J.I. Packer is probably one of my favorite writers, and this book has been yet another great read by one who is, in my estimation and many others, one of the best Evangelical writers. Those who have read his book *Knowing God* would attest to this! (And if you haven’t yet, go get a copy!) His ability to explain big concepts in a way that is both easy to understand and also makes your heart rejoice is uncanny. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* is yet another proof of Packer’s skill as a writer to stir both the mind and heart. In it he tackles one of the most difficult and often asked questions of Christians, namely: “how does God’s sovereignty and human will work out practically in Evangelism?” We all will in some form or another struggle with this question if we take the Bible and our faith seriously. Many an internet debate has been over various questions of how Divine Sovereignty is played out as per the popular Arminian vs Calvinist discussions (or meme-wars depending on the thread you’re following). Although sadly, many for fear of the unknown seem timid to approach the mount of such a daunting doctrine. But for those brave sojourners who attempt to climb to the summit, the view of great depth of joy and wonder await the steadfast traveler and Packer makes for a friendly guide through the trail.

**Our prayer life indicates our underlying theology**

Packer starts off his apologetic for the sovereignty of God by showing in plain language to the Christian, that they already believe in God’s sovereignty. If we pray, as Christians do, it is implicitly a recognition of God’s sovereignty already. For why would we
pray to a God who is not sovereign? Who was not in control of all things? What guarantee do we have that He could answer those prayers? “The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God’s hand, but a humble acknowledgement of helplessness and dependence. When we are on our knees, we know that it is not we who control the world; it is not in our power, therefore, to supply our needs by our own independent efforts; every good thing that we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God, and will come, if it comes at all, as a gift from his hands.”¹

Secondly, every true Christian gives thanks to God for their salvation. We know in our hearts that God was entirely responsible for it and we did not save ourselves. Apart from the explicitly clear testimony of scripture on this matter, we implicitly know this from the depths of our souls if we have been redeemed. When we look back on our own lives, we take upon ourselves the blame for our past blindness—how could I have been so blind? How did I not see this before? And our own indifference to the gospel message—how did this message I heard at first not affect me sooner? “You give God all the glory for all that your salvation involved, and you know that it would be blasphemy if you refused to thank him for bringing you to faith. Thus, in the way that you think of your conversion and give thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge the sovereignty of divine grace. And every other Christian in the world does the same.”²

Thirdly, we acknowledge God’s sovereignty in salvation in the way we pray for the conversion of others. You ask God to do whatever is necessary for their salvation, and assume that it is in God’s power to bring them to faith. If it were that God had already done all that he could and the final decision in the conversion of people was up to the people themselves, then why pray? God has done all he can! It is up to the person to make the decision, to be convinced, for the evangelist to work up enough conviction or charisma to move them to accept his message. If the final decision and say in conversion is from the person, we have no reason to pray the way we do for the conversion of those opposed to the Gospel at this point. The truth is that true Christians already believe in divine sovereignty, but perhaps are not aware that they do or mistakenly think they reject it, or in fact reject a caricature of it. We may argue on our feet, but we agree on our knees.

¹ Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 15.
² Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 17.
“The desire to oversimplify the Bible by cutting out the mysteries is natural to our perverse minds... the irony of the situation, however, is that when we ask how the two sides pray, it becomes apparent that those who profess to deny God’s sovereignty really believe in it just as strongly as those who affirm it.”

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Contradiction, Paradox or Antinomy?

The second chapter tackles head on this apparent conundrum. Packer argues for understanding the interplay between Sovereignty and Human Responsibility as an antinomy. He states, “an antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other.” One example of antinomy is the modern understanding in physics of light. Light is evidenced to behave as both a wave and a particle. The two must be affirmed from the clear evidence, however they seem to be irreconcilable, but there is a bit of mystery as to how they fit together and are true at the same time. Packer argues that the same is true of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility—they are not a contradiction, nor are they a paradox. It is an antinomy.

Packer does a great job of fleshing this point out, and give many scriptural references and exegetes relevant passages such as Romans 9. One thing we notice in Romans 9 is that the imaginary objector which Paul uses to raise questions to what he has presented seems to ask the same questions as those who object to Divine Sovereignty also raise. It is interesting to note Paul’s response to this objector—“but who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” Creatures are not entitled to complain or find fault in the revealed ways of their Creator. God is totally just in his right to do with his creations as he sees fit (Rom. 9:20-21). However, this is not all. “A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man’s image and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all.” At this point, many may have quite some discomfort in reading these truths, however Packer does an excellent job of fleshing them out and bringing out the deeper truth

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4 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 29.
which comforts and guides us, going beyond the surface level sting. Also, he makes it clear that “God did not teach us the reality of his rule in order to give us an excuse for neglecting his orders.”

When asked about how to reconcile the apparent conflict between these two truths of sovereignty and responsibility, C.H. Spurgeon responded, “I wouldn’t try. I never reconcile friends.”

Sovereignty and Evangelism

Packer points out the tendency for us to want to define evangelism in terms of an effect produced in our hearers rather than as a message that is delivered. Evangelism is a summons, for men to receive Jesus for who he is—Lord, Saviour, King and Sovereign. Packer expands that, “evangelism is the issuing of a call to turn, as well to trust; it is the delivering, not merely of a divine invitation to receive a Saviour, but of a divine command to repent of sin. And there is no evangelism where this specific application is not made.” While we do seek to bring about conversions in our evangelism efforts, the way to tell whether or not we are truly evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are resulting from our witness but rather if we are faithfully making known the Gospel message. We are not called to be successful, but rather to be faithful heralds. We leave the results to God through His Holy Spirit to make the truth we proclaim come alive in the hearts of people. And God has promised that where His Word goes out, it never returns void.

Packer develops this point by looking at the Gospel ministry of Paul who was commissioned as a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. “Paul could only regard himself as speaking with Christ’s authority as long as he remained faithful to the terms of his commission and said neither less nor more than he had been given to say (cf. Gal 1:8ff). But while he preached the gospel that Christ had entrusted to him, he spoke as Christ’s commissioned representative, and could therefore speak authoritatively, and claim a right to be heard.” Paul’s primary task was to teach the truth about Jesus with the aim to convert his hearers to faith in Christ. Packer points out that evangelizing is not simply a matter of teaching or

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5 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 38.
6 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 40.
7 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 41.
8 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 44.
9 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 48-49.
imparting information, but endeavours to elicit a response to the truth that was taught. It is not just mere informing but also inviting.

“Paul sought to save men; and because he sought to save them, he was not content merely to throw a truth at them; but he went out of his way to get alongside them, and to start thinking with them from where they were, and to speak to them in terms that they could understand, and above all, to avoid everything that would prejudice them against the gospel and put stumbling blocks in their path.”

Packer also goes on to offer a helpful critique of the model of ‘evangelistic services’ and meetings that modern churches sometimes believe in or practice. “The way to find out whether a particular service was evangelistic is to ask not whether an appeal for a decision was made, but what truth was taught at it. If it transpired that an insufficient gospel was preached, making the appeal for a response unintelligible to the congregation, the right of the meeting to be called evangelistic would be very doubtful.” Packer’s observations and critiques of the way some in Evangelicalism have approached evangelistic programs/services/meetings is one that needs to be heard and taken seriously to heart if we are to remain faithful heralds of the Good News. Ultimately, how we understand divine sovereignty in evangelism will end up shaping our approaches to ministry and practice in our churches and various endeavors.

What is the Gospel?

Packer then goes on to exposit what is the Gospel message. He breaks it down into four essential parts; it is a message about God, sin, Christ and a summons to faith and repentance. In this section Packer’s clear exposition of these four points is refreshing and compelling as he draws from scripture to make these truths clear. I highly recommend this section of the book to all who would desire to be clear in their presentation of the Gospel. Particularly, his distinctions of faith and repentance are helpful. “Faith is more than just credence; faith is essentially the casting and resting of oneself and one’s confidence on the promises

10 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 55.
of mercy, which Christ has given to sinners, and on the Christ who gave those promises. Equally, repentance is more than just sorrow for the past; repentance is a change of mind and heart, a new life of denying self and serving the Saviour as King in self’s place. Mere credence without trusting, and mere remorse without turning, do not save.”

True repentance consists of a settled refusal by those who are repentant to ever set any limit to the claims which Christ may make on their lives.

Packer then goes on to talk about the motivations for evangelism—love of God and love of others. Our passion to see others come to a saving faith in Christ should be motivated by our own acknowledgement of how greatly we’ve been saved and be a natural overflow of the gratitude for the grace which saved us from death and hell. Packer next tackles the question of what means and methods should be employed in evangelism? To this he offers many helpful insights as well as some great introspective questions:

“Does this way of presenting Christ savor of human cleverness and showmanship? Does it tend thereby to exalt man? Or does it embody rather the straightforward, unaffected simplicity of the messenger whose sole concern is to deliver his message, and who has no wish to call attention to himself; and who desires so far as he can to blot himself out and hide, as it were, behind his message, fearing nothing so much as that men should admire and applaud him when they ought to be bowing down and humbling themselves before the mighty Lord whom he represents?”

Packer’s insights are needed for many in Evangelicalism to seriously analyse the methodologies they employ for ‘evangelism’ and see if we are really relying on the Lord or trying by means of human cunning and entertainment—using carnal means to draw carnal men.

Divine Sovereignty and Evangelism

The last chapter of the book is devoted to fleshing out this concept, and while it is not a comprehensive response to all objections or difficulties encountered with it, it is a very good job of getting the conversation started and bringing some much needed clarity. In it Packer unpacks the theology of the two wills of God—called in older theology God’s will of

12 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 72.
13 Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 87.
precept and his will of purpose—that is, his declaration of what man ought to do, and the second his (largely secret) decision as to what he himself will do. This is an incredibly complex doctrine to embark upon, but Packer does it with grace and eloquence that is very readable.

Packer shows that God’s sovereignty in grace does not affect what was said about the nature and duty of evangelism for the Christian. Nor does it affect the necessity of evangelism—for God does not decree an end without also establishing the means by which to accomplish that end. God’s sovereignty likewise does not diminish the urgency of evangelism nor does it affect the genuineness of Gospel invitations or the truth of Gospel promises. Furthermore, God’s sovereignty does not excuse the sinner of his responsibility for his reaction to the Gospel. Through the exposition of relevant scriptures, Packer brings clarity to these important points. Secondly, Packer importantly points out that God’s sovereignty in grace is actually our only hope of success in evangelism—and as such, is not a detractor from evangelism but in fact a great motivator and security in it!

Take-aways from the book

Reading this book feels like being taken by the hand by a familiar friend or loving uncle through a path that leads to an amazing view. Packer argues that this doctrine of Divine Sovereignty in Evangelism should make us bold, patient and prayerful. To this I give a hearty amen and recommend this book to those seeking to perhaps dive into this topic for the first time—Packer makes for a great introduction and clear exposition of the main themes—or for the seasoned veteran to be edified and sharpened by a great author. The suggestion that a confident faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is somehow a hindrance to evangelism is without grounds. I agree with Packer’s conclusion that, “anyone who makes this suggestion thereby shows that he has simply failed to understand what the doctrine of divine sovereignty means. Not only does it undergird evangelism, and uphold the evangelist, by creating a hope of success that could not otherwise be entertained; it also teaches us to bind together preaching and prayer; and as it makes us bold and confident before men, so it makes us humble and importunate before God.”