

Calvinism is not Fatalism

When folk begin to learn about the sovereignty of God and the doctrines of grace, and embrace them with reverent fear, they rejoice in a new-found freedom and submission to their Lord. However, sometimes, a few embrace these ideas with such vigour and zeal that they go beyond humble submission to God's sovereignty and begin to fall into various forms of fatalism. In some cases this leads to Hyper-Calvinism, but often it is a more innocent false idea about submission to everything, since this is perceived to be God's will.

This paper seeks to show the balance between a Biblical submission to the sovereignty of God and the need for activity in doing God's will and resistance to satanic temptation.

What is fatalism?

Before we continue we must define fatalism. This is the secular belief that all things are predetermined by fate (a Greek mythological concept) which nothing can change. Therefore, fatalists believe that they must submit to this fate and are bound, unable to effect any change.

This is unacceptable to Christians for these reasons:

- Fate is impersonal, arbitrary and mechanistic. God is active in human affairs and his predetermined purpose follows a specific plan and is not arbitrary in any way.
- Events do not demand inaction, but faithful action.
- Christians are not disengaged from the world around them but spiritually active in it according to God's direction.
- God often brings about certain conditions in the world in order that believers take certain action to change these, such as prayer, evangelism and so on.
- Submission to God's sovereign predestination of events does not imply inactivity but careful consideration of God's will and seeking grace to perform it.

The word 'fate' does not appear in the Bible. Some versions translate a couple of words as 'fate' but this is a mistranslation of the original words.

False impressions about what God's sovereignty means in practice

As people new to Calvinism begin to understand that God is fully in control of all things, they begin to understand that everything in their life is sovereignly predetermined for a purpose and for their spiritual good (Rm 8:28). They not only begin to accept what is happening in their lives, whether good or bad, but they thank God for it all as they are supposed to (1 Thess 5:18). They abandon the error that good things are God's blessing and bad things are devilish opposition, and embrace the truth that God disposes everything according to his plan. Even so-called 'evil' events are under the sovereign permission of God and nothing happens without divine purpose.

This changes their whole approach to the Christian walk. No longer do they kick against their circumstances, or moan and complain about them. No more do they seek signs and wonders or put their trust in Charismatic charlatans who promise them healing, prosperity, financial gain, continual happiness and health if they do this or do that. They accept their share of suffering for the Gospel; they trust in their heavenly Father who controls all the events of their life and they seek help from the Lord according to his will. Prayer becomes more important and they eventually learn to worship God even in the midst of great trials, humbly accepting his will.

All this is good; however:

At this point some stray into a spiritual and moral vacuum. The understanding that God is in control of everything leads a few into sitting back and ceasing to engage in their circumstances properly. For instance:

Hyper Calvinism.

Under the influence of Hyper-Calvinist errors, some cease to be active in Gospel witnessing, believing the lie that they are not to preach to the wicked. Hyper-Calvinists so emphasise God's sovereignty that they strive to protect it by human wisdom. They do this by saying that since man has no ability to believe and repent due to human depravity (which is correct), they we must not universally command belief in the Gospel and repentance from sin (which is unbiblical – Mk 1:15; Acts 17:30); only those already changed by God and showing signs of regeneration are to be preached to. This idea fails to understand that though man has no spiritual ability, he is still responsible to obey his creator. Inability does not obviate responsibility. The command to preach the Gospel to all is a clear scriptural principle. Those sinners who fail to obey the Gospel command are hardened in their sin and prepared for judgment. Thus the Gospel comes as a sword; it brings life to the elect but it seals the condemnation of the reprobate.

Extreme Hyper-Calvinists go further than this and often end up as antinomians, having no regard for God's law, or they become passive. Their acknowledgement of God's sovereignty leads them to believe that there is no point doing anything active since this would be a raising of 'creature power'. They either dwell on their natural sinful condition and have no assurance, or they over-emphasise their deliverance and excuse their actual unrighteous practices. The errors of eternal justification (they were always righteous in Christ) and denial of heavenly rewards, leads them to having very little purpose in their existence at all. Add to this no need to evangelise (since God does it all), their whole Christian life becomes a sham and empty. All this produces elitism, which they defend with great aggression towards other believers.

Political accountability.

Accepting that God has placed those in power who govern us (which is correct), some believe that any criticism of governmental iniquity is wrong, affirming that total compliance with the governing power is necessary. Now obedience to the sovereign power is Biblical, as is acceptance of the magistrates' power to punish evildoers to the level of capital punishment (Rm 13:4). This is part of the governing body's delegated authority under God to ensure a peaceful and equitable society. Now when a government becomes wicked and contravenes God's laws the believer must take great care to behave correctly.

Rebellion is never an option since God is sovereign and since we cannot practice violence. Faced with an unlawful government Reformed teachers vary in their advice, but scripture is pretty clear. In the case of a monarchy gone bad, the lawful parliament can take action to govern the people properly and force an abdication to ensure sound government (e.g. the Glorious Revolution). Matters are less clear when parliamentary democracy itself becomes lawless. What is certain is that believers have no authority to rebel or pursue civil action of various sorts. Even civil protest is laden with problems and usually leads believers to rebel against the authority of God who put the government in position in the first place. Acceptance of God's sovereignty in this situation means acceptance that a lawless government has been placed there for a divine reason. The believer's job is not to try to change government or even change governmental policy; we are not here to create a better world but to preach the Gospel and build the church, whatever the state of government.

However, this does not mean that we endorse lawless government policies. It does not mean that we can never complain or comment about iniquity in high office; indeed, righteousness demands that we have the right opinion about such matters and speak the truth. When governments pursue evil policies it is our right, as a citizen, to have an opinion, and also our job, as a believer, to witness for the truth. We must never endorse evil at any level, whether the government is sending innocent people to concentration camps or failing to grit roads in the winter causing people to have accidents.

An acceptance of God's sovereignty does not make us mindless, neither does it muzzle us. Indeed, we must be vocal about iniquity around us. The prophet Amos is a good example here. He was very clear on God's sovereignty, as seen in this verse:

If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done *it*? Amos 3:6

The word 'calamity' here means 'evil' and shows that God controls the bad as well as the good, as other prophets confirm (e.g Isa 45:7). Despite Amos teaching that God controls everything, even bad governments, he was not afraid to go before the king and publicly condemn his wicked policies that angered God. He did not instigate rebellion, but gave an honest opinion and witness. God's sovereignty over governments does not change their obligation to pursue righteous policies. Christians can remind them of this without offending God's sovereignty; indeed a witness must be made. However, they do not become political activists and waste their time trying to make national changes; that is not their job. We must never fail to speak the truth and stand for it, but our focus is on a new world, a heavenly city, and not trying to make a utopia here on a world that God has condemned to judgment.

Prayer for change

Acceptance of God's sovereignty does not mean that we can never petition God to change things. Indeed, we are called to constantly seek God's help to change situations. When faced with a loved one who is a sinner, we constantly pray for their conversion; we do not blindly accept their condition and leave them in their sins. We witness the truth to them but also pray constantly for God to change their hearts. It is curious that even Arminians become Calvinists in prayer. Arminian theology affirms that man determines his own salvation by his free choice, yet an Arminian contradicts his theology when he seeks God's power to change the man against his choice.

When faced with sickness it is entirely normal for a believer to pray for healing or relief of suffering. God may or may not accede to that request and the believer must accept the outcome, but until God's will is understood it is acceptable to seek divine help. Paul once had divine revelation that a sickness was not to be healed; at that point the prayer focus changed from healing to grace (2 Cor 12).

When very difficult circumstances hem us in, it is right to seek God's help to change those circumstances. Paul constantly sought the prayers of churches to assist his evangelistic work, even when faced with restrictive persecution. Sometimes Paul observed that the restriction was a satanic strategy; at such times Paul sought the prayers of the saints to help his work. At other times the hold-up was caused by the Spirit, and then Paul needed wisdom. In any event, prayer to change circumstances is Biblical, but submission must follow divine revelation about the matter.

God's sovereignty often initiates circumstances that bind us specifically in order for us to be activated to pray and grow in our maturity, perseverance and faith. He does not bring about suffering in order for us to sit like dummies doing nothing, accepting the situation in a fatalistic way. No! Obstacles in our way are means of engaging with God in a more

serious manner. His will is always to drive us to more faith and a closer relationship with him.

Using our talents and gifts

God never intends for us to sit on our gifts and fatalistically let the world go by without us engaging with it. Jesus spoke categorically about the obedience required of servants in using the gifts that their master had given them in the parables of the talents and the pounds (minas). If God has given you a gift, then he intends that you use it and not sit back doing nothing. There are people in the church today who are clearly gifted in certain ways and never use this gift for the benefit of their brothers and sisters. This is not just a waste, it is disobedience. Rewards on the last day will depend upon our obedience in serving others and using our gifts fully (Matt 25:14ff; Lk 19:12ff.).

Sovereignty establishes responsibility

The sovereignty of God does not obviate man's responsibility. The decree of salvation through election establishes this truth; God's sovereign choice of some does not alter the responsibility of all men to obey the Gospel. God's sovereign choice of Abraham to bless the nations did not alter the need for Abraham to obey God's subsequent commands, up to the point of sacrificing his own son of promise. God's sovereignty made Abraham even more responsible. God's sovereign choice of Moses to deliver the people of Israel did not affect the need of Moses to implicitly obey God. As the leader of the people, Moses was subject to even stricter examination and his failure to obey God responsibly on just one occasion led to his restriction from the Promised Land.

Israel was chosen by God, amongst all the nations, in order to have a special saving relationship and inherit God's blessing. Despite this sovereign choice, it did not alter Israel's need to behave responsibly. The choice of God led to the requirement for Israel to behave even more responsibly than any other nation. To this end she was given specific laws to enable her to fulfil this responsibility. Despite this she utterly failed to be responsible, despite much grace and patience from God, and finally was rejected from the inheritance and the kingdom passed to the church (Matt 21:43). This showed the divine plan from the beginning as the church was always in the faithful remnant of Israel; the elect were not the whole nation but the remnant in it who were carried by God (Isa 10:20-22, 46:3).

Believers are assured that God will save his people. There is no doubt that all the elect will come to faith as God gives them the grace to believe in due course. Despite this certainty, all believers are still responsible to share the Gospel. Although God promises to save all the elect, if believers do not witness to Christ and preach the Gospel, then the elect will not be saved. The sovereignty of God in salvation also brings the need for responsibility in the church to preach the truth and witness to Christ.

Thus the truth of God's sovereignty does not cause fatalism and complacency. Fatalism always results in inactivity and atrophy, but God's sovereignty always brings action and service. A clear Biblical understanding of God's sovereignty (as espoused by Calvinism) will always result in renewed service and responsible actions.

The danger of passivity

Perhaps the key problem in many modern churches today, especially those of the Charismatic variety, is passivity. There are various expressions of this. Most common is where church-goers do nothing to contribute to church life in any way. They attend church meetings faithfully but are unable to share their gifts or express their personality. This is not New Testament Christianity, where church life is based upon fellowship and mutual

edification. In Charismatic churches passivity is taken to extreme levels when people literally let their mind be controlled by dominant personalities, who then manipulate them into various forms of uncontrolled behaviour and loose thinking. The most obvious case of this was the Toronto Experience, which led to an outbreak of occult activity in evangelicalism based upon Oriental religious techniques (such as releasing kundalini energy).

Fatalism leads to a similar sort of passivity. It is a 'let go and let God' sort of experience where there is no point in doing anything since a higher power is in control. Calvinism, on the other hand, always leads to increased rationality, which is a Biblical exhortation. Over and over believers are called to use their mind, to discern, to judge, to consider, to act, to ensure they are pleasing the Lord. Even worship is a rational activity (Rm 12:1-2). There is never a time when the mind is released; indeed self-control is a gift of the Spirit. Control of the self is never relinquished in Christianity (it is in mysticism) but self is denied as a result of self-control. Calvinism is the enemy of passivity.

Examples of saints that acted responsibly in the face of a divine decree

The Bible is filled with the sovereignty of God, but it is also filled with examples of men who, while utterly subject to God's will, sought to react responsibly in the face of what appeared to be a divine decree. They had every reason to do nothing, to be complacent, but they did something, while remaining submissive.

Abraham

Abraham had an amazing relationship with God, speaking to him face-to-face in the person of the pre-incarnate Son. So intimate was this relationship that God took Abraham into his confidence about his plan to judge Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:17ff.). Faced with this clear statement of impending doom, Abraham could have simply been silent; instead he interceded with God in a very repetitive fashion, pleading for the lives of any righteous in the city, even ten. In the event only Lot and his daughters were saved, and Abraham's intercession goes to show just how iniquitous the cities on the plain were.

However, the point is that God's statement about the impending judgment elicited Abraham's caring intercession. There was no change in the divine decree, God knew that only Lot's family would be rescued, hence sending the two angels to his house instead of just raining down fire from heaven. The decree to judge led to spiritual education for Abraham and closer dealings with God.

Hezekiah

In 2 Kings 20 (cf. 2 Chron 32:24-26; Isa 38:1-20) we read that no less than the prophet Isaiah tells Hezekiah that he will certainly die of the sickness he was undergoing. In the face of a message from God, Hezekiah, instead of fatalistically doing nothing, pleads with tears for healing and a longer life. God hears this prayer and adds 15 more years to his life. Not only that but God delivers the city from the hand of the Assyrians, and performs an astounding miracle of nature upon Hezekiah's request for a sign. As the parallel passage in Isaiah shows, the original declaration of the Lord was to elicit a humbling of Hezekiah who, though a good king, had become proud. His humiliation was genuine and the incident brought a change and enabled Hezekiah to do many good things in the remainder of his reign. However, Hezekiah's pride did appear at one point of divine testing later, when he revealed his treasures to the Babylonian ambassadors.

Nehemiah

As a God-fearing man, Nehemiah understood that the exile of Israel into Babylon was the result of divine judgment against her apostasy; nothing could change the decree of God.

Despite this, Nehemiah longed for Jerusalem to be re-established and its walls rebuilt. He felt this so strongly that he mourned for many days so that his disposition was sullen in the presence of king Artaxerxes, a capital offence.

His sadness had led to intercessory prayer on behalf of his people, which included repentance for the nation's sin. As a result of that prayer God used his sad countenance to cause the king to ask why he was dejected, giving Nehemiah the prayerful opportunity to explain his concern about the state of Jerusalem (Neh 2:3). The result was that Artaxerxes permitted Nehemiah to supervise the rebuilding of the gates and walls and even supplied him with a troop for security and the supplies to do the job.

A fatalist, even one that knew of Jeremiah's prophecy regarding the timing of the end of the captivity, would have done nothing, reasoning that God would enable the rebuilding of Jerusalem in his own way. Nehemiah, however, was not a fatalist and set himself to mourning for sin, repenting and praying for a change. When given the opportunity to speak, he acted boldly and requested a range of letters of authority to enable the work to succeed, and then went to work. Notice also that Nehemiah was the king's cup-bearer, a very responsible and privileged position in court. He was assured of a relatively affluent servant's position for a captive. He exchanged this for danger, persecution, strenuous work, slander and trouble in order to effect the fulfilment of God's promise. Nehemiah was no fatalist but a faithful servant.

The Lord Jesus Christ

No one understood the will of the Father, or the divine decree, better than the Lord himself; he had repeatedly taught the disciples that he had to die in order for salvation to appear. Yet when faced with the terrible price to be paid at Gethsemane, and knowing the certainty and manner of his death, the Lord sought the Father for a way of escape. This was done in a submissive and reverent manner. There was no rebellion, nor resistance, but an expression of pain from the human nature of the Lord.

Instead of the Lord merely going to the cross with his face set like a flint, Jesus' cries to the Father give us the most intimate and passionate picture of the inner life of the Lord, enabling us to utterly identify with him in his moment of extreme pain and grief. The episode makes the Lord a better Saviour, one who can have sympathy with us in our trials, one who prayed with cries and tears just like we do. It enhances our appreciation of the measure of suffering and sacrifice that Jesus endured for us, and this is God's purpose in it. While nothing changed, the Lord's cries enlarge our understanding of his redemption.

Fate is arbitrary and detached; God is imminent and active

In Greek and Roman mythology the Fates were three goddesses (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) who governed the destiny of people. They were also called the Moirai and the Parcae. In Scandinavian Mythology they were the Norns, three virgin goddesses of destiny (Urd or Urdar, Verdandi, and Skuld), who sat by the well of fate at the base of the ash tree Yggdrasil to spin the web of fate. When a person's time on Earth was over, the Fates cut the thread of his life, which they span round a spindle, and thus determined his end, but they did not interfere in his life, give him aid, or give him any direction. They were detached, abstract and cold.

This, though an illustrative fiction, demonstrates the attributes of the concept of fate: cold, lifeless, detached, uncaring and arbitrary. Thus people say, 'When your time is up, it is up', yielding to what they consider to be relentless fate. None of this is anything like the God of Calvinism, which is merely the God revealed in the Bible.

God is fully active in the affairs of men, directing all according to his eternal purpose. There is never a time when God is detached from the world (such an idea is Deism). Indeed, if God ceased for just one second to be active in creation, it would collapse and spin out of control since the Lord upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb 1:3). It is only in God that all things consist (cohere or stand together, Col 1:17). All the affairs of men are controlled by God's sovereignty (Ps 33:11; Eph 1:11) and have specific meaning, whether the boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26) or the rise of kings (Acts 4:27-28; Eccles 7:13-14; Dan 11:27).

This sovereign control of God operates right down to the level of individual men's destiny. Not only is the direction of their life predestined for a purpose, but the very hairs on their head are under God's sovereign control (Matt 10:30). All the movement upon the earth is under God's providential control, whether it be the weather (both good and bad), wars, political upheavals, cultural rising and collapse or times of peace and prosperity (Isa 45:7; Amos 3:6). Nothing is accidental or arbitrary; everything has a purpose because it is according to the divine plan from eternity and leading to a specific goal. God is fully active in the affairs of men and this world. There is no comparison between the concept of fate and the workings of the Most High God.

Conclusion

Calvinism has nothing in common with fatalism, this is just a slur often thrown at this system of theology by foolish men who have not investigated the truth. Calvinism is merely a nickname for Reformed theology, which is the most Biblical attempt to systematise scriptural teaching. Far from being marginal and extreme, Reformed theology was the basis of all the main evangelical church movements in England, The Netherlands and America. It lies at the basis of the origin of Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism and most Baptist churches. Even the original Brethren were Calvinists according to esteemed Brethren teacher GH Lang.

Calvinism is the Reformation attempt to rediscover and systematise apostolic teaching and educate the church in Biblical concepts. Contrary to detractors, it also produced many important missionary movements, education programmes, charitable works and the establishment of righteous behaviour in its members. To accuse it of engendering fatalism in merely an unjust slander.

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