

Sovereignty of God, Providence, and Election

- 1) Sovereignty: "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 established" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3-1).

J.I. Packer: "The assertion of God's absolute sovereignty in creation, providence, and grace is basic to biblical belief and biblical praise" (*Concise Theology*, p. 33).

Selection of Scripture passages portraying God as Ruler and King, with control over all that happens: Gen. 50:20 ("*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*"); Exod. 15:18; 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 11:4; 45:6; 47:8-9; 93; 96:10; 97; 99:1-5; 146:10; Prov. 16:33 ("*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*"); 21:1; Isa. 6:1-5 ("*I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up...*"); 24:23; 52:7; Ezek. 1:26-28; Dan. 4:28-37 ("*...until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.*"); 5:21-28; 6:26-27; 7:9-14; Matt. 10:29-31 ("*But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.*"); Acts 2:23 ("*this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God...*"); 13:26-39 ("*And when they had carried out all that was written of him...*"); Heb. 12:2; Rev. 3:21.

Packer: The proof that Christians believe in God's sovereignty is demonstrated in the fact that they pray (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, p. 11).

- 2) Sproul's Paradox - "Though there is not much in the Reformed doctrine of God that differs significantly from the doctrine confessed by other Christian communions, the most distinctive aspect of Reformed theology is its doctrine of God" (*Grace Unknown*, p. 26).

For example, God's sovereignty is affirmed by virtually all Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation. But what makes Reformed Theology unique is that it "applies the doctrine relentlessly to all other doctrines, making it the chief control factor in all theology." Other groups often weaken the doctrine when it comes into any apparent conflict with other doctrines, such as man's free agency.

Rob's personal take: All systems of doctrine contain error; if you're going to err anyway, it's better to err on the side of God's sovereignty than on man's freedom.

- 3) Packer's Antinomy - The controversy as regards God's sovereignty has to do with its apparent contradiction with the doctrine of man's responsibility before God. This is an *antinomy*, an apparent contradiction between two apparent truths. The Bible teaches both doctrines; we can't understand how they can both be true; therefore, we must simply hold them together, despite the apparent contradiction.

There is danger in over-emphasizing one over the other. When William Carey proposed a missionary society, he was told, "Sit down, young man! When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid, or mine!" C.H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends." That is the key point: the two doctrines are not enemies, but friends. It is only our limited, finite understanding that makes them oppose one another.

- 4) Providence: "God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q.11). Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 33:10-11; 135:6; Matthew 10:29-31; Acts 17:25-28 ("*...he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*"); Ephesians 1:11 ("*...according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.*"); Hebrews 1:3 ("*...he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*")
- 5) Unconditional Election: God's selection before the creation of the world of those whom he would redeem, for his good pleasure, out of his free grace and love, with no foresight of faith or good works or any other conditions or causes, "and all to the praise of his glorious grace" (*Cf. WCF 3-5*). Election is the Bible's teaching, not man's. It is the expression of free and sovereign grace, unconstrained, unconditional, and unmerited.

Romans 8:29-30 – 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. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 9:10-16 – ¹⁰And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad – in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call – ¹²she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Ephesians 1:3-14 – ³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, ⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 2:8-10 – ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

2 Timothy 1:8-12 – ⁸Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹²which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

- 6) We don't know why God chose us, and we don't know who else among unbelievers has been chosen. Packer calls it "the family secret of the children of God."
We do know: (1) if we hadn't been chosen, we wouldn't be believers, and (2) we may rely on God to finish the good work that he started.
Since we don't know who has been chosen by God, we must consider everyone we meet as possibly being one of the elect. Certainly everyone we meet is immortal; as C.S. Lewis writes in *The Weight of Glory*, either "immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."
- 7) Sproul: In Rom. 9:14-15 (*above*), Paul poses a reader's hypothetical question of whether God is unjust, if what Paul is saying is true. The doctrine of election, properly understood, should raise this question. But if Paul is simply saying that God chose us based on his foreseeing that we would respond with faith, the question of his injustice would not arise. Why would it? In fact, however, Paul is indeed saying that God's choice is not based on anything he sees (or foresees) in us. Therefore, an accusation of unfairness is at least logical (though presumptuous).
- 8) These doctrines are taught in Scripture for pastoral purposes: (1) to encourage us by demonstrating the magnitude of God's grace in salvation; (2) to promote humility, holiness, and assurance; and (3) to give glory to God alone.