

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

An Exposition On The Seventh Question Of the
Westminster Shorter Catechism.

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Reformed Theological Seminary

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“Although the sovereignty of God is universal and absolute, it is not the sovereignty of blind power. It is coupled with infinite wisdom, holiness, and love. And this doctrine, when properly understood, is a most comforting and reassuring one.

Who would not prefer to have his affairs in the hands of a God of infinite power, wisdom, holiness, and love, rather than to have them left to fate or chance, or irrevocable natural law, or to shortsighted and perverted self? Those who reject God’s sovereignty should consider what alternatives they have left”. (Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 32)

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

An Exposition On The Seventh Question of The
*Westminster Shorter Catechism*¹

David S. Petrie

PERHAPS THE MOST NEGLECTED DOCTRINE IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH TODAY IS THE DOCTRINE OF GOD. Just as the Bible starts with God, any study of theology must start with God. In fact, it is upon this doctrine that our faith will stand or fall. It was John Calvin who compared the Scriptures to “ a pair of eyeglasses”, in that through the written Word of God we may be able to have a correct view of our life, purpose, and the world around us. Well, in very much the same way, the only way to gain a clear understanding of the various doctrines found in scripture is to first have a correct understanding of the nature of God Himself. Unfortunately, in the mind of many in the church today, there seems to be a struggle between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Although I do see great danger in over emphasizing one side and neglecting the other, the intent of this essay is to focus on the sovereignty of our God, to glorify the One who rightly sits on the throne.

We can ask ourselves ‘who’s in charge, God or man?’; ‘can dead men believe?’ or ‘does Jesus save, or, does He make salvation possible?’ It was perhaps best said by Steve Brown, a noted Reformed theologian and Bible teacher, who once remarked; “we are to work like an Arminian, yet trust like a Calvinist”. Amen! May we assume our responsibility to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost, from *first* having confidence in the sovereignty of our God. May we know Him to love Him; may we love Him to serve Him; may we serve Him to glorify Him. Amen.

I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD DEFINED

‘Sovereignty’ is a term often heard in public prayers, and used in the context of Sunday sermons. It has become a term that may be better placed in a category called “Christian-ese”. Often used, its meaning has become dulled and obscured over time. My favorite treatment on this matter is found in the book, *The Sovereignty Of God*, by Arthur W. Pink. For example:

¹ The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) also served as a model for the Baptist Catechism published by order of the Particular Baptist General Assembly which met in London in 1693.

The sovereignty of the God of Scripture is absolute, irresistible, and infinite. When we say that God is sovereign, we affirm His right to govern the universe, which He has made for His own glory, just as He pleases. We affirm that *His right* is the right of the Potter over the clay, vis: that He may Mould that clay into whatsoever form He chooses, fashioning out of *the same lump* one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour. We affirm that he is under no rule or law outside His own will and nature, *that God is a law unto Himself*, and that He is under no obligation to give an account of His matters to any. ...none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purposes, or resist His will. (*The Sovereignty of God*, 20, 22)

II. THE WESTMINSTER CATECHISM, QUESTION SEVEN

Perhaps the best confessional statement on divine sovereignty is in the Shorter Catechism. Question seven reads as follows:

Q. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. ²

III. THE DECREES OF GOD

The answer for much of the reluctance to accept the absolute sovereignty of God lies in the noetic effect of the fall. In other words, the fall, resulting in our inherent sin nature, has a negative effect on our *willingness* to know certain kinds of truth (Romans 1, 2). The Deistic view of God has Him “outside the box”, so to speak, unable or unwilling to involve Himself in His creation. This view is absurd. Consider the truths of scripture: God is absolutely perfect **in His nature and character** (Dt 32:4; Ecc 3:14; Mt 5:48; Ro 11:33-36). **In His Word** (Ps 12:6; Ps 19:7; Pr 8:8-9; 30:5; 2Ti 3:16-17; Jas 1:25). **In His morality** (Hab 1:13; 2Sam 22:26-27; Job 4:17; 1Jn 3:3). **In His will and providence** (2Sam 22:31; Ps 18:30; Ro 12:2; Jas 1:17). **In His knowledge** (Job 37:16; Ps 139:4; Isa 40:13-14; Heb 4:13). His perfect-ness necessitates involvement. Therefore, as we take an honest, and most importantly, a humble look into the nature of God, we are necessarily driven to the logical conclusion that God must be absolutely sovereign over *all* of His creation. An honest assessment of His nature demands it.

² This question was adopted by, and is found as question eleven (11) of the Baptist Catechism, originally published by order of the Particular Baptist General Assembly, 1693. The Baptist Catechism is based on the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

As R.C. Sproul has said, “there cannot be even one maverick molecule in the whole universe”... In his book *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith*, he goes on to say:

Because God is sovereign and His will can never be frustrated, we can be sure that nothing happens over which He is not in control. He at least must “permit” whatever happens to happen. Yet even when God passively permits things to happen, He *chooses* to permit them in that He always has the power and right to intervene and prevent the actions and events of this world. Insofar as He lets things happen, He has “willed” them in a certain sense. (*Essential Truths*, p. 67)

Essentially, when we speak of God’s sovereignty, His decrees must be inclusive. Even in the *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1986 ed, we find the word ‘decree’ defined theologically as “one of the eternal purposes of God, by which events are foreordained”. This brings us to the next item to examine: His eternal purpose.

IV. HIS ETERNAL PURPOSE

“Known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15:18). The plan of our God is assumed throughout the Bible. His plan is purposive, and has been established from eternity (Eph 3:11). This plan, rather, this *all-encompassing* plan of God is what gives life meaning! In his book *Enjoying God Forever*, Pastor and Author Paul Smith comments on the relationship between God’s eternal purpose and our assurance:

In declaring that God is sovereign, we say that He is in absolute control of the universe, and that He is absolutely independent of any other will or power. God does whatever He wills; nothing happens without His leave, and no decision of any other person or being can interfere with the accomplishment of His purpose. This is indispensable to what we believe. (p. 37)

He goes on to say:

This understanding of God’s absolute sovereignty should also be for us an incomparable source of consolation in times of grief or loss. Consider this with me: No accident, no illness, no death, no crime,

no loss takes place without God's sovereign leave. In other words, as He is sovereign, such events simply may not happen to us if He does not allow it. If they do happen to us, it is because He has allowed it for His good purposes. We may not be able to see what He has in mind, but we can be assured that God in His sovereignty has it well in hand. (p. 46)

A person acts with purpose. God is personal. Belief in a personal God results in the belief in a plan underlying all that He does. Perhaps there is nothing more personal than realizing that there is nothing in God's plan that comes into our lives except through the broken body of our Lord Jesus, demonstrating the heart of His love for us. Yet this too, was in the *plan* from eternity past *according to Scripture* (Rev 13:8). Notice also, that this passage clearly teaches that all of God's elect, had been chosen before the foundation of the world, before Genesis 1:1. We also know that there is nothing we can do to add to that number, or take away (Jn 13:18; Acts 13:48; 2Tm 2:19). Therefore, we may not only *trust*, but we can *rest* in Him!

V. THE COUNSEL OF HIS WILL

For years, many have enjoyed reading the works of the late Lewis Sperry Chafer, in particular, his seven volume set *Systematic Theology*. Over the years, many of us have also learned the value of discernment, and that we can learn from some even if we cannot agree with everything they say. Case in point here. Chafer, a distinguished dispensational theologian (who also praises the Westminster Confession...) writes:

Both salvation and condemnation are *conditioned on the individual's reaction* to one and the same thing, namely, the saving grace of God made possible through the death of Christ. (*Systematic Theology*, 3.187, emphasis mine).

Notice, this kind of statement proclaims the Arminian teaching that our eternal fate is conditioned on what *man* does and not what God does, hence denying the sovereignty of God.

So... What about this "will" of God that determines His decrees? Well, if we remember two facts, we will be leaps and bounds above the curve. First, EVERYTHING is derived from the will of God (Rev. 4:11). Second, God's will is the FINAL *ground* of all things (Dan. 4:35, 6:18). A few very significant examples would be: The *ground* of government (Prov. 1:21);

ground of Christ's suffering (Lk. 22:42); *ground* of election and reprobation (Rom. 9); *ground* of regeneration (Jas 1:18); *ground* of sanctification (Phil 2:13); *ground* of sufferings of believers (1 Peter 3:17); *ground* of life and destiny (Jas 4:15); *ground* of even the smallest and least significant things (Mt 10:29).

In his book *The Doctrine of God*, Herman Bavinck does a wonderful job defining God's decrees, and points us to their source with all the Scripture references one would need to be a responsible "Berean":

God's decree is his eternal purpose whereby he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. Scripture everywhere affirms that whatsoever is and comes to pass, is the realization of God's thought and will, and has its *origin and idea in God's eternal counsel or decree*, Gen 1; Job 28:27; Prov 8:22; Ps 104:24; Prov 3:19; Jer 10:12; 51:15; Heb 11:3; Ps 33:11; Is 44:24-27; 46:10; Prov 19:21; Acts 2:23; 4:28; Eph 1:11; etc.

He goes on to add:

Even human deeds are based upon deliberation and consideration: in the case of rational beings thinking and purposing precede acting and doing. In a far more exalted sense this is true with respect to the Lord our God: apart from His knowledge and will nothing can ever come to pass. Accordingly, all Christians accept a divine decree as such. (p. 369)

In essence, what we are saying is that, it is God's "Godhood" that holds the very fabric of our lives together. His plan, His decrees, His counsel, is within Himself, the Godhead alone. He confers with no one. From primary and secondary causes, right down to the freedom of our own wills, all things run in perfect line with His ultimate will. It is this sense of freedom and trust that we have which compels us, *our will with His will*, to carry out the Great Commission with joy and eagerness, realizing the great privilege we have in participating in God's plan.

To God be the glory!

...FOR HIS OWN GLORY

I believe this is the heart of the problem. For example, in his book *The Holy Spirit*, Charles Ryrie comments that God the Holy Spirit needs man to “enable” Him to give man new life. He says:

Faith is not the means of regeneration, though it is the human requirement which when met, *enables* the Spirit to bring about the new birth”. (64, emphasis mine)

In principal, this is bad theology. We must remember for what purpose God created the universe and man. Very simply, and well stated, question one of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reads:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. ³

It is for God’s glory that *all* that is, exists. Does God fail? Of course not! Part of the cause of the confusion in the evangelical church today, is that some have a tendency to define truth philosophically, or by human reasoning. Read these words again written by A.W. Pink:

Why is it that all are not saved, particularly all who hear the Gospel? Do you still answer, because the majority refuse to believe? Well, that is true, but it is only a part of the truth. It is the truth *from the human side*. But there is a divine side too, and this side of the truth needs to be stressed or *God will be robbed of His glory*. (*The Sovereignty of God*, 46)

In John Calvin’s reply to an address by Jacopo Sadoletto, a Roman Catholic Cardinal in the sixteenth century, Calvin wrote: “...it is not very sound theology to confine a man’s thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. We are born first of all for God and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from Him, and subsist in Him, so, says Paul (Rom. 11:36), they ought to be referred to Him”. (1539: *A Reformation Debate*, p. 58)

³ This question was adopted by, and is found as question four (4) of the Baptist Catechism originally published by order of the Particular Baptist General Assembly, 1693. The Baptist Catechism is based on the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

We get into danger when we attempt to interpret the Word of God according to our own human paradigms. I like how the *Thematic Reference Bible* defines the term 'Reformation': "The process of bringing religious practices and beliefs back into line with the Word of God" (p. 2017).

The point the editors are trying to make is clear: It is the Word of God, and the Word of God *alone*, which defines the truths of God.

Spiritual giant Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, cut many to the quick in his day as he proclaimed boldly the sovereignty of God. Relating this matter to the Glory of God, he wrote:

There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children of God ought more earnestly to contend than the dominion of their Master over all creation – the kingship of God over all the works of His own hands – the throne of God, and His right to sit on that throne.

On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except upon His throne. They will allow Him to be in His workshop to fashion worlds and to make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense His alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth; and when we proclaim an *enthroned* God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter, then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. They love Him anywhere better than they do when he sits with His scepter in His hand and His crown upon His head.

But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust. (“Divine Sovereignty,” a sermon delivered May 4, 1856.)

The glory of God, affirmed by His Sovereignty, is the line of demarcation that separates the Gospel of God (Rom. 1), from the gospel of man that surrounds us.

VI. FOREORDAINED WHATSOEVER COMES TO PASS

Here we have another major stumbling stone for many. The opposing argument is one that defends free will as independent of God’s sovereignty. The argument may go something like this; “that kind of doctrine makes God out to be some kind of cosmic rapist, or puppeteer...” Well, if we look at the flip side, if God did not foreordain all things (as His Word declares), then we have a God susceptible to failure. Remember, God created man in His image, and declared His creation “very good” (Gen. 1). Jonathan Edwards wrote these related words with regard to the fall, illustrating the point perfectly:

...God must be greatly disappointed in these events; and so the grand scheme and contrivance for our redemption, and destroying the works of the devil by the Messiah, and all the great things God has done in the prosecution of these designs, must be only the fruits of His own disappointment, and contrivances of His to mend and patch up, as well as He could, His system which originally was all very good, and perfectly beautiful, but was marred, broken, and confounded by the free will of angels and men. (*The Freedom of the Will*, 131-132)

I think it is an easy trap to fall into when we limit the nature of God (who is sovereign), according to our own (limited) human nature. The basic difference lies between Orthodoxy and Heresy. Unfortunately, the source of this difference is in the attitude of the heart. Heresy declares, “if I can’t understand it, it must be false”, and allows the contemporary philosophical teaching in today’s church to determine truth. Belief, through faith, *must* be guided by the Word of God.

Chapter three of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* begins with these words:

From all eternity and by the completely wise and holy purpose of His own will, God has freely and unchangeably ordained whatever happens. (cf. Eph. 1:11)

Another mistake some are guilty of making, is to put the cart before the horse. Let us not make that mistake here. God does not ordain what may happen or make decisions based on what he “foresees”. (Unfortunately this is a very popular, yet unbiblical view of election). What God *knows* (first), He ordains (Isa. 46:10-11; Ac. 2:23; Rom. 8:28:30; 1 Pe. 1:20). Luther comments well on this subject with these words:

There are no obscure or ambiguous words here, even though all the most learned men of all ages should be so blind as to think and affirm the contrary. However much you may boggle, yet your conscience, and everybody’s conscience, is convinced and bound to confess, that, if God is not mistaken in what He foreknows, then what He foreknows must necessarily come to pass.

He goes on to say,

And if you do not allow that the thing which God foreknows is necessarily brought to pass, you take away faith and the fear of God, you undermine all the divine promises and threatenings, and so you deny Deity itself! (*The Bondage of the Will*, 213)

In other words, the Bible is actually quite clear. Perspicuously written, Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by. The perspicuity of Scripture rests in God’s intention to provide Scripture as a revelation of Himself. God created with purpose. A purpose demands a plan. God’s knowledge of His plan coming to fruition must necessarily precede the event in time. God is God; to deny that His plan (which He foreknows, and *not* according to what he foresees) must come to pass, denies the God-hood of God!

A.A. Hodge, son of the great Charles Hodge, does a great job of articulating these truths in his book *The Confession of Faith*. Here I quote at length:

God has had from eternity an unchangeable plan with reference to His creatures. As an infinitely intelligent Creator and providential

Ruler, God must have had a definite purpose with reference to the being and destination of all that He has created, comprehending in one all-perfect system His chief end therein, and all subordinate ends and means in reference to that chief end. And since He is an eternal

and unchangeable being, His plan must have existed in all its elements, perfect and unchangeable, from eternity. Since He is an infinite, eternal, unchangeable, and absolutely wise, powerful, and sovereign Person, His purposes must partake of the essential attributes of His own being. And since God's intelligence is absolutely perfect and His plan is eternal, since His ultimate end is revealed to be the single one of His own glory, and the whole work of creation and providence is observed to form one system, it follows that His plan is also single - one all-comprehensive intention, providing for all the means and conditions as well as the ends selected. (COF, 63-64)

He follows up by addressing the inevitable question of free will and secondary causes:

Calvinists believe, as all men must, that all events in the system of things depend upon their causes, and are suspended upon conditions. That is, if a man does not sow seed, he will not reap; if he does sow, and all the favorable climatic influences are present, he will reap. If a man believes, he shall be saved; if he does not believe, he will not be saved. But the all-comprehensive purpose of God embraces and determines the cause and conditions, as well as the event suspended upon them. The decree, instead of altering, determines the nature of events, and their mutual relations. It makes free actions free in relation to their agents, and contingent events contingent in relation to their conditions; while at the same time, it makes the entire system of events, and every element embraced in it, certainly future. An absolute decree is one which, while it may determine many conditional events by determining their conditions, is itself suspended on no condition. A *conditional* decree is one which determines that a certain event shall happen on condition that some other undecreed event happens ... All who believe in a divine government agree with Calvinists that the decrees of God relating to events produced by necessary causes are *unconditional* ... If every event that comes to pass is foreordained, it is evident that there is

nothing left undetermined upon which the decree can be conditioned. (COF, 65-66. Emphasis mine)

It is the Sovereignty of God, according to His perfect, wise, and unchangeable plan, that proves the truth of this view. This is directly affirmed in Scripture. Dan. 4:35; Is. 40:13,14; Rom. 9:15-18; Eph. 1:5, etc.

VII. CONCLUSION

I am saddened by the nominalism and idealism that is so prevalent today. In reality, these problems have been in the Church for centuries. The Sovereignty of God is hard for many to swallow. I often hear the most learned of men deny the most obvious truths, and I can't help but remember these words from our hero, Martin Luther:

As little children in fear, or at play, cover their eyes with their hands and think that because they see nobody, nobody sees them, so the Diatribe, which cannot bear the bright beams, nay, the lightning-flashes of the clearest words, uses every means to pretend that it does not see what the facts are, in hope of persuading us that our eyes are covered also and that we cannot see either. All these maneuvers, however, are signs of a mind under conviction, recklessly resisting invincible truth. (*The Bondage of the Will*, 212)

Hard words, for hard truth. But let's not be "puffed up", as many would like to think of us who claim to be 'reformed'. We need to stand for truth, just as Luther, yet let's also be humble enough to admit our natural tendencies, as Luther also did:

Keep in view three lights: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory.... By the light of nature, it is inexplicable that it should be just for the good to be afflicted and the bad to prosper; but the light of grace explains it. By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. *Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God....* But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God, to whom alone belongs a judgment whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God Whose justice is most righteous and evident-provided only that in the meanwhile we *believe* it, as we are instructed and encouraged to do.... (*The Bondage of the Will*, 317, emphasis mine).

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Soli Deo Gloria