

The Sovereignty of God

1 Chron 11:29 "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth, is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all."

How different is the God of the Bible from the God of modern Christendom! The conception of Deity which prevails most widely today, even among those who profess to give heed to the Scriptures, is a miserable caricature, a blasphemous travesty of the Truth. The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands little respect from too many, even among believers. In a word, to deny the Sovereignty of God is to enter upon a path which, if followed to its logical terminus, is to arrive at atheism.

The sovereignty of God I take to be the absolute authority, rule, and government of God in the whole of that reality that exists distinct from Himself in the realms of nature and of grace. It is a concept that respects His relation to other beings and to all other being and existence.

If God possesses and exercises this absolute authority, rule, and government, the necessary presupposition of it is the oneness, or unity, of God. It is a fact to which Scripture bears constant witness in a great variety of contexts because it is a truth that underlies and determines the whole superstructure of divine revelation.

It is not as if there were a host of lesser deities over whom God is supreme and therefore demands from us supreme worship and devotion. It is rather that he alone is God. "The Lord he is God; there is none else besides him." "He is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else" (Deut. 4:35, 39). "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me" (Deut. 32:39). "Thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth" (2 Kings 19:15).

It is significant that it is precisely this line of Old Testament witness that is appealed to by our Lord as He answers the question, "What commandment is the first of all?" "The first...is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29). And the necessary consequence for us is, "and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". (Mark 12:30). "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." (Matt. 4:10). The pivotal character of the oneness of God appears, for example, in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, when it is made the hinge upon which turns and hangs no less important a doctrine than that of justification by faith. ²⁹ "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

The concept of divine sovereignty presupposes also the fact of creation, that is, the origination of all other existence by the fiat of God. The moment we introduce the existence of anything independent of God in its derivation of factual being, in that moment we have denied the divine sovereignty of God. Scripture is paramount in exclaiming this fact, and so its witness to the absolutely origination activity of God is pervasive.

"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Ps. 33:6). "For he spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (vs. 9). This mode of statement harks back to the first chapter of Genesis, where on eight occasions the successive steps of the creation are introduced with the formula "and God said."

God made heaven and earth; by His Spirit the heavens were garnished; He laid the foundations of the earth; by wisdom He founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; His hands stretched out the heavens, and all their host He commanded; heaven and earth, His hand made, and so all those things came to be; He made the sea and the dry land; He is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega; He is the beginning of creation; by His will, heaven and earth were, and were created (2 Kings 19:15; Job 26:13; 38:4; Prov. 3:19; Isa. 42:5; 44:6; 45:12; 66:2; Jonah 1:9; Rev. 1:8; 3:14; 4:8).

The foundation on which the Scripture places its guarantee rests upon, and is necessarily suffused with, the recognition of God as creator. The address to God in adoration, prayer, and praise begins with it; the address to men in law and gospel rests upon it. The faith that is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," the faith through which the catalogue of saints had witness borne to them that they were righteous, is the faith through which "we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3). And when Paul made his appeal to the idolatrous Athenians that God now commands men that they should all, everywhere repent, he began his address by saying, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man" (Acts 17:24).

Sovereignty, as the right of dominion and the fact of possession, comes to its full all-pervasive and efficient exercise in government. As such it is (1) sovereignty exercised in accordance with His original decree. "Hast thou not heard, long ago, how I have done it, and of ancient times that I have formed it? now have I brought it to pass, that you should turn fortified cities into heaps of ruins" (2 Kings 19:25). "Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isa. 14:24). "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isa. 26:10). In Job's words, "He is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desires, even that he does. For he performs the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him" (Job 23:13-14). "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:1-2). It is that "the counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations," that he "works all things according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ps. 33:11; Eph. 1:11).

This purposeful decree is not only stated positively but also negatively. No purpose of his can be restrained, and every creature's purpose that is contrary must be frustrated. "For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27). "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He frustrates the plans of the peoples". (Ps. 33:10).

As sovereignty coming to all-pervasive and efficient exercise in government, it is (2) sovereignty exercised with omnipotent and undefeatable efficiency. The mighty hand of God is the executor of his will. He is the great, the mighty, the terrible. He rides upon the heavens and, in his excellency, on the skies. (Deut. 10:17; 13:26; Job 5:12-13; 12:14; Prov. 21:30; Dan. 3:29; Isa. 31:3).

It is (3) sovereignty that is all-pervasive. This all-pervasiveness rests upon his omnipresence. "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. (Ps. 139:7-10).

We may illustrate this all-pervasiveness in three of the ways in which Scripture exhibits it:

1) It respects the events of ordinary providence. Job 5:10; Matt. 5:45; Ps. 104:4, 14-24; 63:11; Hos. 2:8.

1) It respects the disposition of all earthly authority. He alone is God of all the kingdoms of the earth. He removes kings and sets up kings, for as the Most-High, he rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever he will. Deut. 4:35, 39; 2 Kings 5:15; 9:15; Isa. 37:16; Dan. 4:11; 5:18, 21; Hag. 2:22.

3) It respects good and evil, so that even the sins of men come within the scope of his rule and providence. "What," asks the oppressed and the afflicted Job, bereft of flocks and herds and smitten with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto the crown, "shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?" Job 2:10. Job 12:13-14. Isa. 45:7; Deut. 32:39. "The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble." Prov. 16:4.

The teaching of Scripture on the divine sovereignty requires us to recognize with Calvin that all events are governed by the secret counsel and directed by the present hand of God and that God's omnipotence is not the vain, idle possession of potency but the most vigilant, efficacious, and operative, "a power constantly exerted on every distinct and particular movement". "Whence we assert, that not only the heaven and the earth, and inanimate creatures, but also the deliberations and volitions of men, are so governed by his providence, as to be directed to the end appointed by it.

Isa. 6:9-10, Matt. 13:14-15, John 12:40, Acts 28:26-27, I Thess. 2:11-12, I Kings 22:19-23, Rom. 9:18.

Perhaps most familiar to us in the matter of the divine agency as it respects evil are Acts 2:23; 4:28, where the arch-crime of human history is referred to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God and the treatment meted out to Jesus. In the conspiracy devised against him by Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel is that which the divine hand and counsel foreordained to come to pass.

God is not the author of sin. Sin is embraced in his decretive foreordination; it is accomplished in his providence. But it is embraced in his decree and effected in his providence in such a way as to insure that blame and guilt attach to the perpetrators of wrong and to them alone.

Eccl. 11:5, Job 11:7-9, Ps. 77:19, Ps. 89:14.

The sovereignty of God is in a unique and peculiar way exemplified in the election to saving grace. The correlate of this sovereignty in the choice and salvation of his people is the faithfulness and unchangeableness of God. He consistently pursues the determinations that proceed from himself, and so his self-consistency insures steadfastness and persistence in his covenant promises and purposes. Mal. 3:6

Perhaps the most plausible and subtle attempt to eliminate the sovereignty of God in the election to saving grace is the interpretation that posits foreknowledge in the diluted sense of foresight Romans 8:29. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." It is contended that the foreknowledge spoken of is the divine foresight of faith, or, more comprehensively, the divine foresight of the fulfilment on the part of men of the conditions of salvation. Those whom he foreknew, therefore, are those whom he foresaw as certain to fulfill the conditions of salvation.

The answer that Scripture itself affords is that faith itself is the gift of God, not of course a gift in some mechanical sense, but gift in the sense of being graciously wrought in men by the operation and illumination of the Spirit. John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:21. According to the teaching of Scripture in general and Paul in particular, faith is made the consequence of foreknowledge and predestination.

Conformity to the image of the Son, no doubt, points to the ultimate perfection to which the elect will attain. If so, then the whole process by which that conformity is secured and realized must be in subordination to this end. Paul there affirms that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: having predestinated us unto adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself." The elect are chosen to holiness; in the divine love, they are predestinated to adoption.

This election and predestination are according to the good pleasure of his will and according to the purpose of him who worketh all things according to the purpose of his own will. "being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11). To find the determinating factor in this predestination in a human decision would be to wreck the whole intent of Paul's eloquent multiplication of terms.

The choice in Christ and the consequent union with him is the antecedent or foundation of all the blessings bestowed. It is in the Beloved we were abundantly favored with grace (vs. 6); it is in him we have the redemption, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace (vs. 1); the making known of the mystery of his will was purposed in Christ (vs. 9); it is in him that all things in heaven and earth will be summed up (vs. 10); it is in him we are called (vs. 11); it is in him that the Ephesians, when they had heard the word of truth and believed, were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (vss. 13, 14). It is obvious that the very exercise of grace, believing and persevering grace, is grace exercised in the sphere and on the basis of union with Christ, and so the union with Christ which has its genesis in the choice of Christ before the foundation of the world, must be regarded as the foundation and basis of that rather than, by way of prescience, its conditioning cause.

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). "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 forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36)

Sources:

The Sovereignty of God; A.W. Pink

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The Work of the Holy Spirit; Abraham Kuyper