to me, unless it has been granted ("dedomenon" - from "didoomi"; "give") him from the Father" This is closely related to the last two passages.
  1. This is the reason Jesus gives for the fact that some were not believing.
  2. Why were they not believing? Because the Father has not granted to them that they come to Jesus. Why not?

3. This is a tougher question especially if, as we have seen, God's initiative is universal.
  4. In the context the people are finding his teaching "hard".
  5. It may be that they have refused to learn from the Father through Jesus' words. (See above where verses 44 and 45 seem to equate God's "drawing" and his "teaching").
- E. 12:39-40 - John quotes from Isaiah. In vs. 42 he goes on to say, "Nevertheless many... believed in him" so it can't be taken to include everyone.
1. Is God shown to be acting arbitrarily here? No, neither here nor in Isaiah is this meant to show that God acts without reasons.
  2. God was finalizing the consequences of their own rejection. (Osborne)
- F. 15:16 - Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" This chapter is also pertinent to the Eternal Security issue.
1. Normally, a disciple would attach himself to a particular Rabbi. Jesus here tells his disciples that this was not the case with them. He reminds them that the initiative was his not their's. (Morris) (See 1:39, 1:43)
  2. Jesus reminds them of this because he wants to tell them that he has appointed them to a mission (to "go and bear fruit").
  3. The fact that Jesus reminds them that he was the one who chose them shows that he had a purpose in mind from the very beginning. In a way he was saying, "Forget about your own ideas of what you might get out of being a disciple of a Rabbi, I've got other plans for you."
  4. He is specifically addressing the twelve here. The context is their future mission not salvation.
  5. Verse 19 - "...I chose you out of the world" This denotes separation from the world here. (Morris) Therefore it is more like "I chose you to be apart from the world."
    - a. Again, this stresses their mission and their identification with Jesus and so shows why the world will hate them too.
  6. Verses 1-6 - The present tense use of the verb "abide" in this passage is parallel to John's use of "believe", "know", and "see".

7. "believe" occurs 98 times in a verb form and only one time in a noun form in John which shows John's understanding that belief is not so much something you have as something you do. It is a dynamic (continuous) commitment to Christ. (See 3:36)
8. Eternal life in John is realized eschatology which means it is a present possession with present blessings. (The key word in all of this is *present*.) Neither the future nor the past aspects of salvation are stressed much in John.
9. In verse 5 the disciples are told that they are the branches in the *mashal*. So the branches are people not "fruit", etc.
10. Jesus is showing the importance of abiding (continually) in him and gives a warning to not neglect abiding in him. We are dependent on him (the vine) in order to bear fruit.
11. If we do not bear fruit (which is the result of not abiding) we are useless to God. Verse 6 says that in such a case the branch is thrown away and burned. This is very vivid imagery for total rejection. (i.e. being separated from Christ - the vine.)
12. It is interesting to note that this warning was addressed to the disciples. I don't see any way that "he who abides" can be anything other than a believer.
13. It seems "that while eternal life is a present blessing, it is not a future certainty." (Osborne)
14. The warning must refer to a genuine possibility which makes perseverance essential.

G. 17:1-12, 24 - Jesus makes his "high priestly prayer"

1. Concerning "the men whom thou (the Father) gavest me (Jesus)" in verses 2, 6, 9, and 24 enough has already been said about "giving" and "drawing" and about Judas in vs. 12.
2. Still, there is something to be said about Eternal Security in verses 11 and 12. Jesus does pray that the Father "keep" the disciples "in Thy name" even as he kept them while he was with them (though he "lost" one).
3. Although there is here a promise for God's protection, "security does not mean an absolute guarantee." (Osborne) The believer must appropriate God's power based on these promises in order to persevere in security.

Conclusion: At the risk of sounding too convinced, to be honest, I find myself rather squarely on the Arminian side of the debate. I realize that there are other verses on both sides that I did not deal with yet, but for now that's where I stand.

- A. I believe that John found no contradiction in the ideas of Sovereignty and Human Responsibility. For the most part, neither do I. (God's sovereignty in initiating salvation and promise of power for perseverance to the believer who responds in faith and continues to the end.)
1. Not that I understand completely every reference or implication but it seems that the acceptance of "responsibility" does not necessarily impugn the validity of God's sovereignty.
    - a. The main thing I can't find is the idea that in order for God's sovereignty to remain intact he must have arbitrarily ("according to his hidden good-pleasure") picked some to be save.
  2. Many great men of God have "found themselves", in all sincerity, on the Calvinist's side. The issues involved are very complex and I could be wrong in any number of places where Scripture does not seem to be as clear about something as I would like.
  3. It therefore seems prudent to not push the issue and to be open to new ideas and ways of looking at certain passages. It must be treated as a "non-essential".

## **Bibliography**

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