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Volume 2 – 2009

**Response to Rev. Canon Dr. Magumba’s Article –
How Can I Accept the Sovereignty of God?**

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It seems Canon Magumba is avoiding being constrained by theological categories, such as monergism or synergism. This is commendable when the goal is to use biblical expressions and arguments, rather than merely agree with or argue from a theological system or construct. He presents his perspective on God’s sovereignty in two parts. The first is personal, providing an explanation of who he is, and negative in that he explains his rejection of monergism and synergism. The second is general, providing an overview of God’s sovereignty in the Bible, and positive as he defines his understanding of God’s sovereignty.

In response to the first section, it is not unusual for people to struggle with and consequently reject monergism and unconditional election, as Canon Magumba clearly does. Both these views and related concepts are not attractive to human beings because they remind them of their spiritual inability and dependence, which are threatening realities for people whose worldview is self-centred. Rarely do people enjoy helplessness and hopelessness, but the Bible

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² See www.acm.sa.edu.au.

clearly teaches these conditions are true of all people prior to conversion (Matt 9:36; Eph 2:12; 2 Thess 4:13).³ Understanding the extent of human ability is critical to this discussion.

Canon Magumba asserts his belief in fallen humanity's spiritual deadness and bondage because of sin, and consequent inability to come to God. This would seem to agree with the traditional Calvinist view, expressed by the T (total depravity) in TULIP,⁴ which he refers to later in his article, but dismisses it as unhelpful. He also affirms the Augustinian view of human inability in that humans are not able not to sin, a state that can only change through spiritual salvation. One would therefore expect that he would follow a traditional line, but not so.

As mentioned earlier, he rejects monergism, the traditional Calvinist position, and gives three reasons for so doing. The first is monergism's connection with unconditional election, which he also rejects, considering it a Calvinist creation and therefore unscriptural, yet offers no substantial argument to support his viewpoint. This is unconvincing. Good biblical and theological support exists for unconditional election, which should have been addressed.⁵

His second reason is equally unsupported. Despite affirming God is sovereign and predestines everything to His own glory, he is careful to reject any Calvinist understanding of these concepts. Unfortunately, no argument is offered to support this position. This makes his position both unclear and unconvincing. How does predestination correlate with election? If unconditional election is unscriptural, then how can predestination be acceptable? Too many questions remain unanswered by this lack of clarity.

His third reason introduces the role of faith in salvation, which he considers a "real condition of salvation" as against a "mere consequence of election." He interprets the Calvinist understanding

³ This is also evident by the frequent reference to Christians now possessing hope, because of their salvation (Rom 5:2, 4, 5; 8:24, 25; 12:12; 15:4, 13; 1 Cor 13:13; 15:19; 2 Cor 1:10; 3:12; Gal 5:5; Eph 1:12, 18; 4:4; Col 1:5, 23, 27; 1 Thess 1:3, 5:8; 2 Thess 2:16; 1 Tim 1:1; 4:10; Tit 1:2; 2:13; 3:7; Heb 3:6; 6:11, 18, 19; 7:19; 10:23; 1 Pet 1:3, 13, 21; 3:15).

⁴ The classic Calvinist understanding of TULIP is T representing total depravity, U representing unconditional election, L representing limited atonement, I representing irresistible grace, and P representing perseverance of the saints.

⁵ See L Crawford, *Ephesians 1:3-4 and the Nature of Election*, The Master's Seminary Journal, vol 11, No. 1, pp. 75-91.

as God being both object and subject of faith, the giver and receiver, which is not correct. No genuine Calvinist would understand faith this way. God is certainly the object of faith (Mark 11:22; 1 Thess 1:8), but the believer exercises faith and is therefore the subject of faith. God is also certainly the originator of faith (Eph 2:8-9), but the reciprocal activity of giving and receiving is not an accurate expression of how believers acquire faith. When Paul writes that salvation is “the gift of God,” he emphasises that God is the source. He is not using this expression as an explanation of how salvation is obtained.

It is not correct to assert monergism has no role for human beings in salvation. Monergism only demands that God supplies the necessary elements for salvation, which include regeneration and faith. When the Apostle Paul teaches concerning election and predestination, as well as other divine activities, he includes the human activities of hearing and believing (Eph 1:13). People do hear and believe, but not without divine enabling (Acts 11:18; 13:48; 16:14). These are genuine human activities and God does not substitute for people in their performance.

It is also not correct to redefine monergism as holding to a sole saviour in distinction from the part that people play. The term monergism focuses on the enabling power producing salvation and isolates God as the only one so doing. All evangelicals can agree that God is the only saviour, but not all evangelicals are monergists as properly defined. Agreed clear definitions best serve mutual understanding and personal adaptations of terms only produce confusion. Inventing a particular form of monergism creates a “straw man” argument that inhibits progress in the discussion.

Not only is Canon Magumba unwilling to accept monergism, he is also not comfortable with synergism, which seems to be because of its tendency to make God dependent on humanity. Thankfully, he seeks to counter that view and affirms again God’s independence of humanity in being able to accomplish His will despite human unwillingness. Yet, he still presents the necessity of human participation in initial salvation.

His illustration of the relationship between God’s part and humanity’s part falls short of the mark because it is not similar to the spiritual reality it seeks to explain. The giving and receiving

expressed in the illustration is not true of salvation. Indeed, God gave His Son as a sacrifice for sin as taught by John 3:16, but His person and work of salvation are not presented as realities to receive, rather they are to be believed in (John 3:18; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom 3:22; 4:24; 10:9; 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 3:22; 1 Tim 4:10; Heb 11:6; 1 Pet 2:7).

Even John 1:12 explains that those who received Christ, or welcomed Him, have done so by having believed in His name. In other words, they believed Jesus was the Messiah, God's Son, something the Jewish leaders refused to do. Therefore, those rulers did not receive Him, soon plotted to kill Him, and eventually succeeded, albeit temporarily. Whatever a believer receives in salvation is a consequence of believing in God's Son. Despite frequent modern use, the analogy of giving and receiving is absent from the Bible as a description of the means of salvation. It is best to keep to biblical terminology for such an important truth.

Additionally, the analogy also fails with respect to human ability. People are capable of accepting material gifts, but this is not so for spiritual things (1 Cor 2:14). Even if one accepts the concepts of giving and receiving as adequate descriptions of initial salvation, fallen sinners are not able to respond apart from divine intervention. Human depravity prevents such a response (Rom 3:9-23; Eph 2:1-3, 5). The limitations imposed by a sinful nature are key considerations in this discussion, but little is offered on this matter.

Canon Magumba criticises the Calvinist understanding of faith as a “mere consequence of election, irresistible grace, and regeneration,” because this removes faith as a condition of salvation and such an understanding is not compatible with John 3:16. Once again the major objection centres on the issue of election. Can unconditional, individual election be consistent with John 3:16? In a word, the answer is yes, but in what way. Does the reference to world in John 3:16 contradict a Calvinist view? In a word, the answer is no, but again more needs to be said.

John 3:16 genuinely expresses God's love for the world, which is evident from the generous gift of His Son as Saviour. This provision, however, only benefits those who believe, because all humanity is already condemned (John 3:18) and will remain so apart from believing. How then do unbelievers become believers? Are people able to exercise faith without divine assistance? I think Canon

Magumba would answer this with no and so would the Scriptures. As mentioned previously, the description of fallen humanity is not one of ability, but inability.

If that is the case, does God grant all people the capacity to believe and it then becomes their choice whether to exercise that capacity or not? This overcoming of human inability is sometimes referred to as prevenient grace, but the Bible does not teach this concept. In fact, at times the Scriptures highlight a distinction in God's dealings with people, such as Pharaoh (Rom 9:17). In Romans chapter nine Paul clearly communicates that not all people received the same spiritual benefits. Jacob and Esau are primary examples and the distinction between them is clearly dependent "not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Rom 9:16).

This is offensive to human pride and Paul is well aware of the objections raised by people. The first one is the injustice toward humanity by such distinguishing choices (Rom 9:14). His answer to this objection is a reminder that the basis of God's benevolence is mercy not obligation, because none deserve spiritual benefits (Rom 9:15). The second objection is holding people accountable when it is impossible to resist God's will (Rom 9:19). Paul answers this by asserting God's prerogative to act as He does, because God is the creator (Rom 9:20-21). Throughout the Bible God makes the difference between people, not the people themselves.

Returning to John 3:16, Canon Magumba correctly emphasises that the extent of God's love reaches beyond human limits of "race, nation or class" and election does likewise. God's choice is not based on human capacities, qualities or achievements (Eph 1:3-6, 11-12). His choice is independent of these human attributes or actions and therefore includes every category of humanity, particularly the least esteemed by humanity (1 Cor 1:26-28). It is therefore incorrect to argue that election contradicts the scope of John 3:16, unless this passage teaches universalism, which it does not.

It is also worth noting that because election is sourced in God and God is love (1 John 4:8) it expresses God's love for humanity, but it goes beyond love. God is also spirit (John 4:24), true (John 3:33), one (Rom 3:30), faithful (2 Cor 1:18), light (1 John 1:5), holy (Psa 99:9), and a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). These passages provide clear statements of God's being, which combined with the rest of the

Bible's descriptions, serve to exhibit God in all His fullness. This fullness is captured by the term, glory.

Election is designed to promote God's glory,⁶ which includes all God's attributes, not only love. God's justice, righteousness, and wrath are equal contributors to God's actions as the attributes of grace, mercy, and love. It is unwise to limit one's understanding of God's actions to a single or even several of God's attributes. Using John 3:16 as the standard for one's theological position, as significant as that verse may be, is inadequate and liable to bias. This well-known and oft-quoted text has no issue with election and neither does election with it.

After a short section on God's sovereignty in the Bible, Canon Magumba resumes answering the question, "How can I accept God's sovereignty?" by interacting with TULIP, the Calvinist summary of salvation. He dismisses this construct as inappropriate because only the first and last items refer to humanity's condition, with the middle three referring to God's role. Admittedly theological constructs are humanly made and may be inappropriate, if not inaccurate, but the reasoning behind this dismissal was not obvious. It would seem that the human condition is not sufficiently explained by these points or he is not in agreement with them. With respect to the first point, total depravity, he clearly does not agree with the Calvinist understanding.

Unfortunately, no real explanation of their deficiencies is provided, which leaves the reader without content with which to engage the discussion. Nevertheless, further discussion is appropriate and so the following material is presented to expand the subject of unconditional election and its connection to God's sovereignty.

Romans 8:29-30 presents the completion of salvation from being foreknown to finally glorified. Two terms are particularly significant in this discussion of God's sovereignty – "foreknew" and "predestined" (Rom. 8:29). A clear understanding of these terms assists in clarifying God's sovereignty in salvation, which seems to be the issue in Canon Magumba's difficulties with Calvinism's view of God's sovereignty.

⁶ This is the clear focus of Ephesians 1:3-14, where Paul repeats "to the praise of His glory" (verses 12 and 14), as well as mentions "to the praise of his glorious grace" (verse 6).

The first term comes from the root Greek word (proegno) literally translated “foreknew” and “foreknowledge” and it occurs seven times in the Greek New Testament. Twice it refers to previous knowledge on the part of man: in Acts 25:6 to the Jews’ previous knowledge of Paul and in 2 Peter 3:17 to the Christians’ previous knowledge (being forewarned) of scoffers who would come in the last days. Five times, it refers to God’s foreknowledge: three times as a verb in Romans 8:29, Romans 11:2, and 1 Peter 1:20, and twice as a noun in Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:2.

It thus clear that foreknowledge is a biblical term or concept, but how do you define it? Some suggest it means that by looking into the future God knows those who will believe the gospel and He then chooses these people to be saved. Is this explanation accurate, biblically sound? Is God’s choice of people with respect to salvation based on foreseen faith?

In the theological context, the word foreknowledge designates a subset of God’s omniscience, one of His attributes of infinity, which concerns His knowledge of all things, both actual and possible, whether past, present or future. This term specifically describes God’s knowledge of the future, well in advance of its occurrence. Whereas human knowledge is extremely limited and results from observation and reasoning, which are conditioned by time, God’s knowledge is unlimited, immediate and intuitive. Although God is aware of the realities of past, present and future, they do not bind him. It has been suggested that time from God’s perspective is an eternal now.

How does this match up with the biblical use of this important term? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word is yada, often translated “know”, with the connotations of intimacy and love, having the idea of making someone the object of loving care. In Genesis 4:1, it is used of sexual intimacy. In Jeremiah 1:5, it describes Jehovah’s relationship with Jeremiah prior to his conception. In Hosea 13:5, it refers to God’s care for His people (NASB – “cared”; NKJV – “knew”). In Amos 3:2, it describes God’s choice of Israel (NASB – “chosen”; NKJV – “known”).

In the New Testament, a similar usage occurs with the Greek word ginosko. In Matthew 7:23 Jesus never knew the false professors, i.e. never had a relationship with them. In contrast, John

10:27 states that Jesus knows His sheep, i.e. has a relationship with them. Therefore, in certain contexts the concept of knowing includes more than mere facts. It demands a personal connection between two personalities, which at times includes God and man.

Cremer writes that this word in the Greek “denotes the foreordained relation of fellowship of God with the objects of His saving counsel; God’s self-determining towards fellowship with the objects of His sovereign counsel preceding the realization thereof.”⁷ For this reason of personal love, Erickson writes,

Nor is the argument that God’s foreordaining is based on his foreknowledge persuasive. For the word יָדָא (yada), which seems to lie behind Paul’s use of προγινώσκω, signifies more than an advanced knowledge or precognition. It carries the connotation of a very positive and intimate relationship. It suggests looking with favor upon or loving someone, and is even used of sexual relations. What is in view, then, is not a neutral advance knowledge of what someone will do, but an affirmative choice of that person. Against this Hebraic background it appears likely that the references to foreknowledge in Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:1-2 are presenting foreknowledge not as grounds for predestination, but as a confirmation of it.⁸

God’s foreknowledge, although including an advance knowledge of information, is not merely so when applied to the salvation of people. God does not know the future by use of a “divine crystal ball” or some other device or even an inherent foresight. He knows the future because He plans and controls it, as the all-wise, omnipotent, omnipresent and infinite God that He is. He has the ability to formulate a perfect plan and then carry it out, despite it including creatures with free agency, who actively resist that plan.

Acts 2:23 is a significant reference since it uses both predestination and foreknowledge together, in that order. The Granville-Sharp Rule of Greek grammar demands that these two words refer to the same thing and therefore God’s foreknowledge is governed by His “predetermined plan”, not the other way around. It is a mystery as to how God can do this, but the Scriptures affirm it strongly and continue to do so with the term, predestined.

⁷ H. Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, (4th ed.), T & T Clark, 1977, pp. 161-62.

⁸ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.), Baker Academic, 1998, p. 939.

Interestingly this term, predestined, is not found in philosophical debate, but in communicating the marvellous grace and love of God toward people. This verb is personal, Christocentric, and gracious in character. The English “predestine” comes from the Latin *praedestino*, which the Latin Vulgate uses to translate the Greek *proorizo* (προορίζω). The English word “horizon” comes from the second part of this term, which points to its meaning. Just as a horizon defines the boundary between the land or sea, and sky, so this term describes the creation of a boundary. Modern versions translate this term as predestine or foreordain, and it only has God as its subject. Its general meaning is to establish something in advance of its actual existence.

The Old Testament lacks words for expressing this concept in an abstract form, but it often speaks of God purposing, ordaining or determining particular things in contexts where God is absolute and independent. The New Testament uses various words to express this concept, including being chosen and appointed to certain positions. J I Packer writes,

The usage of the New Testament word group is in favour of the traditional practice of defining predestination in terms of God’s purpose regarding the circumstances and destinies of men. The wider aspects of His cosmic plan and government are most conveniently subsumed under the general head of providence. To grasp the meaning of predestination as Scripture presents it, however, it must be set in its place in God’s plan as a whole.⁹

Therefore, predestination is directly related to people, their actions and destinies. The following references highlight this for the actions of Herod, Pilate and the Jews against Jesus (Acts 4:28) and the adoption of believers into God’s family (Eph 1:5, 11). It would seem that predestination describes the establishment in history of God’s purpose, which with respect to salvation is defined as election. Predestination is the means by which election is made certain, as seen from Eph 1:3-14.

Another related term, often translated “appointed”, ought to be considered. Three Greek words stand behind this concept, *tasso* (τάσσω), *keimai* (κείμαι) and *tithemi* (τίθημι). Some key references are: Acts 13:48, where believers are appointed to eternal life; Luke

⁹ J. I. Packer, *New Bible Dictionary*, IVP, 1962, p. 1024.

2:34, where Christ is appointed to a particular future; Phil 1:16, where Paul is appointed to defend the gospel; 1 Thess 3:3, where Christians are destined to suffering; John 15:16, where the disciples are chosen and appointed by Christ; Acts 1:7, where the times and epochs are fixed by the Father; Acts 13:47, where God places the Jews as a light to the Gentiles; and 1 Peter 2:8, where those disobedient to God's word are appointed to stumble. Regardless of the individual interpretations for each reference, the overwhelming emphasis is God's control of these situations. He is the active subject and people are the objects of His dealings.

One last term already mentioned also warrants further examination, especially because it is a point of disagreement. Election in the Old Testament is under the primary Hebrew word, *bahar* (בָּהַר), generally translated "choose". *TDOT* states, "Everywhere that בָּהַר occurs in relationship to persons, it denotes choice out of a group (generally out of the totality of the people) ... Thus throughout, בָּהַר includes the idea of separating ... The important passages where בָּהַר is used in this sense are Dt. 4:37; 7:6f.; 10:14f.; 14:2; and 1 K. 3:8" (vol. 2, pp. 82-83).

In the New Testament the primary Greek word is *eklegomai* (ἐκλέγομαι), commonly translated "choose." There are numerous references,¹⁰ which identify some key aspects of this important term. First, God is the subject performing the action of election. Second, humanity is the object being chosen. Third, the grounds of election are clearly outside of humanity. Fourth, the timing of this choice is before creation and thus the existence of those chosen. Fifth, the focus of election is initial salvation. Finally, Christ is closely connected to election and union with Him is essential to it. In addition, hearing the gospel and believing God's message are also essential to realising election.

¹⁰ Matt 22:14 ("many called, few chosen"), Matt 24:22, 24, 31 ("elect"), Mark 13:20, 22, 27 ("elect", "whom he chose"), Luke 6:13 ("chose from them"), Luke 18:7 ("elect"), John 6:70 ("choose you"), John 13:18 ("I have chosen"), John 15:16, 19 ("I chose you"), Acts 1:2 ("whom he had chosen"), Acts 9:15 ("a chosen instrument"), Acts 13:17 ("chose"), Rom 8:33 ("God's elect"), Rom 9:11 ("God's purpose of election"), Rom 11:5, 7, 28 ("chosen", "the elect", "election"), Eph 1:4 ("he chose us"), Col 3:12 ("God's chosen ones"), 1 Thess 1:4 ("he has chosen you"), 2 Tim 2:10 ("the elect"), Tit 1:1 ("God's elect"), 1 Pet 1:1 ("elect exiles"), 1 Pet 2:9 ("a chosen race"), 2 Pet 1:10 ("election"), 2 John 1, 13 ("the elect lady", "elect sister"), Rev 17:14 ("called and chosen and faithful"). In addition, consider Matt 12:18, 2 Thess 2:13, Acts 3:20, Acts 22:14, and Acts 10:41 for additional Greek words translated with the same nuance.

These primary terms dealing with initial salvation communicate clearly that God is sovereign and is fulfilling His eternal plan and purpose in saving people, chosen before the foundation of the world. God has a plan that governs all events, either actively or passively. God causes certain things to happen and He permits other things to occur, especially when they are morally evil.

In concluding this aspect of the discussion, it is worth summarising the characteristics of God's sovereign plan. First, it is founded in wisdom (Eph 3:9-11). Second, it is eternal (Psa 33:11; Eph 3:11). Third, it is effectual (Isa 14:24-27; 46:10). Fourth, it is unchangeable (Num 23:19; Job 23:13-14; Luke 22:22). Fifth, it is unconditional (Isa 40:13-14; Acts 2:23; Eph 2:8). Sixth and final, it is all-inclusive (Eph 1:11; Psa 119:91): including good works (Eph 2:10), evil deeds (Gen 50:20), length of life (Psa 39:4; 139:16), and national boundaries (Acts 17:26). Nothing is outside of God's sovereignty and believers can rest securely in this fact.

In response to the second section, a few matters require further elaboration. Canon Magumba has given six aspects of God's sovereignty, which enrich the discussion, but do not address his disagreement with Calvinism's interpretation of the subject. He makes an important point in the association of Christlikeness with divine sovereignty, but this should not be taken as support for his view. One should remember that the human Christ exhibits the full range of divine communicable attributes, including wrath (cleansing the temple in Matt 21:12 and woes to the religious leaders in Matt 23) and justice (Matt 16:21). Love is a dominant aspect of God's motivation in salvation, but it is not the only factor.

The idea of ownership as an expression of God's sovereignty is used to defend God's prerogative to make His own choices independent of human beings (Rom 9:20-23), even when those choices involve human beings. This would seem to support the view that Canon Magumba rejects and yet continued ambiguity in his article makes it difficult to be sure. His references to authority and epithets of power also seem to support a more Calvinistic orientation, but without a fuller explanation, this is again difficult to process.

Majestic anthropomorphisms capture a wide range of sovereign activities and provide a rich, but limited, description of God's sovereignty. Each one could be treated with greater depth to expand

how they contribute to God's majesty in sovereignty. Canon Magumba includes the miracle of the incarnation and all that it expressed in this point, which could be considered the greatest anthropomorphism. It should, however, be remembered that this was an actual taking on of humanity, not merely an association with humanity, which is the usual meaning of an anthropomorphism.

Under the reference to God's incommunicable attributes, it is remarkable that those expressing God's infinity are not mentioned. God's omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, and eternity are the clearest and strongest supports for His sovereignty. Because God knows all things, is everywhere present at once, possesses all power, and has existed from eternity past to the present time and will do so for eternity future, He is able to accomplish His purpose and carry out His plan (Isa 46:9-11). Nothing can thwart Him (Job 42:2), nor can any being resist Him (Rom 9:19). These attributes are critical to God's sovereignty and should be included in this discussion.

Canon Magumba closes this section with reference to God's communicable attributes and particularly focuses on His holiness. He makes the point that God is never responsible for people's sins, which is a critical part of understanding His sovereignty. Human beings are not exempted from responsibility, despite the reality that God is control. The crucifixion is the most dramatic event to demonstrate this fact. God holds those who crucified His Son, Jesus Christ, responsible for their actions, even when His sovereign plan dictated the event (Acts 2:23). Even Jesus stated that Judas' betrayal was a part of God's plan, but Judas was still responsible (Matt 26:24). It is crucial to maintain this balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

As finite creatures, human beings are limited in understanding and this is most obvious when considering God's sovereignty. Canon Magumba's attempt to affirm this important truth, while avoiding Calvinistic categories is commendable, but falls short of the mark. His readers will struggle to process his argument and wonder what exactly he means by God's sovereignty. In some respects his best explanation is pure Calvinism as he writes, "The remarkable fact is not that God allows some sinners to persist in their chose delusions, but that he saves sinners, changes our natures, and gives us the desires

to do good for the glory of God.” Perhaps it is best to leave the discussion here, a point of agreement.



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