

The Sovereignty of God

By Kyle Pope

Introduction. The doctrine of Divine Sovereignty does not hold a place in the popular TULIP¹ acronym used by Calvinists to articulate their beliefs, but there can be no doubt that it lies as the foundation of this entire false doctrine.

- A. Warren Berkley puts it well that “This TULIP grew out of the soil, that Calvin called ‘The Sovereignty of God’” adding “This is where he started” (4).²
 1. He goes on to quote F. H. Klooster’s comment that, “The confession of the sovereignty of God has become the hallmark of authentic Calvinism” (ibid).³
- B. *Sovereignty* refers to authority and power.⁴
 1. In politics a sovereign nation owes no allegiance to another power.
 2. Most would agree that God possesses all power and authority.
 - a. **“With God all things are possible”** (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27).
 - b. The voice of a great multitude in heaven declares, **“Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent [Gr. *pantokrator* “he who holds sway over all things”] reigns”** (Rev. 19:6).
 - c. In this age Jesus now declares, **“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth”** (Matt. 28:18).
 - d. The problem is that some understand this to remove any power that man or laws of nature play in influencing what happens in this life.
- C. The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) claimed, “We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God’s orderly arrangement.” (Article XIII).
 1. Notice this wording that views the allowance of things such as “chance” and “fortune” to a type of *abandonment* on the part of God.
 - a. Advocates of this doctrine see in it an exaltation of God. They imagine that anything short of this limits God and fails to acknowledge His greatness.
 - b. Calvin wrote, “Insipid indeed is the comment, to fancy that God remains doubtful and waiting for what will happen to individuals, as if it were in their own power either to attain to salvation or to perish.” (*Commentary on Ezekiel* 18:32).

¹ Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance (and Preservation) of the Saints. *The Five Points of Calvinism: A Study Guide* by Edwin H. Palmer (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978). Palmer was the executive secretary of the original edition of the New International Version that reflected a strong Calvinistic bias.

² Berkley, Warren E. *Calvinism (Is Not According To Christ) Colossians 2:8* (Beaumont, TX: Preceptor Co.).

³ Elwell, Walter A. Ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2nd Ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001, 1132).

⁴ The words *sovereign* and *sovereignty* are derived from the Old French words *soverain* and *soverainete* which came from the Vulgar Latin term *superanus* meaning “chief, principal” or “prevailing.” The word *soprano* is derived from the same Latin word but applies to the highest voice in vocal harmony.

2. We can see from this concept of God's power and authority how it gives birth to other fundamental tenets of Calvinism.
 - a. If man's state before God is a matter of God's determination alone one cannot be pleasing to Him unless God unconditionally chooses some people as the elect.
 - b. If this is the nature of the election of the saved, obviously Christ could not have died for those chosen as the condemned—so, His atonement must have been limited in nature.
 - c. If one's view of God's power demands that we understand God as the source and controlling force of all things if He chooses to bestow His grace it cannot be resisted and He will do all that is necessary to preserve those He has previously chosen to save.
3. I contend, however that this view of God's sovereignty is not only unscriptural but it actually limits the scope of God's power.
 - a. It imagines a God that does not have the power to create creatures of freewill within the bounds of His ultimate knowledge of all that will happen and that He will ultimately bring to pass.
 - b. The Calvinistic view of sovereignty stems from a failure to understand what Scripture teaches about...
 - God's allowance of freewill and laws of nature.
 - The way that God influences human will, and...
 - Different ways that Scripture speaks of God's will.

I. Scriptural Teaching on Freewill and Laws of Nature.

- A. *Choice in Scripture.* A major problem that Calvinism faces comes in the fact that if its concepts about Divine sovereignty are true one must change or ignore certain words and concepts clearly taught in Scripture.
 1. A good example of this is the concept of choice.
 - a. For something to be a choice one must have the power to act in different ways.
 - b. Democratic societies are highly critical of totalitarian regimes that conduct elections with only one candidate.
 - i. They act as if it is a choice but in reality they have none.
 2. Scripture makes it clear that man has the power of choice.
 - a. Read Joshua 24:14-15. Note: **“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.”** If the Israelites had no power to choose this statement is meaningless.
 - b. God promises to forsake the sinful, explaining, **“Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke”** (Prov. 1:29-30). If one cannot choose why does God “rebuke”?
 3. Calvinists sometimes try to explain this away. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) claimed, “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” (III. Of God's Eternal Decree).

- a. How can it not do “violence” to the “will of the creatures” if God causes “whatsoever comes to pass”?
 - b. The Calvinist resolves this with what Edwin Palmer calls “The Great Mystery.” He writes,

How to resolve this overwhelming problem of reconciling God’s foreordination and man’s freedom. It is the mystery of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, of God’s freedom and man’s freedom, of God’s love and God’s omnipotence. How to resolve the two? (84).

 - i. His answer is to say that it is a paradox that cannot be explained (85-86).
 - ii. Now, I appreciate that there are secret things that belong only to God (cf. Deut. 29:29)—it is one thing to say we can know only what God has revealed, but it is a different thing to reject what He has revealed on the basis of our own self-imposed model of God’s power and nature!
4. The Bible teaches that God is of such power that He has created beings with some measure of choice similar to that which He possesses.
 - a. Far from a concept that Adam’s sin thrust man into perpetual inherited depravity, Scripture teaches that in gaining a knowledge of good and evil mankind gained a quality that God Himself possesses...
 - i. **“Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil”** (Gen. 3:22).
 - b. Human beings are not gods but we share with our Creator the power of choice.
- B. *Natural Laws*. Scripture has not spelled out in mathematical and scientific terms the exact nature of God’s continued involvement with creation.
1. Did He create all things? Yes.
 2. Did He (as Calvinists charge) abandon His creation to chance? No, but does that mean that His involvement must involve the same degree of activity on His part at every stage? No!
 - a. Consider creation—God created all things in six days, **“And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”** (Gen. 2:2).
 - b. Jesus said, **“My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”** (John 5:17).
 - i. Wait a minute—That means God has continued *working* even when it is said that He **“ended His work.”**
 - ii. Colossians 1:17 says of Jesus, **“In Him all things consist.”** NASB **“hold together.”**
 - iii. The Hebrew writer says of Jesus that He is now, **“upholding all things by the word of His power”** (Heb. 1:3).
 - c. God works, holds it all together, upholds all things even at a time He may be said to *rest*.

- i. We must not limit His power by imagining that the same degree of action must be exercised in every deed He is said to conduct.
 - ii. That means that He can create laws that allow for time and chance...
3. Read Ecclesiastes 9:11— **“time and chance happen to them all.”**
 - a. The word rendered **“chance”** here is the Heb. word *pega’* (פֶּגַעַ) meaning “occurrence, happening, chance” (BDB).
 - b. It is from the verb *paga’* (פָּגַעַ) meaning “to encounter, to meet, to light upon” (BDB).
 - i. While it must be acknowledged that the book of Ecclesiastes is addressing things as they appear, **“under the sun”** (cf. 1:3, et. al.) that doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit is using a false concept to describe how things appear.
 - ii. This text makes it clear that the power of God, while it may be said to uphold all things nonetheless allows things to operate that can happen *by chance*.
 - c. Does this leave God “doubtful” and “waiting” (as charged above)? No!
 - i. But this is where we must see the distinction between that which God *foreknows* and *foreordains*, as we shall see throughout this lesson.

II. God’s Influence on Human Will. We noticed the wording of Proverbs 1:30 that God *rebukes* the sinner. It is clear from Scripture that God seeks to exert an influence over human will that motivates but does not force behavior.

- The Calvinist view of sovereignty must not only reject this but reduce Divine rebuke to meaningless speaking into the air—or a farcical gesture by which Deity is actually rebuking something that It has caused!

This stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what Scripture teaches about the power of God’s word.

A. *Hardening, Blinding, and Opening the Heart.* While Scripture clearly describes varying degrees and types of Divine influence over creation and human will, Calvinists often assume that statements describing the consequences of Divine influence demand we understand God as the direct cause of the result. Key examples cited are...

1. *Lydia*—**“The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul”** (Acts 16:14).
2. *The Jews*—**“Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive”** (Matt. 13:14). And finally...
3. *Pharaoh*—**“I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.”** (Exod. 4:21).
 - a. Calvin leaned heavily on the idea that God directly causes these responses and much of the modern belief in the direct operation of the Holy Spirit stems from his concepts.⁵

⁵ Calvin wrote, “The extent of this agency can never be explained by having recourse to foreknowledge or permission. We, therefore, hold that there are two methods in which God may so act. When his light is taken away, nothing remains but blindness and darkness: when his Spirit is taken away, our hearts become hard as stones: when his guidance is withdrawn, we immediately turn from the right path: and hence he is properly said to incline, harden, and blind those whom he deprives of the faculty of seeing, obeying, and

- b. Scripture teaches that God’s word is the **“sword of the Spirit”** (Eph. 6:17) and the means by which God’s Spirit works upon the heart. As such it is the human response to this word that produces the different responses.
 - c. It is God’s word, therefore, that is the means by which Divine influence is exerted upon the human will.
- B. We may notice that in each of the cases above the response to God’s word is what is described as God opening, blinding, or hardening the heart.
1. *Lydia*—Paul and Timothy **“spoke to the women who met there”** (Acts 16:13) and she was judged to be **“faithful to the Lord”** (16:15). Her acceptance of God’s word is the way that God opened her heart.
 2. *The Jews*—**“Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed”** (Matt. 13:15). They closed their own eyes. Sometimes this is even described as **“the god of this age”** having **“blinded”** the unbeliever **“lest the light of the gospel”** touch them and **“shine on them”** (2 Cor. 4:4).
 3. *Pharaoh*—Before God speaks of hardening Pharaoh’s heart He declares, **“I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go”** (Exod. 3:19). This shows God’s foreknowledge.
 - a. Isaiah 46:10 tells us God is a God who declares **“...the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done.”**
 - b. God knew the response that Pharaoh would have to His word and chose to use this to show His glory in Egypt. However...
 - c. God hardening Pharaoh’s heart is equated with Pharaoh hardening his own heart...
 - i. He is said to **“exalt”** himself (Exod. 9:17).
 - ii. He says **“I have sinned”** (Exod. 9:27).
 - iii. He refused to **“fear the LORD God”** (Exod. 9:30).
 - iv. **“He sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart, he and his servants”** (Exod. 9:34).
 - d. Compare this to what is said of Pharaoh’s servants earlier during the plague of hail: **“He who feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh made his servants and livestock flee to the houses. He who did not regard the word of the LORD left his servants and his livestock in the field”** (Exod. 9:20-21).
 - i. The choice of how one *fears* or *regards* the word of the Lord determines whether God may be said to *harden* or *open* the heart.⁶
- C. This is exactly what we see in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower. The word is the same but what determines growth is the condition of the soil (cf. Matt. 13:1-9; 18-23).
1. The Calvinistic concept of sovereignty claims to respect the power of God’s word but it actually reduces it to “dead letter” (as you will sometimes hear

rightly executing. The second method, which comes much nearer to the exact meaning of the words, is when executing his judgments by Satan as the minister of his anger, God both directs men’s counsels, and excites their wills, and regulates their efforts as he pleases.” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book II, 4.3).

⁶ For a more thorough consideration of this see my booklet *The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart* (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2008).

people describe it) powerful only if the Holy Spirit enlivens the heart granting it the ability to work.

2. That is not what the Bible teaches! That is not the biblical picture of the word of God which is **“living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword”** acting as **“a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”** (Heb. 4:12).

III. Biblical References to God’s Will. The Calvinistic concept of Divine sovereignty paints a very narrow picture of the concept of God’s will. It is assumed that every reference to God’s will in Scripture carries exactly the same force and indication of the extent to which God acts to bring about His will.

- This is not what is seen in the record of Scripture and a failure to see different ways Scripture speaks of Divine will can easily lead to the same false assumptions even among our own brethren.

We can see at least five distinct ways that Scripture speaks of Divine will. These may be categorized as follows...

- A. *God’s Determined Will.* There are things that God determines will happen and no degree of human choice can prevent their occurrence.
 1. *Jesus’ death.* **“Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death”** (Acts 2:23).
 - a. Note: It was done by **“lawless hands”** but God in His **“foreknowledge”** (i.e knowledge of something that will happen before it happens) used this to carry out His **“determined purpose.”**
 - b. No one could stop it—He determined it would happen.
 2. *Final Judgment.* **“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.”** (Acts 17:31).
 - a. No amount of human freewill or choice can alter this—it will happen, but is that true of every reference to Divine will?
- B. *God’s Revealed Will.* Paul taught the Ephesians, **“Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”** (Eph. 5:17).
 1. Is this like God’s will in Jesus’ death or final judgment? No. This is something we are to **“understand.”**
 2. We can only **“understand”** what is revealed to us. This is talking about understanding God’s will for us as revealed in Scripture.
 - a. If God’s sovereignty causes everything why would Christians be charged to seek to **“understand”** God’s will.
 - b. Obviously there is some measure of His will that He desires but does not impose. In a similar way there is...
- C. *God’s Desired Will.* **“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”** (2 Pet. 3:9).
 1. If God by His will causes everything how can we understand this? Will all be saved? No—but He wants all to be saved.

2. Is this saying (as the Calvinists would contend) that unless you accept their notion of sovereignty you are saying there is something God doesn't control? No.
 - a. On the Day of Judgment God's sovereignty will be fully vindicated and demonstrated and all will be brought into subjection to Him.
 - b. But now, **"the righteous God tests the hearts and minds"** (Psa. 7:9).
 3. That suggests that there are now things God permits even though those things are contrary to His revealed will. He does not, however cause them by His determined will.
- D. *God's Permissive Will*. So let's consider some things about permission.
1. Our attitude toward the future must be **"If the Lord wills we shall live and do this or that"** (Jas. 4:15). So does that mean God causes death?
 - a. Remember Ecclesiastes 9:11 says of death **"time and chance happen to them all."**
 - b. Does God want the disease to kill our loved one? The accident to cripple our child? The rapist to assault our wife or daughter? No.
 2. In the natural order of life in this age there are things that God allows but does not directly cause.⁷ Then finally...
- E. *God's Providential Will*. This may not be the best way to describe this but notice a text in Matthew 10:29: **"Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will."**
1. Not all translations add the word **"will"** here but it is not italicized—editors consider it inferred in the sense **"apart from your Father."**
 - a. The Calvinist wants to look at that and say "see God makes everything happen!" And they might pair this with **"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD"** (Prov. 16:33).
 - b. We have already acknowledged that we are not told the precise extent of God's direct involvement in ongoing creation, but we have also seen that Scripture acknowledges the existence of **"time and chance"** and contrasts God's work in the six days of creation with His ongoing *work* while He was said to rest.
 2. Does God know every sparrow that falls and when? Yes—He knows the exact number of hairs on our heads (cf. Matt. 10:30).
 - a. Is He actively killing birds and plucking hairs from our heads? If so, He is directly to blame for misfortune.
 - b. How did God feel when Israel blamed Him for things for which He was not directly responsible—**"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge"** (Ezek. 18:2).
 - c. He declared, **"you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel"** (Ezek. 18:3).

⁷ Many Christians have struggled with the problem of holding God responsible for wickedness or hardship in life. I have done a couple of studies that might offer some food for thought to those struggling with such issues: "The Intricacy of Divine Providence: Is God To Be Blamed for Human Wickedness?" *Truth Magazine* 58.3 (March 2014) 14-15, and "Can I Forgive God?" *Focus Magazine Online* (August 26, 2014) <http://focusmagazine.org/can-i-forgive-god.php>.

- i. How must He feel about Calvinistic notions of His sovereignty that make Him responsible for everything?

Conclusion. Twenty-four years ago I was preaching in Birmingham and had the privilege of working with Bob Hutto and Steve Patton to help bro. Charles Andrews prepare for a four-night debate with an Orthodox Presbyterian preacher named Jon Smith.

A. Mr. Smith had handled the debate more like a sermon than a formal debate and by the second or third night he became frustrated when bro. Andrews tried to urge him to answer points that he had refused to address to that point in the study.

1. I will never forget when Mr. Smith in impassioned frustration exclaimed, “Oh, you deceived people! I implore you—be reconciled to God!”
2. Bro. Andrews stood up during his next turn and calmly replied:

Mr. Smith has made an impassioned plea that we are deceived and implored us to be reconciled to God. I appreciate his concern, but I must say, if his view is correct he is appealing to the wrong audience. If he is correct we can do nothing—he should implore God!. If he is correct, God is the only one responsible for our reconciliation to Him. He should not implore us, but God!

B. That is exactly right! If God has not granted to man some measure of choice in our sin or righteousness He bears all responsibility for our choices.

1. The Calvinist may imagine that this narrow view of God’s power and authority glorifies Him but the Holy Spirit makes it clear that God is not pleased with human concepts that blame Him for sinful behavior.
 - a. The Holy Spirit declared through James, “**Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.**” (Jas. 1:13-14).
 - b. The Calvinistic view of sovereignty not only puts God in the position of *tempting* man but actually argues that He makes man sin!
 - i. Why do Calvinists have to argue that this a paradox that cannot be explained?
 - ii. Because to accept any alternative would cause the entire foundation of their false view of God to crumble.