

SOVEREIGN GRACE DEFENDED

By A. H. Strong (1836 - 1921)

Copyright [Public Domain]
www.reformedontheweb.com

We grant that man can work evil without God, but can he work any thing which is truly good? Surely not. In a fallen state man is solely responsible for evil, but not he alone is to be credited with good. That is due to God. Good King Alfred, with laboring quaintness of phrase, tried to express this truth more than a thousand years ago. "When the good things of this life are good, then they are good through the goodness of the good man who worketh good with them, and he is good through God." But the fountain head of all this doctrine is in the utterance of the Apostle Paul. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

PAUL COMBINES THE TWO ELEMENTS

And yet, if Paul were not an inspired apostle, such an utterance might seem a piece of sublime audacity. Here are two truths, so far as human reason can see, irreconcilable with each other, yet both asserted in the same breath, and without the slightest intimation that the apostle is aware of any contradiction between them. Divine sovereignty, and efficiency on the one hand, and human freedom and responsibility on the other. God, the worker of all good, yet man called upon to work out his own salvation. We are usually content to hold each of these truths at different times, and we are greatly perplexed when we are required to grasp both of them together. We are like the child who tries at the same moment to hold in its little hand two oranges. It can hold one, but so surely as it attempts to take up the other, it is compelled to drop the first. So God's working and man's working are both of them truths, but our intellects are too infantile as yet to be able at once to grasp them both.

Cecil once said, in substance, that the preacher who preached the whole truth of God would sometimes be accused of being a hyper-Calvinist; and that the preacher who preached the whole truth of God would at other times be accused of being an out and out Arminian. And F. W. Robertson is but the type of a multitude of candid thinkers, when he tells us that he was in great trouble so long as he sought man's free agency, and that he founded rest only when he finally determined that both were true, and that he would preach them both, but that he would forever give over any attempt to understand or to explain the relation between them.

But Paul stands on a loftier height than either Cecil or Robertson. What to us seems contradiction is to him as if it were not. He seems to discern the inner harmony between the divine and the human activities. He walks with firm and elastic step along the edge of these fathomless abysses of thought, and as for the depths of mystery, he does not even notice them. For my part I count it a proof of his inspiration. No merely human tongue could thus speak of the problem of the ages without effort to speculate or explain. I can not understand Paul's calm declaration of the twofold truth without supposing that God lifted Paul up to -something like his own divine point of view,

and then enabled Paul to speak as the oracles of God.

ONE-SIDED ATTEMPTS AT SYSTEMATIZING

While the ordinary reader of Scripture has contented himself with holding each of these truths alternately, the makers of theological systems have very often tried to do better, and to embrace both in a rightly proportioned and organic whole. But we have to confess that, owing to the limitations of the human intellect which I have already alluded to, whether these be original and permanent, or super induced by sin and destined to gradual removal, the success of the systematizers has been far from complete. They have been constantly tempted to purchase a seeming unity by a partial ignoring of the one or the other element of the problem.

Many a scheme of doctrine has been built upon the single datum of human freedom. Freedom itself has been defined as the liberty of indifference, the soul's power to act without motive or contrary to the strongest motive, and such freedom has been declared to be the measure of obligation. The result has been the denial of all responsibility for our native depravity, all certainty of man's universal sinfulness and dependence upon Christ, all permanence of holy character in the redeemed or of unholy character in the lost, all predetermination or even foreknowledge by God of human free acts or final destinies... a self dependent, self-righteous religion, in which the glory is given to man, not to God.

And then, on the other hand, many a system has been built upon the single datum of God's sovereignty, and man's freedom has been recognized only in name. Because God works all and in all, man's working has been ignored, and the human will has been made only the passive instrument of the divine efficiency and purpose. The result has been that human individuality has been lost sight of; the personality of man has been merged in the totality of the race; the race itself is but the automatic executor of an eternal decree; conscience is lulled to sleep; responsibility becomes a dream; sin is no longer guilt, but misfortune; men are saved or lost, no longer because of what they are or what they do, but only because it was so determined from eternity.

A faith like this may have in it some grain of truth, and may be far better than no religion at all, but it is dangerously defective. It plays into the hands of modern materialism with its professedly scientific refutation of the theistic, it is only because the necessitarian element in it is not carried to its logical consequences. Let it have its way unchecked and unchallenged, and Christianity becomes a dead orthodoxy, whose deadness is evidenced by indolence and immorality of life.

SCRIPTURE TEACHES ESSENTIAL CALVINISM

Now it is this last error which, in certain quarters, is most prevalent, and which it is my present purpose to test by an appeal to Scripture and to consciousness. But before I do this it is important to notice that in the passage which I just now quoted the Apostle Paul does not urge human duty by denying or undervaluing the divine activity. He does not inculcate man's work by disparaging God's. Nay, he not only recognizes both, but he bases the duty of the former upon the fact of the latter. "*Work out your own salvation,*" he tells us, "*for it is God that worketh in you.*" As between the Calvinistic and the Arminian scheme then, the Calvinistic is much the better, for it presents the more fundamental truth, the truth which human nature tends most to deny, the truth which we need most to recognize. An awe-inspiring view of God's working will nerve the soul, so that inaction will be impossible. It is not true, conversely that a strong conviction of human power will lead to dependence upon God. The Scotch Covenanters knew what practical religion was. The English Church of the eighteenth century hardly did.

And the difference was determined largely by their creeds. To know that God is at work in us, gives hope and courage. All things are possible to him who believes in this. But to be thrown back upon self and the strength of my unstable will for my security of salvation, this is weakening and depressing. Therefore, Paul tells us that in our very working we are to recognize already the working of God and the pledge of victory.

No synergism here; no recognition of an equal partnership between man and God much less of a co-operation to be symbolized by a tandem team, in which man leads and God follows; nor a "working out," on man's part, of what God, on His part, "works in." All this misses the point entirely. Paul's idea is that God is in all, and man in all, so that man is to go forward joyfully, in the faith that every movement is the revelation of a divine energy within him, and that his success is not by might or power of his own, but by the Spirit of the Lord. Whatever stage of progress it is God who has wrought all his works in him, that unto these very works he has been created in Christ Jesus, according to the eternal ordination of God, and therefore he shall ever cry: "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory!"

LIMITATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE AGENCY

Having thus vindicated my position as a genuine Calvinist, I wish to point out certain limitations of this doctrine of divine agency. And the first is that, while God is said to be the worker of all

good he is not said to be the worker of all evil. There has been a hyper-Calvinism that has practically taught this. It has made God the only actor in the universe. Because all things are included in his plan, it has been supposed that he must work all by his actual efficiency. And when it has been objected that this must make God the direct author of sin in human hearts, and that the responsibility of sin is thus transferred from man to God, such men as Hopkins and Emmons have responded that the moral quality of action does not depend upon its cause, but only - upon its nature.

It is difficult to find words strong enough to express the instinctive indignation of the unsophisticated mind at his slanderous imputation upon God and at the perverse reasoning with which it is supported. Is it possible to suppose that a human being, created with a will set against holiness and efficiently caused to exercise his evil propensities, would still be responsible for the possession of this will and for the exercise of these propensities? Yet this must be true, if the moral quality of activity does not at all depend upon its cause. God might make a man evil, and yet for his evil, not God, but man might be responsible. This can not be. We can hold man responsible for his evil nature only upon the assumption that man is himself, in some proper sense, the originator of it.

I do not now inquire whether there may not be a race-unity and a race responsibility, in virtue of which humanity is an organic whole, and constitutes one moral person before God. I only claim that no man's evil dispositions can be accounted guilty unless their origin can be traced back to some self determined transgression committed either in his individual capacity or in his connection with the race. We are guilty only of that sin which we have originated or have had a part in originating. Indeed, there is no other sin than this. Sin is never God's work but always man's. Within the bounds of the human race ... and of this only we are speaking ... sin is not caused by beings or by things outside of us. It is due neither directly to God's efficiency nor indirectly, to the circumstances in which God has placed us. Man's sin comes from himself, and each man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed.