

“Here is startling insight on the perplexing problem of polarization within Western culture at large and Western Christianity in particular. Adam Mabry is a pastor and a rising public intellectual who has demonstrated the ability to help people find common ground while maintaining faithfulness to the high calling of obedience to Christ. Refreshingly original, this book deserves serious consideration.”

RICE BROOCKS, Co-founder, Every Nation Churches;
New York Times Bestselling Author, *God's Not Dead*

“Our culture’s continued descent into polarization and sectarianism presents unique challenges for the church—including our complacency about and contribution to this descent! I’m grateful to my fellow Boston pastor Adam Mabry for his biblical reflection and cultural witness as Christians seek to bear witness to the truth of the gospel and to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

STEPHEN T. UM, Senior Pastor, Citylife Presbyterian Church of
Boston, MA; The Gospel Coalition Council Member

“I suspect this provocative book will be received with delight and suspicion in equal measure. But for those who long for Christian relationships that go beyond the combative or tribal, and that are instead marked by grace and truth, there’s a lot here to make you ponder and pray, with hope and joy.”

MARCUS HONEYSETT, Director, Living Leadership

“In an age of social and political ranting, raving, and shouting, Adam Mabry helps God’s people learn to reflect, repent, and serve. This is the kind of book that every Christian can read—and, while doing so, every Christian will be both offended and helped.”

MARK DRISCOLL, Founding Senior Pastor, The Trinity Church,
Scottsdale, AZ; Author, *Win Your War*

“In an age of extremes, Adam Mabry echoes F. Scott Fitzgerald in telling us that the righteous person ought to be able to hold two apparently opposing ideas in their mind at the same time. He is right, and, thank God, he makes his case masterfully in this essential book.”

STEPHEN MANSFIELD, NYT Bestselling Author of
The Faith of George W. Bush and *Men on Fire*

“Adam Mabry addresses with charity and clarity one of the biggest problems facing the church: the steadfast refusal of most Christians to hold multiple truths in tension with grace. I love how this book models how to think by addressing complicated and pressing questions of theology, discipleship, and cultural engagement with thoughtfulness, openness, and a dedication to biblical truth. You will be challenged as you read, and come away encouraged and chastened. You’ll encounter issues that make you uncomfortable and won’t be let off easy with pat or myopic answers. You’ll be pulled time and again into the path of the Spirit speaking through Scripture. And you will be better for it.”

BARNABAS PIPER, Podcaster; Author, *Hoping for Happiness*;
Director for Community, Immanuel Church, Nashville, TN

“One of the more important skills for the 21st century is learning how to hold our theological convictions without giving in to divisive controversy. The body of Christ is so much more than the sum of its divisions, and Adam Mabry has given us wise guidance on how to maintain unity and disagree agreeably when it comes to complex theological topics.”

TIM MACKIE, Co-founder, The Bible Project

“Provocative, refreshing, and compelling reading. This book will expose unhelpful and unnecessary divisions, and enable healthy, gospel-empowering unity. A must-read for staff teams, lay leaders, and any thinking Christian.”

PAUL DALE, Senior Pastor, Church by the Bridge, Sydney, Australia

“In the age of social media, it has become easier than ever to share opinions (informed or not) without considering how they may affect others. In light of our mandate to make disciples, it is vital that Christians understand how and when to engage one another (and the world) in truthful and gracious conversation. Adam’s book offers significant wisdom and points us back to what really matters. My suggestion: buy this book, read it, and stop taking sides.”

STEVE MURRELL, President and Co-founder,
Every Nation Churches; Founding Pastor, Victory Philippines

“Challenging, stretching and in some places quite uncomfortable. Adam challenges us to grow in humility towards Scripture and other Christians, especially those who understand things differently to us.”

LINDA ALLCOCK, The Globe Church, London; Author, *Deeper Still*

“Someone has said that Christians are porcupines trying to hug each other. It’s hard to fix without somebody getting hurt—and seriously. The remedy? It’s Jesus and the Bible, of course—but it is also this book, which is about Jesus and the Bible. *Stop Taking Sides* is a practical, profound, and wonderful (though sometimes painful) book. Read it and give it to everybody you know. Jesus might change you—and the world. I wish every Christian would read this.”

STEVE BROWN, Host of “Steve Brown, Etc.”; Author, *Talk the Walk*;
previously Professor of Practical Theology, RTS Orlando

“This book is so needed today! Our age has been called the information age, but it could equally be called the outrage age, the anxiety age, the fear age, or the tribalism age. Pastor Mabry has served us well by helping us see the necessity of embracing clarity, argumentation, listening, and mystery, as we seek to avoid these problems and live with a renewed mind and for the good of neighbor, Christian unity, and the advancement of Jesus’ mission.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Imago Dei Church,
Raleigh, NC; The Gospel Coalition Council Member

“Thought-provoking, insightful, and biblical in describing the divine tension each of us navigates to be the light and influence God has called us to be in our generation. I highly recommend this book as one to put in your library to be read multiple times for maximum benefit!”

TOM LANE, Apostolic Senior Pastor, Gateway Church,
Southlake, Texas

“Adam skillfully applies to some of life’s most perplexing conundrums this wisdom of Solomon: ‘It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes’ (Ecclesiastes 7 v 18). And he does this with a scholar’s mind and a pastor’s heart.”

JIM LAFFOON, Global Overseer, Every Nation Churches

“This is the book Christians need right now, in a world where people are only too happy to divide and cancel one another. As you read this book, you’ll find many of your views confirmed, but also challenged. You’ll be invited to avoid simplistic answers of one, the other, or an unthinking average. Instead, you’ll feel the invitation to hold to all of Scripture.”

JOSEPH BONIFACIO, Director, Every Nation Campus, Philippines;
Lead Pastor, Victory Katipunan

“Excellent for Christians seeking to be faithful to Scripture who are frustrated by an age marked by truth abandonment and narrow tribalism.”

TOM JACKSON, Senior Pastor, CentrePoint Churches, Scotland;
Professor of Theology, Every Nation Seminary

“This book could not be more timely. In a world of complexity where people love to take sides, this book offers a thought-provoking, challenging, and surprisingly refreshing alternative.

JOSH KIMES, Pastor, Hillsong Boston

“Adam brilliantly navigates today’s biblical and cultural tensions that are too often downplayed or tossed to the wayside. For it’s not just my way, your way, or the highway. There’s actually another way that Adam masterfully sets out in the pages of this book. Don’t miss it!”

DANIEL IM, Pastor; Podcaster; Author

thegoodbook
COMPANY

STOP TAKING SIDES

How Holding
Truths in Tension

Saves Us From
Anxiety and Outrage

ADAM MABRY

Stop Taking Sides

© 2020 Adam Mabry

Published by:

The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

ISBN: 9781784984465 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1 Sovereignty <i>and</i> Responsibility	17
2 Divine Imagers <i>and</i> Deeply Flawed	35
3 Word <i>and</i> Spirit <i>and</i> Tradition	53
4 Us <i>and</i> Them	75
5 Victory <i>and</i> Suffering	93
6 Love <i>and</i> Wrath	111
7 Politics <i>and</i> Kingdom	129
8 Strong <i>and</i> Weak	149
9 I <i>and</i> We	167
Epilogue	185
Acknowledgments	191

INTRODUCTION

“You can’t let those people think that they could have voted for Donald Trump and actually be Christians!”

I preach with an edge, but I rarely get yelled at afterward. But, firm in her conviction, she planted herself before me as I stepped off the platform, ready to fight for her side. In my sermon, I had made the point that Christians cannot hate each other, especially over politics. My mistake (in her eyes) was to invoke the 2016 US presidential elections and the derision some Christians lobbed at “those people” who had supported the other side (and how “those people” promptly returned the favor). Apparently, I should have taken her side—the “correct” side.

I tried to explain that Christian love meant loving all the people Jesus bled for, even when they held different political beliefs than we wished they would. After five minutes of my best pastor-voice, she thought silently, and then concluded, “Fine, but you can’t let them think what they did is ok.”

At this point I politely excused myself and headed out the door. The cool New England air greeted me as I walked to the car. Settling into automotive obscurity, I did what many humans now do instinctively—I checked my phone. An email popped up. It was from another Christian who’d heard my sermon, denouncing my approach as taking it

too easy on “the lefties.” He informed me that he’d now be looking round for another church—one that was on the “correct” side.

I was silent.

Then—unexpectedly—I laughed.

Perhaps it was the absurdity of getting opposite complaints about the same sermon that made me laugh. Perhaps it was the irony of my main point having been missed entirely, and the approach I’d been preaching against being embodied so perfectly. But I think that mainly my laughter was covering a deep sadness I felt—and still feel—over our tendency as Christians to anathematize each other over so many things.

WHEN SAINTS TAKE SIDES

I’m a pastor in Boston, Massachusetts. Pastoring in the educational hub of the world is great. But less great is the close correlation between perceived intelligence and strongly-held opinion. The “smart” folk in the media no longer treat disagreement as an occasion for conversation but for tribal competition, mud-slinging, and point-scoring—and five minutes on any social-media platform will show even the most optimistic of us that the world takes its lead from its media. In their *Hidden Tribes* study, More in Common—an international initiative trying to understand this phenomenon—found that “many of today’s most contentious issues are framed as us-versus-them identity-based struggles.”¹

Technology isn’t helping either. Silicon Valley promised us an advent of peace through constant digital connection. But

1 *The Hidden Tribes of America* (https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf, accessed 4.20.20), page 70.

what we got was mostly a repository of porn, distraction, and cat videos, and a lot of tribalization. Ghettoized by giant tech companies into digital alleyways, we increasingly find ourselves in an echo-chamber of the like-minded, close enough to the next tribe to lob hateful comments but far enough from them to make engagement, love, and thought near impossible. The result? Side-taking, and a lot of it.

In the second decade of the third millennium, this is how the Western world works (or doesn't). And sadly, so does the church. We, too, are very, very good at setting up tribes, drawing boundaries, and looking down on those who are on the "wrong side." We're so much better at knowing what we are not, and why "they" are wrong, than we are at listening closely, loving deeply, and being willing to learn from the other. In some ways, we're even worse than the world: we rage about the same things as the world (politics, anyone?) and then, when we're done arguing over those things, we heap theological tribalism on top, just for good measure.

And so the church—Christians, including you and me—misses out on the unity Christ prayed for, on the experience of life Christ died and rose for, and the compelling witness that Christ called for.

Don't you wish there was another way? Aren't you exhausted by the constant arguing? Don't you wish we'd all start listening, and that Christian spaces, be they physical or virtual, could feel more like heaven than hell? Does it concern you what tribalism is doing to our witness? Do you worry that the "others" may have a point and you're missing out on something God is offering you, but you daren't put your head over the parapet of your team's trench and make that point?

If you wish this, or worry about this, then the antidote is disarmingly simple: Stop Taking Sides.

TRUTH IS TRUTH, AND SOMETIMES IT'S BINARY

First, I want to be clear about what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying Christians should never take sides. To be a Christian is to take that side, and to therefore not be a thousand other things. The Christian journey begins with repentance—a literal turning away from sin and toward salvation. Christianity is founded on truths that require turning from the “side” of non-truth:

- God is God: Everywhere, the Scriptures affirm that God exists, and there is no God like him.
- God creates: Everywhere the Scriptures affirm that God made the world and made us.
- Jesus is Lord: There's no debate over the lordship of Christ. He's the Savior, and he's the boss. This glorious fact stuns us and saves us, if we confess with trusting hearts (Romans 10 v 9).
- We are saved by faith and not works: While the Bible cares deeply about what we do, Scripture is clear that salvation comes through trusting God's promise to save in Christ, not by any other means.

The above list is not exhaustive, of course. But it demonstrates that the method of taking the Bible more seriously, not less, means that we take our stand on certain doctrines.

But... the fact that our faith contains some key binaries doesn't mean that everything in our faith is similarly

binary. Not everything is a hill upon which to die. There are certainly moments when we must echo Martin Luther's "Here I stand, I can do no other"—but there are simply far more moments when we must think harder, pray longer, and draw closer, especially to those with whom we disagree. Not all who disagree with us are heretics. In fact, they probably have wisdom we should hear and maybe even a position we should embrace.

Second, I'm not calling for balance, where you try to hold all things as true at once. Truth cannot be balanced with lies. Jesus didn't "balance" Judaism with Roman paganism, nor did Paul or Peter, who followed him.

Third, I'm not talking about some Aristotelian middle way, choosing the best of what both "sides" have to offer and creating our own path. That's just the road to autonomy, and away from biblical authority.

Fourth, I'm not talking about saying that everyone's right and it doesn't really matter what you think as long as it works for you. A bloody cross—an act of divine disagreement with the way humanity had ruled itself—was the work of a Savior who died precisely because there are matters that matter. "Agreeing to disagree" is often just a mask for pride (they're wrong, but I can't be bothered to show them that they are) or for laziness (who knows who's right, but I can't be bothered to work it out).

HOLDING THE TENSION

To stop taking sides we must start to see. So, here's what I offer: a way for you to see where you're taking sides that the Scripture doesn't call you to (in fact, it calls you not to) and instead to start holding truths in tension: that is, to let the Bible tell us sometimes that two truths are both-and rather

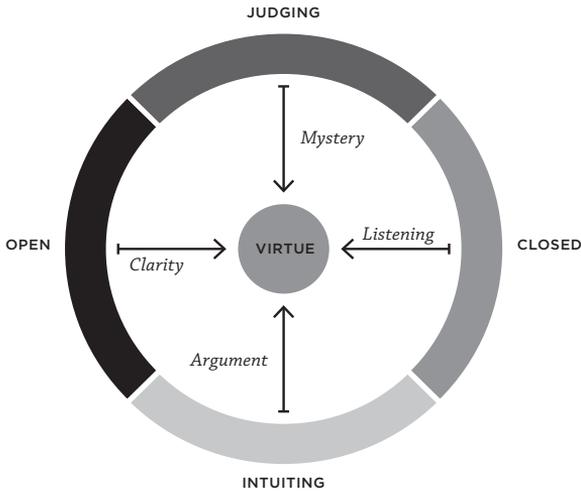
than either-or, and we need to live and grow in the tension of believing and holding to both. To stop sublimating some biblical teachings to others that we prefer, and to start listening to how the Bible is teaching. Here's why I want to offer it: because holding truth in tension not only brings us more into line with God's word, but it frees us from the anxiety and outrage that threaten to destroy us. Taking sides and throwing stones steals joy and decimates virtue. So this book offers you nine pairs of truths that represent some of the ground on which we are most prone to plant a flag, see the terrain as "either-or," and fight the "others." Embrace the tension and you'll grow in virtue, and gain a fuller experience of the Christian life.

If, like me, you often feel tempted to take sides, take heart. In a world of complexity, we all long for simple answers to hard questions. Like me, you probably feel a lot of pressure to choose your team—to be *either* this *or* that—and it's difficult to resist the herd impulse. Resisting that urge to take sides is difficult, and downright humbling. But that's part of the point. It takes virtue to state doctrines clearly, and virtue to hold them in tension when Scripture does. Virtue is hard, but nothing truly worth having is easy. Everything good is hard, and virtue is no exception. But, if we'll take the Bible more seriously, we may start to be known not for what we're against, but for an attractive virtuousness.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Before we start this journey, it's worth reflecting on the location of our beginning. This simple graphic illustrates what I mean:

STOP TAKING SIDES



We’re all on this circle somewhere, so locating ourselves will help us know what it will take to move forward. No one of the starting points is better than another—each has its strengths and weaknesses. But if you find yourself seeing only your strengths and the weaknesses on the other “side”—well, please stop taking sides.

“Openness” refers to your degree of acceptance of the new and the other, while “Closedness” describes your degree of firm conviction about truth and morality. “Intuiting” describes your degree of reliance on the promptings of the Spirit, wisdom, and an inner leading, while “Judging” describes your degree of reliance on sound reasoning, facts, and rules.

Take a moment and ask yourself, “Where do I tend to sit?” (Maybe ask someone who knows you well, too.) You can even draw a dot on that map (go ahead, I don’t mind). My point here is simple: that where we start isn’t where we should stay. Virtue lies in not letting go of the strengths of where we begin, but holding our strengths honestly in tension with

the strengths of what we are naturally not. Jesus, of course, is our goal. He was the perfect embodiment of all these four qualities, which is why Christ-like virtue is found as we move sanctifyingly toward other strengths—toward him.

If you're naturally high in openness, you need to remember the Bible speaks clearly. It's not changing; it's not wrong. And that fact of doctrinal clarity must constantly rebuke and reward you. For the feeling-based intuiters, the challenge is to stop only thinking with your feelings, and let logic and sound arguments speak to you. I don't mean "arguments" as fighting but as substantive reasoning and the careful articulation of truth. Facts aren't feelings, and the Spirit wrote a book that makes sense. If you're closed, listening is going to be necessary—especially listening to the more open among us or those who aren't already saying what you want to hear, remembering that they often have a point and a helpful perspective. And finally, if you're more judging, then you like your lines nice and neat, and your doctrine all sewn up—so you'll need to consciously, willingly embrace paradox and mystery. For, while God knows all things, you don't, and you can't. You must learn to trust him, not your ability to understand him.

Clarity, argumentation, listening, and mystery—these are the tools that will enable us to stop taking sides, embrace tensions, and for God's sake be free from constant fear, proud tribalism, and sprawling anxiety. "How beautiful are the feet of them who publish peace," wrote Isaiah, during his own difficult cultural moment. If we'll embrace biblical tensions, we'll experience virtue's beauty.

So, let's dive into the first tension: sovereignty and responsibility.

1. SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

“He is not a tame lion.”

Mr. Tumnus, from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

“It’s our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are...”

Dumbledore, from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

“It’s called predestination.”

It was a hot July afternoon, and 14-year-old me was headed back home from summer camp with the church youth group. A new kid was waxing philosophical, using words like “sovereign” and “election”—words I had not encountered. I barely understood what he was saying. A few rows back on the bus, I was only half-listening. But, when he uttered that word—*predestination*—I sat up. I didn’t know what he meant, but I knew I didn’t like it. Was this guy suggesting that God chooses some people but not others?

Maybe it was the heat at the back of the van, beyond the air conditioner’s reach. Maybe it was the friction of strange ideas abrading my own. Or maybe it was just the fear of encountering concepts I wasn’t sure of. Whatever

the reason, I loosed off my entire arsenal of biblical argumentation against this offensive idea (which, as I had only been a Christian for a few years, took mere minutes). From a few rows forward my new not-friend pushed back, and before long things got heated, so we thought it best to let the conversation break off. But a few weeks later, he handed me a copy of John Piper's *Desiring God*. "Read this," he said. "Then, let's talk." Since he was older than me (which seemed very important at the time), I took the book, thanked him, and didn't read it.

The book sat forgotten on my shelf for months. I'd no intention of reading it, yet I was afraid to give it back. What was I to say? "Thanks for this. I didn't read it"? Eventually pride, peer pressure, or something else got the better of me, and I opened it up and started to read. It was akin to being judo flipped. I was offended to learn that this guy—a famous pastor-author—taught this idea. I was shocked to find out that Scripture appeared to support it. And then I hit a problem: the more I read, the more I realized that I might be wrong. Over time, my worry transformed into worship and my indignation into exaltation. I reread it. Then I re-reread it. Then I read J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*. Then R.C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God*. Then I did a Bible study through the book of Ephesians for a whole year. It kindled a deepening passion for this surprisingly sovereign God who I thought I had understood.

Being young and foolish, I now entered into the "cage stage" of theological awakening—where passion to share a newly discovered doctrine runs roughshod over love for others. So it was that the following summer, on another youth trip, there was another van scene and another "bite-off-more-than-we-can-chew" discussion about God.

But now I was the reformer, and now I was preaching the doctrines of grace with all the gracelessness of an inquisitor. I had texts. I had quotes. And I had a captive audience.

Arriving at our destination, I was surprised to discover that not everyone appreciated my doctrinal passion. Settling to bed, my roommates—my friends—seemed to be avoiding me. With the same boldness I had earlier showed, I asked why. They told me. I may have been right—they weren't sure and they admitted as much. But I wasn't loving—about that they were quite sure. One friend put it this way: "I don't know if you're right, Adam. But the way you're acting makes me want nothing to do with this idea, if this is what it turns you into."

They didn't feel they'd been near Jesus—just near a jerk.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY WHEN TALKING SOVEREIGNTY

Conversations like this are too common. A brief scan of the comments section of a Christian website or a YouTube video will give you abundant proof that believing right doctrine—in this case, that God is sovereign over human affairs—is no guarantee of love. Knowledge puffs up (1 Corinthians 8 v 1), especially knowledge about God. Anyone who increases in knowledge risks arrogance—a risk multiplied when the subject is God. Of course, arrogance is not the wholly owned subsidiary of any theological position. It is, as we will soon see, a ubiquitous problem. My point in this chapter—if we have eyes to see—is that the tension in which the Bible sets the doctrine of God's sovereignty is the Bible's solution to this difficulty. The good news for us is that God loves neatniks, newcomers, and everyone who has ever been confused about how exactly to resolve the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Resolving sovereignty and responsibility isn't my aim so much as showing how the Bible teaches us to *hold* this tension. The Bible teaches that God is in control *and* that our decisions matter. His will *will* be done, and he will hold us responsible for ours. God chooses his people, and we are responsible for trusting God. Many men far greater than me have theologized and philosophized about these biblical realities, drawing ever nearer to that horizon of mystery. I won't be doing that here. I'm here simply to say this: if we care more about being right about Jesus than following the way of Jesus, it won't matter that we're right about Jesus. I want you to see what took me so long to learn: the Bible's strategy isn't to explain God systematically but to confront us with truth in tension—to show us that paradox and mystery aren't bugs but features we must learn to lean into and not hide from. The Bible's teaching on sovereignty and responsibility is not an either-or truth tournament, nor an “emphasize one element and briefly acknowledge the other” discussion. It is a tension—one that requires bravery to embrace mystery. So, let's jump in and see just how Scripture does this when it comes to God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

COMPATIBLE AND CONFOUNDING

There are basically two sides to this debate about sovereignty and responsibility. One group (usually marked by the word “Reformed”) celebrates the power, might, magnificence, and glory of God, highlighting Scriptures that sing, “Our God is in heaven, and he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115 v 3). God leads human decision-making (Proverb 16 v 9). He declares “the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done,” accomplishing every single one

of his plans (Isaiah 46 v 9-10). Because humans are dead in sin (Ephesians 2 v 1-3), we cannot choose God (because dead people don't make choices). So God chooses those who will be his own (John 15 v 16; Ephesians 1 v 5, 11), calling his chosen ones to himself when and how he pleases (Ephesians 1 v 3-6).

The other group (usually marked by the word "Arminian") is concerned to celebrate the dignity of human agency (Genesis 1 v 27), pointing out that God gave us a choice to follow him and that we failed in our responsibility (Genesis 3 v 1-7). In love, God created humanity with choice-making capacity, so it is up to us to "choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24 v 15). By grace, this is how any Christian starts their lives in Christ, obeying his call to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1 v 15). God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2 v 4), which means we are responsible for sharing this good news with as many others as we can, so that the whole world may know the God who desires to forgive them.

Notice all the Bible references that both "sides" can marshal. How do we resolve that? We don't, except to say that the Bible simply presupposes that both of these realities are true (as D.A. Carson notes in *How Long, O Lord?*²). Is God is absolutely sovereign, yet not in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated? Yes. Are humans morally responsible and rightly held accountable for their actions, but not in such a way as to make God's sovereignty subservient to their choices? Yes.

The tension is pretty obvious. How can God choose who will come to him (Ephesians 1 v 3-6) if he wants everyone

2 *How Long, O Lord?* (Baker Academic, 2006), page 201.

to come to him (1 Timothy 2 v 4)? How can God hold us responsible for our choices (Romans 2 v 16) if he's already ordained the future of his choice and knows everything that will happen (Isaiah 46 v 9-10)? These are good questions, which seem to only have "either-or" kinds of answers. Either God is running the show or we are. But not both.

Yet Scripture seems to say, "Not so."

Scripture *knows* that this tension exists, and it unashamedly presents it to us. God doesn't highlight his sovereignty in one book and then mention human responsibility in another. Nor does one author wax philosophical about human freedom while another comes along later to correct him. Extraordinarily, Scripture brings God's absolute sovereignty right up against inescapable creaturely responsibility. Let's look at four such places.

GOD CHOSE YOU, AND YOU CHOSE HIM

At various points, the Bible deeply offends our sensibilities. But for almost every 21st-century Westerner who bumps into it, the idea that God may have chosen certain individuals for special treatment sounds unfair at best and unconscionable at worst. But, if we approach Scripture with that conviction about any doctrine, we're not likely to be able to hear what Scripture is saying about any doctrine. That's the very definition of prejudice—to pre-judge before listening humbly to the evidence. God in Scripture cares less about preserving polite, Western sensibilities of fairness than he does about stunning us with the nature of his sovereignty. Space does not permit us here to catalog the hundreds of instances where the

Scriptures confront us in this way.³ Instead, I want to zoom in on one of the many places where human responsiveness to the gospel and God's choice of those respondents is fused: Acts 13.⁴

*“The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And **Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly** ... And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, **and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed**. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region ... And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”*

(v 44-45, 48-49, 52, emphasis mine)

This passage, typical of many such accounts in Luke's second book, tells an exciting story about evangelistic success. Paul and Barnabas went into a city and preached the gospel; many responded with faith, and they were filled with joy. Paul and co. showed up, people got saved, the end. But that's not what Luke wrote, because the Spirit had something more for his readers to see.

Yes, Paul and Barnabas showed up. As they preached in synagogues and faced fierce opposition from the Jewish rulers, they called people to respond to the amazing news about Israel's true king. But Luke wants us to see that it wasn't merely their preaching that saved. Their preaching

3 For a such a rundown, see D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Wipf and Stock, 2002); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994).

4 This is a pattern in Luke's writing (see also Acts 16 v 14 and 18 v 10).

was made effective because “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

Many commentators have worked very hard to soften the force of this verse, but the whole point of this book is very much not to do that.⁵ We are to take the Scripture as it comes to us and ask, “Why is the Bible knowingly doing this to us—forcing us to put two difficult-to-reconcile truths up against each other?” I would like to suggest that one reason is to foster in us the virtue of humility.

Without a verse like this, we might understandably conclude something like “Wow, Paul and Barnabas must have been amazing evangelists.” If this were simply the story of human actions (evangelism) and human results (conversion and worship), then we would rightly admire and hope to imitate these men, or dolefully conclude that there’s no way that we could. But this is not a simple story about humans; it’s a window into the mysterious concept of election. So, the human stuff is interrupted by the shockingly brief point “and everyone who was appointed to eternal life believed.” Without those words, we’d miss the formational point of this text—God chooses us, *and* we’re responsible for choosing him (or not).

The clearest criteria we’re ever given for God’s electing choices are found in Ephesians 1. He chose his people out of love (1 v 4), for adoption (1 v 5), for the praising of his glorious grace (1 v 6). Not because we’d make useful members of his team, or we’re the right fit, or we are somehow better than others—just because of pure, unmerited grace. Jesus himself affirmed these ideas all the time. See John 6 v 65-67, for example:

5 The Greek word, *tasso*, means “to designate, determine, or appoint.”