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Thomas Schirrmacher

**The Complementary
Nature of Biblical Teaching**



Theologische Akzente

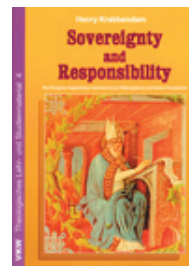
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The Complementary Nature of Biblical Teaching

Foreword to Henry Krabbendam's „Sovereignty and Responsibility“

Thomas Schirrmacher

Sovereignty and Responsibility has been the topic of theology and philosophy for nearly 2000 years. Is it possible to say something new on this topic or has not everything been said? Can you do better than Augustine, Luther or Wesley? And if the author from his personal theological tradition as a leading Reformed Systematic theologian stands on one side of the old fight between Calvinist and Arminian Christians, why bother?

I am convinced that this book is a breakthrough on the topic of Sovereignty and Responsibility. On the one side the author is very old fashioned, using the Bible as governing source of theology and being deeply rooted in historical theology. But his emphasis on the Bible at the same time makes him very modern and innovative, because he does not stop with the situation playing the Bible against the Bible, as is often the case in the debate. He wants to listen to the Biblical arguments of others and prove himself very thoroughly, whether or not he has taken into account their Biblical arguments. The Church of Christ has to battle for theological unity and cannot leave out certain Biblical elements and revelations, because they do not fit in traditional

theological systems. Henry Krabbendam has done the Church a major favour by asking the question, whether we really have built our Systematic theology on the whole Holy Scriptures.

Henry Krabbendam is well prepared for his major task. He is teaching as Professor of Systematic Theology, Apologetics and Evangelism on three continents, in the USA (Covenant College), Uganda (Africa Christian Training Institute, ACTS) and in Germany (Martin Bucer Seminar, MBS) near to his origins in the Netherlands. And everywhere he is listening carefully to local Christians. And he does not only know the academic world, but has been active in evangelism, apologetics and organising Christian work in Africa and elsewhere. Thus he knows his theological „enemy“ from personal encounter and working together in evangelism and theological training.

The Early Councils

When the Early Church Councils (Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431 and Chalcedon 451) resolved the issues of the relationships between the

Persons of the Trinity and the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ, they were exemplary in their refusal to accept a one-sided declaration but to accord all truths expressed in Scripture equal weight. The numerous views in these two major controversies had originated not only under the influence of non-Christian religions or popular world views, but also from apparently contradictory statements in the Bible itself. The councils fortunately chose not to insist upon a 'rational' solution, but included all Biblical information. The statement on Christ of the Council of Chalcedon (22–10–451 AD) says,

„As heirs of the holy fathers, we thus all teach unanimously that our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same Son: the Same is perfect in His divinity, and the Same is perfect in His humanity: the Same is truly God and truly Man with a rational soul and body: the Same is according to divinity of the same substance as God the Father, and according to His humanity of the same substance as we are; in all things like us except for sin (Compare Heb. 4:15). The Same was on the one hand in His divinity begotten of the Father before time; on the other hand in His humanity in the latter days born of Maria, the Virgin (and) Mother of God for our sakes and for the sake of our salvation: one and the same is Christ, the only begotten Son and Lord, Who in two Natures, is seen to be neither commingled, nor alterable, undivided and indivisible. In no way is the difference between the natures dis-

integrated through unification, rather is the unique nature of each of the two natures preserved and unified into one Person and one hypostasis, the only begotten Son. God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not divided into two persons or separated, but is one and the same, as the prophets had testified and as Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the confession of the fathers has affirmed.“⁴¹

Sections 2.3 and 8.2 of the Westminster Confession of 1647² summarize the Early Church's doctrine of the Trinity and of the Dual Nature of Jesus and show that the complementary decisions of the early councils were of lasting value for later generations:

„In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.“⁴³

„The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures,

*the Godhead and the manhood were inseparably joined together in one person without conversion, composition or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.*⁴

Unfortunately, later councils (Ephesus 431, Orange 529) failed to pursue this wise course in dealing with the issue of human and divine responsibility in salvation. The Church had negatively rejected Pelagius' doctrines, but lacked the strength positively to incorporate all aspects of scriptural revelation as they had done when deciding on the Trinity and on the Nature of Christ. Had they done so, their complementary solution would have moulded and unified all of Christianity, as the former issues had done. Full Pelagianism (salvation by works alone), having been universally condemned, never really raised its head again, even in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Complementary Nature of Biblical Thought

Physicists have discovered many phenomena which can be described as „complementary“ (from Lat. „complementum“; completion or supplement) in a double or triple form. Colors which produce white when mixed (for example, red and green), are called complementary colours. In a single experimental situation, an electron can be only demonstrated to be either a particle or a wave, although in reality it is both. This is therefore also true of light.

The theory of complementarity was controversial for many years. The Danish scientist Niels Bohr (1885–1962), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1922, introduced the term to physics in 1927⁵, assuring the success of the theory of complementarity in the physics of the Twentieth Century.⁶

A leading German Lexicon describes complementary nature of physical reality as the experimentally demonstrated fact that atomic particles have two paired but apparently contradictory properties, for example, particle and wave. „Two complementary features cannot be observed simultaneously, but require two contradictory, mutually intolerable measurements.“⁷

Complementarity thus implies that the various aspects of some phenomena can only be studied and defined separately from each other, even though we know that the results of both studies are simultaneously true, and that an accurate result can only be obtained by setting all aspects concerned into a proper relationship to each other – as in the case of complementary colours, which only produce white when properly mixed.

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker defines complementarity as „consisting of the fact that the two features cannot be applied simultaneously, even though both must be applied“.⁸

In the mean time, this theory has been adopted by many sciences and disciplines.⁹

It is not a lack of logical truth that forces man to rely upon complementary statements about scriptural revelation

and theology, but the limitations of the human mind. In defending most central doctrines of the Christian faith, that God is Triune and that Jesus is truly Man and truly God, the Early Church deliberately chose complementary formulations.

A complementary approach can also play a significant role in overcoming many unnecessary conflicts between Christians.¹⁰ We still tend to play one side of complementary reality against the other, or to overemphasise one aspect of it. In the Early Church, Jesus' humanity was emphasized at the cost of His divinity, and his submission to His Father at the cost of His equal status and substance.

The Bible frequently mentions two or more apparently contradictory doctrines in one breath. Jesus' humanity and His divinity, and the Trinity are the most central examples.

The following examples of complementarity are all expressed in the Bible in several ways which seem indivisible but insoluble:

Predestination and responsibility

Law and Grace

Faith and Knowledge

Divine love and divine wrath

Doctrine and life

Baptism as divine act and as human act

Church office and the priesthood of the believer¹¹

Difference and equality of man and woman¹²

The Christian is free from the Law, but lives according to God's commandments.

The Christian is free from Sin, but not sinless.

Satan is overthrown but still wields great power.

The Christian cannot lose his salvation, but is still warned to hold on to his faith.

Several scriptures with complementary content illustrate the point:

Deuteronomy 28–30 pairs the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee (30:1). God's Covenant offers advantages, but also judgement (See also: Romans 2:9–10).

Genesis 2:15 describes Man's commission to work and to keep Creation; two seemingly contradictory tasks, which, however, belong together in everyday life.

Psalm 51:16–17+19: „thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it ... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. ... Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.“

Psalm 73:23: „Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.“ The believer can hold onto God, because God holds him. Who holds whom? Both sides belong together.

1 John 1:5–3:10: John repeats four basic statements with continually new formulations: „Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.“ (3:9); „If we say that we

have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.“ (1:8); „If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.“ (1:9); „My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.“ (2:1). These four statements – a Christian does not sin, every Christian sins, every Christian should confess his sin, and every Christian should stop sinning – do not contradict each other, but belong together.

1 Cor. 8–10: Paul rebukes believers who participate in idolatrous feasts, but also those who condemn the eating of meat offered to idols.

Predestination and Responsibility

As we have seen, many Biblical issues have two seemingly contradictory but equally important factors. Church history demonstrates that many theological disputes arise when two opposing parties insist on accepting or emphasising only one side of the issue.

Scripture makes the individual fully responsible, but only for that area of life, in which he has received responsibility from God. Above and beyond that area, God reigns in His omnipotence and directs Creation. Indeed, it is God’s omnipotence that makes the human responsible and establishes the commandment. Paul states: „Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.“ (Phil 2:12–13).

Knowing that God works all things leads not to passivity but to creative action.

Ephesians 2:8–10 relates the believer’s good works to God’s sovereign activity. „For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.“

The relationship between predestination and responsibility, i.e. between God’s omnipotent and sovereign activity to human activity in responsibility before God, has immense significance for ethics, for it defines the areas for which Man can be called to responsibility. The human being is not responsible for God’s domain, but only for those areas in which he has been placed by God.

Alister E. McGrath, discussing St. Augustine, comes to the conclusion that one must hold onto both the absolute sovereignty of God and onto the reality of human liberty and responsibility, if one is to do justice to the wealth and complexity of scriptural statements on the subject. To solve the problem by denying either divine sovereignty or human liberty would lead to serious uncertainty about the Christian understanding of the way in which God justifies man.¹³

That the knowledge that God directs all things does not reduce human responsibility, and the complete responsibility of Man does not dispute God’s sovereignty,¹⁴ can be seen in several scriptures which mention both aspects at once, even using one to prove the other. Augustine

once wrote, that no one who claimed that grace eliminates free will had ever understood that he does not establish the will, but allows it to drift without restraint.¹⁵

Do we not thank both God and the cook for our food? Every time that a new human comes into being, he is a unique creation of God, but equally the product of a biological process initiated by a man and a woman. Such examples of the linking of God's sovereign activity and human operation are innumerable.

Texts on Predestination to Salvation, which mention both predestination and human responsibility.

Philippians 2:12–13: „Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.“

1 Peter 2:7–8: „To you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.“ (They are personally responsible, because they are disobedient. At the same time, they have been appointed by God to do so.

John 1:12–13: „But as many as recei-

ved him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.“ (We must receive Christ personally, but the power to do so comes from God.)

John 6:37: „All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.“ (We must come to Christ, but those who do so have been given Him by God.)

1 Corinthians 15:10: (Paul speaking of himself) „But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain;“ (All is due to God's grace, but Paul can still point out that this grace had not been bestowed in vain.)

2 Corinthians 6:1: „We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.“¹⁶

Galatians 4:8–9: „Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God ...“

Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?

1. God hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and of the Egyptians: Exo. 21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1+21+27; 11:10; 14:4+8; 14:17

2. Active person not mentioned: Exo. 7:13+14+22; 8:15+28; 9:7+35

3. Pharaoh hardens his heart. Exo. 8:11; 9:34; (See also 1Sam 6:6; P-ov. 28:14).

„The hardening is so much both, c'ivine act and equally decision of the subject, that such expressions alternate ... in the first respect, it is the result of c'ivine wrath.“⁴⁷

The expression „to harden the heart“ appears in the New Testament as¹⁸:

Divine act: Matthew 13:15; Joh 12:40; Acts 28:27; Romans 9:18; 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:14

Man's own decision or as warning against it: Mark 3:5; Acts 19:9; Romans 2:5, Heb. 3:8+13+15; 4:7

Texts which mention both the responsibility of Man in general and the divine predestination of events

Acts 27:22–24+31: Paul receives the promise that no one will be lost in the shipwreck, and announces to the crew, „There shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship,“ but still warns the soldiers, „Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved.“

Luke 22:21–22 (Judas): „But, behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table. And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!“ (Even though he is fulfilling prophecy, Judas is fully responsible for betraying Jesus.)

Matthew 18:7: „Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!“

Isaiah 50:11: „Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.“ (They bring themselves into danger, but the judgment is still from God.)

Deuteronomy 29:29: „The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.“ (God's secret activity is never an excuse for disobedience to His revealed will.)

James 4:13–17: „We are not to boast of our plans, but to say“, „For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.“ (Although promises or plans can be made only under the reservation that God determines all, we still must go about our business.)

Nehemiah 2:20: „The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build“ (Knowing that God gives success leads not to passivity, but to active cooperation.)

1 Peter 3:17: „For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.“ (Suffering occurs according to God's will, but we carry the responsibility for the cause of our suffering.)

Proverbs 21:31: „The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the LORD.“

Men pray that God bring them to repentance:

Jeremiah 31:18–19: “Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.“

Lamentations 5:21: „Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.“

Teaching of predestination leads to evangelization⁹

2 Timothy 2:10: „Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.“

Acts 18:9–10: „Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.“ (Spoken before the people had been converted. Paul is to preach the Gospel, because God has elected some of them.)

Philippians 2:12–13: „Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh

in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.“ (Christians work only because they know that God does all. Knowing of predestination does not make them passive or lazy but active and diligent.)

Nehemia 2:20: „The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build“ (See above.)

Peoples who carry out God’s judgment are still punished.

Isaiah 47:6–7: Babylon conquers Israel according to God’s commandment, but are themselves judged.

Isaiah 10:5–19: Assyria conquers Israel according to God’s commandment, but are judged for their arrogant claim to have done so in their own power.

2 Chronicles 28:1–5 (particularly verse 5, 10 and 13): The kingdom of Israel carries out divine judgement on the kingdom of Judah, but is punished for its own guilt.

Ezekiel 14:9.10: in reference to a prophet.

„O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out. For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.“(Romans 11:33–36)

Annotations

¹ Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünemann. *Enchiridion Symbolorum definitionum et edclarationum de rebus fidei et morum – Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen. Lateinisch–Deutsch.* Herder Verlag: Freiburg, 1991/37. pp. 142–143.

² G. I. Williamson. *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes.* Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co: Philadelphia, 1964, p.26.

³ The Orthodox Church rejects the addition „... and from the Son (filioque)“.

⁴ G. I. Williamson. *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* op. cit., pp. 72–73.

⁵ Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. „Komplementarität und Logik“. pp. 281–331 in: Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. *Zum Weltbild der Physik.* S. Hirzel: Stuttgart, 19587. p. 281.

⁶ Wolfgang Buchheim. *Komplementarität nach Niels Bohr.* Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftliche Klasse 117, 6. Akademie-Verlag: Berlin, 1984 and Wolfgang Buchheim (Ed.). *Beiträge zur Komplementarität,* the same series, 55,5. *Ibid.*, 1983.

⁷ Bertelsmann Neues Lexikon in 10 Vols. Vol 5. Bertelsmann Lexikon Verlag: Gütersloh, 1995. p. 323.

⁸ Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. „Komplementarität und Logik“. op. cit., p. 284. Weizsäcker uses these terms to illustrate the classical definition of the quantum theory. His own view is somewhat different.

⁹ See for example Helmut K. Reich. *Der Begriff der Komplementarität in Wissenschaft und Alltag.* Berichte zur Erziehungswissenschaft 105. Pädagogisches Institut: Freiburg (CH), 1994.

¹⁰ See: Winfried Amelung. *In IHM ist die Fülle: Wider die falschen Alternativen.* Weinmann-Stiftung: Dornstetten, 1988.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–50 (office) and pp. 51–69 (baptism).

¹² See: John Stott. *Christsein in den Brennpunkten unserer Zeit ... 4 ... im sexuellen Bereich.* Francke: Marburg, 1988 [Engl. 1984]. pp. 21–24 (Section „Komplementarität“).

¹³ Alister E. McGrath. *Der Weg der christlichen Theologie.* C. H. Beck: München, 1997. p. 436 [Historical Theology. Blackwell: Oxford, 1997].

¹⁴ As Charles Haddon Spurgeon emphasizes in his autobiography, predestination and responsibility must both be equally emphasized: „Plädoyer für den Calvinismus“ (Title of the 12th Chapter), pp. 95–103 in: Charles Haddon Spurgeon. *Alles zur Ehre Gottes: Autobiographie.* Oncken Verlag, Wuppertal, 1984, here p. 102–103 [Autobiography. Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 1973 and many other editions]; See also: Iain Murray. *Spurgeon – wie ihn keiner kennt.* Reformatorischer Verlag H. C. Beese: Hamburg, 1992.

¹⁵ Aurelius Augustinus. *Schriften gegen die Semipelagianer.* Reihe: Sankt Augustinus, der Lehrer der Gnade: Deutsche Gesamtausgabe seiner antipelagianischen Schriften Bd. 7. Augustinus-Verlag: Würzburg, 19872. p. 31. See also: Aurelius Augustin. *Vom Gottesstaat.* Vol 1. dtv: München, 19852. pp. 240–244+361–363.

¹⁶ On the last three verses, see: *Ibid.*, pp. 265+95–99.

¹⁷ Gustav Friedrich Oehler. *Theologie des Alten Testaments.* op. cit., p. 258 (sic). See also: Karl Ludwig Schmidt. „Die Verstockung des Menschen durch Gott“. op. cit., pp. 1–17.

¹⁸ Based on Martin Luther's usage of „Verstücken“ in his translation of the New Testament. (See *Ibid.*, p. 5). The Greek and Hebrew texts use varying terms (See *Ibid.*, pp. 9–15).

¹⁹ See: James I. Packer. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. IVP: London, 1961 (from the Reformed view of double predestination) and Siegfried Kettling. *Typisch evangelisch: Grundbegriffe des Glaubens*. TVG. Brunnen: Gießen, 19932. pp. 83–147 (from the Neo-Lutheran view of simple predestination).

The author



Thomas Schirmmacher earned his doctorates in Theology (Dr. theol, 1985, Netherlands) in Cultural Anthropology (PhD, 1989, USA) and in Ethics (ThD, 1996, USA) and received a honorary doctorate (DD) in 1997. He is president of Martin Bucer Theological Seminary with campuses in Bonn, Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna, Innsbruck, Prague and Istanbul and holds chairs in ethics, world religions and international development in Germany, USA and India. He is also president of Gebende Hände GmbH (Giving Hands), an internationally active relief organisation, as well as owner of a publishing house and coowner of a consulting company. He is Secretary of the Commission for Religions Freedom of the German and Austrian Evangelical Alliance and member of the same commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. He has written and edited 74 books. He is married with Dr. Christine Schirmmacher, who holds a chair in the Science of Islam, and is father of a son (12) and a daughter (9).

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Kontakt:

E-Mail: mbsmaterialien@bucer.de

Fax: 0 26 81 / 98 83 69

Herausgeber:

Dr. mult. Thomas Schirrmacher

Schriftleitung:

Ron Kubsch

Weitere Redaktionsmitglieder:

Thomas Kinker, Titus Vogt,

Drs. Frank Koppelin

Studienzentrum Berlin

Martin Bucer Seminar, Breite Straße 39B,

13187 Berlin

Fax 0 30/4 22 35 73, E-Mail: berlin@bucer.de

Studienzentrum Bonn

Martin Bucer Seminar, Friedrichstr. 38, 53111 Bonn

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Studienzentrum Hamburg

Martin Bucer Seminar, c/o ARCHE,

Doerriesweg 7, 22525 Hamburg

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Studienzentrum Pforzheim

Martin Bucer Seminar, Bleichstraße 59,

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