

IS GOD STILL SOVEREIGN?

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The Doctrine Stated

The Sovereignty of God is an aspect of His character and relation to creation that has been held, to some degree by all Bible believers. The concept is part of the very fabric of the “theology proper” of the reformers and their successors. Our confession of faith is permeated with the “aroma” of divine sovereignty. Note these examples:

He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. [Chapter II of God and the Holy Trinity, Section I.]

God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather Restablished. [Chapter III of God’s Eternal Decree, Section I.]

God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. [Chapter V of Providence, Section I.] (See also III:3; VI:1; VIII:1,8;X:1; XI:4; XIV:1; XVI:3; and XVII:2.)

The reformers, the Westminster divines and all “reformed Christians” have held and cherished this doctrine primarily because the Scriptural data supports it. We accept statements like that of David (a “sovereign” King in his own right) as true:

Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. (I Chr. 29:11,12)

Our God does “whatever pleases him” (Ps. 115:3). He is an absolute sovereign “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11). A “partial sovereign” is an oxymoron like “dry water,” “partial pregnancy” or “almost alive.” He sovereignly creates. “By your will they were created and have their being” (Rev. 4:11). He sovereignly governs all the life events and actions of his creatures as well. Hannah’s inspired prayer puts it this way:

The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's; upon them he has set the world. (I Samuel 2:6-8)

The Doctrine Challenged

But this view of the Sovereignty of God has been challenged, mostly on philosophical grounds, by unbelievers and some Bible believing Christians. The latest challenge is presented in a controversial new book entitled *The Openness of God* (IVP, 1994). It is co-authored by evangelical scholars representing reputable, mostly Christian, colleges and universities: Clark Pinnock (McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario); Richard Rice (LaSierra University, Riverside, California); William Hasker (Huntington College, Huntington, Indiana); and David Basinger (Robert's Wesleyan College, Rochester, New York). These men all claim to hold a high view of Scripture. Their concept is called variously: the "open view of God," "creative-love theism" or "free will theism." The book was reviewed in an article by Roger Olson entitled "Has God Been Held Hostage to Philosophy?" that appeared in *Christianity Today*, Jan. 9, 1995. He summarizes the basic thesis of *The Openness of God* in his article.

The following quotes are from that article (my summary statements are in italics). According to Olson the book's main ideas are:

1. God chooses to limit His knowledge of the future and the sovereign exercise of His will in history.

"The heart of the change is this: God is no longer to be understood as an immutable monarch controlling human history and individual lives, but rather is to be seen as a self-limiting, loving, and suffering father who allows himself to be affected by his creatures. . . ."

"According to free-will theism, history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do"

"They assert that part and parcel of the open view of God is belief that God does not know future free decisions and actions of his creatures."

2. The traditional view of the transcendent God overseeing but not touched by history is a result of the influence of Neo-Platonistic philosophy on theologians.

"It is a Hebrew-Christian model of God stripped of the deleterious effects of Neo-Platonism and other Hellenistic philosophies."

3. They reject the concept of antinomy or paradox contending that such "logical contradictions" are illegitimate

“. . . truth claims about God that involve logical contradictions are literally nonsense and should not be accepted in theology any more than in any area of intellectual endeavor.”

4. They say that the traditional reformed view of absolute predestination destroys true freedom and therefore must be jettisoned in favor of their view of the self limiting God.

“True freedom means being able to choose between options without any predetermination.”

Doctrine Defended

In my opinion, this “open view” of God should be rejected for the following two reasons: The weight of scriptural evidence for the reformed view and the denial of the transcendent the view requires.

1. Scriptural Evidence for the Reformed view.

There is overwhelming scriptural evidence that God has a sovereign plan and that He moves and acts in history to accomplish that plan in spite of the will of His creatures. There are many examples of this divine planning and acting throughout the Scriptures.

The events of Joseph’s life, based on his testimony recorded in Gen. 50:20, were all guided by God to accomplish His will. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” God’s intent regarding Joseph was revealed in outline form many years before this time (Gen. 37:5-11). God’s will was accomplished in spite of the evil intentions of Joseph’s brothers and others (39:17; 40:23).

The captivity of the Israelites is always referred to by the prophets as a sovereign retributive act of God towards them. “Hear O, earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law” (Jer. 6:19). Although the Assyrians and Babylonians were acting out their own sinful desires in subjugating Israel and Judah, they were at the same time under the sovereign sway of God Almighty (Isa. 37:26). Assyria is but an instrument of God to execute His wrath. God says “I send him against a godless nation I dispatch him against a people who anger me. . . . “ After using these nations he will punish them for their own sins. “I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart” (Isa. 10:6,12). God punishes the Babylonians by stirring up the Medes to destroy them. “See I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon . . . “The Lord has stirred up the kings of the Medes, because his purpose is to destroy Babylon.” (Jer. 51:1,11). When the time is right God “stirs up one from the north” to deliver His people and restore them to their land (Isa. 41:25). “I will raise up Cyrus . . . he will rebuild my city and set my exiles free.” (Isa. 45:1,13). In all these twists and turns of history we see God sovereignly accomplishing His pre-ordained plans even though those on the stage are making moral choices for which they are held accountable.

The God of the Bible takes pleasure in distinguishing Himself from all other so called “gods.” His sovereign administration of the world to accomplish His will is presented as one of those distinctions. He is the God who has a plan and accomplishes it. The prophetic element in revelation is meant in part to demonstrate this control of history. In the midst of specific prophecies regarding Israel He declares: “I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare, before they spring into being I announce them unto you.” (Isa. 42:8,9; cf. 43:8-13; 44:6,7,18,24-26). The God of Scripture makes plans and executes them in history. At times He even reveals before hand what He will do to prove His sovereignty.

God’s sovereign influence over history to accomplish His will is illustrated all throughout the biblical record. God tells Solomon He will “tear the kingdom away from (him) and give it to one of (his) subordinates” (I Kings 11:11). In order to accomplish this He sees to it that Rehoboam follows the advice of his contemporaries rather than elders “for this turn of events was from the Lord” (II Kings 12:12-15). Similarly, Absalom listened to Hushai instead of Ahithophel “For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.” (II Sam. 17:14). Amaziah King of Judah didn’t heed the warning of Jehoash, King of Israel, because “God so worked that he might hand him over to Jehoash” (II Chr. 25:20).

Since no evil can take place without God’s express permission, there are places in Scripture where evil actions are directly attributed to God. God is said to send raiders, adversaries and disaster (I Kings 11:14; II Kings 22:20; 24:2; II Chr. 15:6). In the case of Job we are aware that Satan instigated his troubles yet God rightly is ultimately considered responsible (Job 1:11,12; 2:5,6 cf.; 1:21; 2:10; 23:13,14).

All of these incidents illustrate the truth stated in Proverbs “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Prov. 16:9; 19:21).

The Scriptures are permeated with statements that declare His sovereignty and history that illustrates it. This is the primary objection to the “openness of God” theory. The Scriptures overwhelmingly support the truth that the God of the Bible plans all things and sovereignly executes that plan.

2. The denial of transcendence.

Secondly, I object to these authors’ rejection of the transcendence of God. They force Him into human categories and insist on absolute correspondence between our perception and relationship to the world and His. They insist that words like “repent,” “before,” “after,” “beginning,” etc., have the exact same meaning when applied to God and man. But there is an infinite distance between God’s wisdom and ours, and His ability and ours. In the midst of prophecies of destruction and restoration God declares, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8,9). God is the infinite awesome being who is omnipresent yet incarnate, three yet one, omnipotent yet a person, . . .

tender “Abba.” There is mystery here. There is antinomy and paradox because we are dealing with such an incredible being with abilities that are beyond us.

We don’t know how God is able to be absolutely sovereign yet hold men accountable but He does it. Calvin used the term “wise ignorance” to describe the humility of mind we should have in the face of irreconcilable truths. Is it possible this latest attack on these doctrines betrays an intellectual pride that refuses to accept that “secret things” have been kept hidden by God (Dt. 29:29)? These transcendent qualities of God are what bring us to awe. They illicit our praise and worship. “God comes in awesome majesty. The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power.” (Job 37:22,23). God is worthy of praise because “his greatness no one can fathom” (Ps. 145:3). When we press God into the mold of our limited capacity He loses that majestic awesome quality that we adore and are humbled before.

Doctrine Applied

We should defend this doctrine as an essential revealed truth. But this doctrine has been given to us primarily to benefit our souls. Among other things it should bring us peace to know that God is working all things for our good. (Rom. 8:28). If He is in charge and we are the objects of His redeeming love then we can rest in Him (Rom. 8:31-39). We should be content with our present circumstances (Phil. 4:11-13) and should submit to His providence towards us (II Cor. 12:7-10). Do we really believe this doctrine? Then what is this sound of grumbling and complaining that we hear in our churches, session meetings, homes and places of business? Why are we so bitter over past losses and failures? It is hypocritical to defend God’s sovereignty and not submit to it.

Do we believe this doctrine? Then we should worship His majesty. We have been permitted to see His glory and should fall at His feet in worship of this awesome Being (Rev. 1:12-18). Our heartfelt praise should flow from our redeemed hearts (Rev. 4:2-11).

A young novice was mountain climbing with an experienced guide in the Swiss Alps. When they reached the summit the vista was so magnificent the novice began to jump in exultant joy. Quickly the guide pulled him down to the rock with this rebuke: “The only safe place at these heights is on your knees.” In the presence of such a sovereign, awesome deity as is described in Scripture we must humbly lose ourselves in wonder and praise. Worship is the logical response to the sovereign God.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Rom. 11:36)