

Limiting the Sovereignty of God

Calvinism is no longer considered a viable theological tradition by many believers within modern Western culture. It does not fit the American ideal. Some even say that Calvinism is decidedly un-American in its fundamental commitments. Others claim that Arminians have more in common with prevailing cultural assumptions than the Calvinists do. But among Calvinists the questions raised by the Dutch theologian Arminius (1560-1609) are still being debated. What is at stake in the debate? In Arminianism the limits of salvation are conditionally limited by God and based fundamentally on human responses. All people are sufficiently enabled to accept the gospel, if they so will. Consequently, Arminianism tends to overestimate human ability and the redemptive contribution of human achievement. It is therefore basically about the relationship between divine action in salvation and history, on the one hand, and human responsibility in salvation and history on the other.

Arminian Critique of Calvinism

Some Arminians are extremely critical of the Calvinist view of salvation. Some claim that to be consistent, a Calvinist needs to be a thoroughgoing determinist. Calvinists, therefore, are hard-pressed to give an account for sin and evil in a way that is morally plausible. If God determines everything that happens, then it is hard to see why there is so much sin and evil in this world and why God is not responsible for it. If God determined all things, including our choices, He *would not* determine the sort of evil and atrocities that we have witnessed in history.

Arminians charge that Calvinists can't make coherent sense of their claim that God makes a bona fide offer of salvation, nor can they explain how God can truly have compassion for such persons. Furthermore, Arminians consider God's sovereignty over human affairs as a threat to human freedom and responsibility. They claim that the doctrine of election casts God in the role of an arbitrary despot indifferent to human choice. But human beings make decisions (even eternal ones) by free will.

Arminians claim that Calvinism offers false hope. It is said to lack the clear warrant to speak the most liberating word of encouragement available for persons struggling with their faith and doubt. How can anyone have assurance of salvation if you don't know whether or not you belong to the elect?

A debate with Arminians can be frustrating. Some can fend off the most brilliant theological arguments with the simple retort that one was using God's Word against human opinion. For example, the New Testament does not contain such phrases as *total depravity* and *perseverance of the saints*. Therefore, we may not use them.

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The dispute between Calvinism and Arminianism represents starkly opposing theological views, at the heart of which are profoundly different views of God. Though an emphasis on the Sovereignty of God is frequently associated solely with Calvinism, conspicuous Biblical themes are God's sovereignty, and His supreme power and authority. But from human perspective, the real problem with the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is not that it seems

untrue, but rather that men and women basically do not like this disturbing and humbling aspect of God's character. That's why in so many evangelical sermons we seldom hear of God's sovereign demand to repent or His demand for total submission to the authority of His appointed king, Christ Jesus. Another practical result of refusing to recognize God as the sovereign Lord over all nations is to carefully exclude Him from the decision-making institutions of our national life.

Radical feminist theologian, Sallie McFague, even calls the belief in the Lord's sovereignty as dangerous. According to her, it encourages attitudes of militarism and destruction. It fosters a sense of distance of the world, and it supports attitudes of either domination of the world or passivity toward it.

An evangelical theologian claims that the kingly model for understanding God's authority is out-of-date. In our democratic times, he argues, it is more understandable and easier to comprehend God as parent or as Friend, or as Judge. We may call God Stronghold, Shield and Saviour, but not King. I suggest that the wide variety of contemporary formulations of God to redefine His sovereignty are the direct result of denying a knowledge of God through His self-revelation in the Scriptures.

Sin and Salvation

Perhaps the most serious weakness of contemporary Arminianism is its view of sin. Far too often, Arminians reduce the problem of sin to the matter of guilt. According to them, the death of Jesus *makes provision* for the forgiveness of all sins, but it does not enact that forgiveness until sinners surrender in faith and repentance to God. Those who persist in unbelief have not received the pardon that is yet possible for them.

Is God's sovereignty limited? Absolutely Not! The Bible everywhere declares that God is sovereign. All creation, from the falling of the smallest raindrop to the fate of the nations is in His hands and has a place in His plan. As someone put it, "Scripture contains no hint that God has limited his sovereignty in any degree. God is Lord, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. He is always completely sovereign." Can we logically explain this doctrine? As James Montgomery Boice notes, "We may not understand that doctrine. We may still wonder why God tolerates sin. But still we won't doubt the doctrine nor retreat from its consequences."

The Sovereignty of God

Scripture is unrelenting and unapologetic in its affirmation of the sovereign government of God over all things. This doctrine gives meaning and substance to all other doctrines. "It is", as Arthur Pink observes, "the foundation of Christian theology." But God's sovereignty also means we must acknowledge Christ as King over every sphere of human activity, over the entire domain of human life, whether in education, politics, or business. And if God is not sovereign, how can we then believe in the fulfillment of prophecy? God is fully sovereign. He is active in all events and He always accomplishes His will. He assures us that the world in which we live is not chaotic, without a future. Instead it is under His fatherly control. He rules history and guides it to its goal. He restores and renews all things. He is the God who will one day consummate earthly judgment and redemption through the returning risen and ascended Saviour.

Sovereignty of God in Salvation

In Reformed theology, God's sovereignty is the ground of predestination and election, and God's glory the chief goal of His decrees. The doctrine of election permeates and controls the whole Bible. From the beginning of the Bible to its end we are presented with the story of a universal purpose carried out through a continuous series of particular choices. For example, Abraham is chosen to be the pioneer of faith and so to receive the blessing through which all the nations will be blessed. The ground of election is not in those who are chosen, but in God Himself. The Bible states explicitly that God chose the redeemed "according to the good pleasure of His will" (Eph. 1:5). While not coercing the will, God irresistibly and effectively draws the elect to faith.

Without God reaching out to us, we would never become members of God's family. On our own, we would not even think about the need for salvation. We are sinful by nature. Sin is the wrong orientation of all human existence since Adam's fall, an orientation from which no one can free himself. The sinful inclination inherited from Adam pervasively impacts every area of our lives and bends every faculty toward the self and away from God. As C.H. Spurgeon notes: "There is hardly any doctrine more humbling than that of human depravity or original sin...The evil nature of man brings with it the fact that his will is altogether perverted."

God's gracious election, however, does not take away the need for individual repentance and faith in Christ. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. God demands accountability for our actions (e.g. Acts 2:23). In other words, when a sinner is saved, *all* the glory belongs to God; when a sinner is lost, the sinner must take *all* the blame.

Missions

Why missions if God predestines some to salvation and bypasses others? God elects not for privilege, but for responsibility. The belief that God is sovereign in grace does not affect the urgency of evangelism. What is the point of missions if hell is going to be unnecessary? The fact remains that men without Christ are lost, and are going to hell (Luke 13:3,5). As Carl F. Henry comments: "The fact that God has elected some persons undergirds the divine imperative to proclaim the redemptive good news universally; it assures us also that some will indeed respond to the preaching of salvation."

The Blessings of Sovereignty

The Bible presents the doctrine of God's sovereignty as a source of great comfort and blessing to the saints. The evil in our life is real evil, our suffering is real suffering. But God is still in control and has a good purpose in all of it, even though we probably cannot see it now. Knowing that God is sovereign provides a deep sense of security. Christians will persevere in faith until the very end, when Jesus returns in glory or when they die. God perseveres with them (I Pet. 5:10). The assurance that we will reach our eternal home gives us courage to keep walking with the Lord.

Johan D. Tangelder
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