

# The Sovereignty Of God

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## Introduction

The church and the world have never stood in greater need than today of the message of the sovereignty of God. The world is faced with impious proud claims that contradict the sovereignty of God, claims to the supremacy of race and people. Here is a godless philosophy that has brought upon us the awful cataclysm of bloodshed and tyranny witnessed in Europe and Asia. Before this avalanche many professing Christians have surrendered, and with fanatical zeal multitudes of men have joined in the onslaught on justice and truth and liberty. It is an unholy crusade, and knowingly or unknowingly they have taken “counsel together against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their banks asunder, and cast away their cords from us” (Ps. 2:2, 3).

In such a situation the message of the divine sovereignty must be thrust into the foreground, principally for two reasons. First, we must be reminded that in this universe God’s sovereign government is the only totalitarian government and men must assume in it the place of humble submission and obedience. “The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Sion; and he is high above all the people” (Ps. 99:1, 2). “Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10). God’s supremacy demands subjection to His law and guarantees for every transgression judgment sure and inexorable. All history is under His control and is moving towards His final judgment where every infraction of truth and deviation from justice will receive its final adjustment and adjudication. “He cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity” (Ps. 98:9).

Secondly, we must be reminded that all events, great and small, are embraced in God’s sovereign providence. He has not resigned the reins of government. Present history is not moving towards chaos. It is moving in the grand drama of God’s plan to the accomplishment of His holy designs and to the vindication of His glory. “Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day” (Isa. 2:10, 11). The people of God must “suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock” and recognise, in the words of the great reformer, Calvin, “that while the turbulent state of the world deprives us of our judgment, God, by the pure light of his own righteousness and wisdom, regulates all these commotions in the most exact order, and directs them to their proper end” (Institutes, I, xvii. 1).

## The Presuppositions of God’s Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is the absolute authority, rule, and government of God in the whole of that reality that exists distinct from Himself. It respects His relation to other beings and to all other being and existence. The possession and exercise of this absolute authority, rule, and government are founded upon certain basic truths.

1. Sovereignty is founded upon the oneness or Unity of God. This truth underlies and determines the whole fabric of divine revelation, and it is a truth to which Scripture bears witness in a great variety of ways. The oneness of God does not mean mere uniqueness or supremacy in the realm of deity. It is not as if there were a host of lesser gods over whom God is supreme. It is not as if He demanded of us the highest worship in contrast with the lower worship that may be given to others. It is rather that He alone is God and that there is none else besides Him. “The Lord he is God; there is none else besides him.” “The Lord 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” (II Kings 19:15).

Our responsibility to God is based on His oneness. When our Lord was asked the question, “What commandment is first of all?”, He answered, “The first is, Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord”. And so

the consequence for us is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength” (Mark 12:28-30). “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Matt. 4:10).

Our salvation also is based on the fact that God is one and that there is none else besides Him. This is shown, for example, by the way in which the Apostle Paul supports the doctrine of justification by appeal to the oneness of God. “Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also: if so be that God is one, who will justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith” (Rom. 3:29, 30).

The logic is simple and irresistible. God is sovereign in the realms of nature and grace and this sovereignty belongs to Him because He is one, without peer or rival.

2. The sovereignty of God is also founded upon the self-existence of God. Since God is one and there is none else besides Him, He does not owe His existence to any other. Indeed, origin cannot be applied to Him. His existence is without beginning and eternal. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Psalm 90:2). Our finite minds stagger when we try to bring such a truth within our comprehension. We cannot comprehend it; it is too high and we cannot attain unto it. But we must humbly and even joyfully receive it. God is without origin, and He is not dependent upon any for his eternal and immutable being.

3. The sovereignty of God is founded upon the self-sufficiency of God. Not only is He self-existent but He is to Himself sufficient. He does not need any created existence to complete His perfection and blessedness. Created reality is not a necessity arising from His being but an effect resultant upon His sovereign will.

4. The sovereignty of God is also founded upon the fact of creation. Creation means simply the origination of all other existence by the command of God. The moment we admit the existence of anything apart from God’s will as the principle of its origin, in that moment we have denied the absoluteness of the divine authority and rule.

The witness of Scripture to the originative action of God in creation is very abundant. Perhaps no word expresses it more pointedly than that of the psalm, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6). The import of this text is that the word or breath of God -- breath being the symbol of His almighty creative will -- is the first cause of all that is. “For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast” (vs. 9). This mode of statement reminds us of the first chapter of Genesis where on repeated occasions we have 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 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. (See II 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; 4:11.) Such expressions provide us with examples of the way in which the Scripture abounds in the teaching that God’s hand and will and word are the first cause of all things.

The piety on which Scripture places its seal as true piety rests upon the recognition of God as Creator. Man’s address to God in adoration, prayer, and praise begins with it; God’s 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 makes his appeal to the idolatrous Athenians that God now commands men that they should all everywhere repent, he begins his address by saying, “God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24).

## The Nature of God’s Sovereignty

We have just found that the sovereignty of God rests upon God’s oneness, God’s self-existence, God’s self-sufficiency, and God’s creatorhood. In what does His sovereignty consist?

(1) God’s sovereignty consists in the fact that God is the possessor of all. In the formula of Melchizedek and of Abraham He is “the possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14: 19, 22), and the psalmist sounds this note when he says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1).

(2) God’s sovereignty consists in the right of dominion and rule over all. His kingdom is over all, He is the God of the whole earth, He is the Most High who rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever He will (Isa. 54:5; Dan. 4:17, 25).

(3) God’s sovereignty consists in the all-pervasive and efficient exercise of government. It is not simply that God is the owner of all. Nor is it simply that He has the right of dominion and rule over all. But it is that he also exercises government over all in accordance with His perfections and in accordance with the prerogatives that are His because of His ownership of all and the right of dominion over all. This sovereignty He exercises with omnipotent and irresistible efficiency. The mighty hand of God is the executor of His will. He is the great, the mighty, the terrible. He rideth upon the heavens and in His excellency on the skies. There is none that can deliver out of His hand for He frustrateth the devices of the crafty and the counsel of the cunning is carried headlong. He breaketh down and it cannot be built up again. There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against Him. None can stay His hand, nor say unto Him, what doest Thou? For human might is of one sort with the Egyptians, and they are men and not God, and their horses flesh and not spirit. (Deut. 10:17; 33:26; Job 5:12, 13; 12:14; Prov. 21:30; Dan. 4:35; Isa. 31:3).

We may illustrate this all-pervasive and efficient sovereignty by some of the ways in which Scripture applies it.

(a) It respects the events of ordinary providence. It is God who gives rain upon the earth, and sends water upon the fields. He makes His sun to rise upon the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. He clothes the grass of the field, causing the grass to grow for cattle and herb for the service of man. He feeds the birds of heaven. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and will. He gives us our daily bread. He gives wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil that makes his face to shine, and bread that strengthens man’s heart. He crowns the year with goodness and the paths drop fatness. He even gives that which is abused and used in the service of another god. He gave grain and new wine and the oil and multiplied silver and gold which they used for Baal. He makes the wind His messengers and flames of fire His ministers. The whole earth is filled with His glory. So that the pious contemplation of His working brings forth the exclamation of adoration, “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches” (Job 5:10; Matt. 5:45; Ps. 104:4; 14:24; 65:11; Hos. 2:8).

(b) It respects the disposition of all earthy 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 in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever He wills. He sets up over them even the lowest of men. It is He who gives even to ungodly men the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory. He overthroweth the throne and strength of kingdoms (Deut. 4:35, 39; II Kings 5:15; 19:15; Isa. 37:16; Dan. 4:17; 5:18, 21; Hag. 2:22).

The very division of the kingdom of Israel, fraught with dire consequences for the true worship of Jehovah, was yet a thing brought about of the Lord that He might establish His word (I Kings 12:15). “Thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel: return every man to his house; for this thing is of me” (I Kings 12:24). For He ordains kings for judgment and establishes them for correction, so that Assyria is the rod of his anger and the staff in his hand the divine indignation to perform the divine judgment upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem (Hab. 1:12; Isa. 10:5, 12).

It is not simply, then, that the powers of civil government are ordained by God to be the ministers of equity and good and peace for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise of them that do well (Rom. 13:3; I Pet. 2:14). But it is also true that corrupt government which violates the very principles of government itself is still within the government of God and fulfils His sovereign purpose. In the doing of iniquity the wicked fill up the cup of the divine indignation. “Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit, of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks” (Isa. 10:12).

(c) It respects good and evil. 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 the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). For with God he says again, “is wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding. Behold, he breaketh down, and it cannot be built again; he shutteth up a man, and there can be no opening” (Job 12:13, 14). He forms the light and creates darkness; He makes peace and creates evil. He kills and He makes alive; He wounds and He heals (Isa. 45:7; Deut. 32:39). He “hath made everything for its own end; Yea, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4). “Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” (Amos 3:6).

We should not be in the least forgetful of the very acute questions raised by such pronouncements of Scripture. Yet the teaching of Scripture requires us to recognise, as John Calvin so eloquently taught, 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 and idle possession of potency but power that is “vigilant, efficacious and operative”, “a power constantly exerted in every distinct and particular movement” (Institutes, I. xvi. 3). “Whence we assert”, he continues, “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” (Institutes, I. xvi. 8)

The questions raised come to their acutest expression in those instances where the providence of God is affirmed in connection with what is not only evil in the generic sense, but evil in the specific sense of sin and wrongdoing. It surely appears that Calvin again is right when he contends that “nothing can be desired more explicit than his frequent declarations, that he blinds the minds of men, strikes them with giddiness, inebriates them with the spirit of slumber, fills them with infatuation, and hardens their hearts. These passages also many persons refer to permission, as though, in abandoning the reprobate, God permitted them to be blinded by Satan. But that solution is too frivolous, since the Holy Spirit expressly declares that their blindness and infatuation are inflicted by the righteous judgment of God. He is said to have caused the obduracy of Pharaoh’s heart, and also to have aggravated and confirmed it. Some elude the force of these expressions with a foolish cavil -- that, since Pharaoh himself is elsewhere said to have hardened his own heart, his own will is stated as the cause of his obduracy; as though these two things were at all incompatible with each other, that man should be actuated by God, and yet at the same time be active himself. But I retort on them their own objection; for if hardening denotes a bare permission, Pharaoh cannot properly be charged with being the cause of his own obstinacy. Now, how weak and insipid would be such an interpretation, as though Pharaoh only permitted himself to be hardened! Besides, the Scripture cuts off all occasion for such cavils. God says, ‘I will harden his heart’ ” (Institutes, I. xviii. 2).

In this connection it is noteworthy to observe that the prophet was commanded to go and tell the people, “Hear

ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed' (Isa. 6:9, 10). In the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles we have allusion to this part of Isaiah's prophecy (See Matt. 13:14, 15; John 12:40; Acts 28:26, 27). In Matthew and Acts the blinding of the eyes is represented as the blinding on the part of the people of their own eyes; in John it is represented as blinding on the part of God. This variation should serve to remind us that the positive infliction on the part of God must not be abstracted from the sinful condition of the heart, the moral perversity and responsible action of those who are the subjects of the divine retribution. Paul tells us that, because men will not receive the love of the truth that they might be saved, "for this cause God sends them strong delusion (working of error) that they should believe a lie, that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but took pleasure in unrighteousness" (II Thess. 2:11, 12; cf. I Kings 22: 19-23). But while we may not isolate the divine infliction from the moral situation in which those concerned find themselves, we must frankly acknowledge the reality of the divine action and the sovereignty of His agency. "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will, and whom he will be hardeneth" (Rom. 9:18).

Perhaps most familiar to us in the matter of God's sovereignty as it respects evil are Acts 2:23; 4:28, where the arch-crime of human history, the crucifixion of Christ, 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 referred to as that which the hand and counsel of God foreordained to come to pass.

We are now attempting, only very briefly, to show some of the ways in which the witness of Scripture establishes the all-pervasiveness of the sovereignty of God. When we find this sovereignty coming to expression in the most unequivocal way even in those acts of human agents in which moral responsibility is most intensely active in the perpetrating of wrong, we can hardly go any further in demonstrating the all-inclusiveness of it.

But just then we must ever remind ourselves that God contracts no defilement or criminality from such agency. He is just in all His ways, and holy in all His works. While everything that occurs in God's universe finds its account, as B. B. Warfield says, "in His positive ordering and active concurrence", yet "the moral quality of the deed, considered in itself, is rooted in the moral character of the subordinate agent, acting in the circumstances and under the motives operative in each instance" (Biblical Doctrines, p. 20). God is not the author of sin. Sin is embraced in His 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.

And again there comes to us with renewed force the significance of the precious truth that inscrutable mystery surrounds the divine working. "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all" (Eccl. 11:5). We cannot rationalise it; we cannot lay it bare so as to comprehend it. We bow in humble and intelligent ignorance and reiterate, "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven: what canst thou do? deeper than hell: what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea" (Job 11:7-9). His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters. His footsteps are not known (Ps. 77:19). Clouds and darkness are round about Him. Yet, in accordance with His holiness, Scripture never permits us to forget that justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne (Ps. 89:14).

## The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

I. The sovereignty of God in salvation is in a unique way exemplified in God's election of sinners to salvation.

In the Old Testament, one of the most significant episodes is the revelation of the redemptive name Jehovah. There have been various attempts to interpret the precise meaning of this name. The older view that Jehovah expresses the self-determination, the independence, the sovereignty of God in the redemptive sphere, appears to be the most acceptable and tenable. The key to its meaning is found in the formula, "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14). In all that God does for His people He is determined from within Himself. Paraphrased the formula would run, "What I am and what I shall be in relation to my people, I am and shall be in virtue of what I myself am. The explanation of my actions and relations, promises and purposes, is in myself, in my free self-determining will."

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. "For I am Jehovah, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mat. 3:6).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most plausible and subtle attempt to eliminate the sovereignty of God in the election of sinners to salvation is the interpretation that regards predestination as being based upon foreknowledge in the diluted sense of mere foresight. The classic passage in the argument is Romans 8:29, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren". It is contended that the foreknowledge spoken of is God's divine foresight of the sinner's faith, or, more comprehensively, the divine foresight of the fulfilment on the part of men of the conditions of salvation. Those whom He foreknew, it is therefore said, are those whom he foresaw as certain to fulfil the conditions of salvation. It is thought that this removes the reason or cause for the discrimination that exists among men from the sovereign discrimination and fore-ordination on the part of God and attributes it to the sovereign volition on the part of man.

This matter, of course, concerns the eternal decree of God. The question really is: what determines whether a man is predestined to salvation? Is it a sovereign act on the part of God? Or is it an exercise of will on the part of man? If predestination is made contingent upon the divine foresight of a voluntary decision on the part of man, then it is that action on the part of man that accounts for discriminating foreordination on the part of God. In such a case, the sovereignty of God in the election to salvation is eliminated at the crucial point. Predestination, then, is made to rest upon a condition fulfilled by man.

Suppose that for the sake of the argument we were to adopt this diluted interpretation of the word "foreknow" in Romans 8:29, we are not too readily to conclude that the absolute sovereignty of God in the matter of election to salvation would be eliminated. If we say that the meaning of the verb "foreknow" in Romans 8:29 is "whom He foresaw as believing and persevering", we are not to think that we have ended the matter. For we are compelled to ask the further question: whence this faith which God foresees?

The answer which Scripture affords is that faith itself is the gift of God, not, of course, gift in some mechanical sense but gift in the sense of being graciously wrought in men by the operation and illumination of the Spirit (See e.g. John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:21). Since faith is thus given to some and not to others, and given to those who are equally unworthy with those to whom it is not given, the ultimate reason is that God is pleased thus to work in some and not in others. God's foresight of faith, therefore, would presuppose an earlier decree on the part of God to work this faith in some and not in others. The foresight of faith would be preceded in God's plan by His sovereign determination to give faith to them. And so, on a Biblical conception of the origin of faith, even foresight would throw us back on the sovereign determination of God to give faith.

This interpretation, however, though really providing no escape from the sovereignty of God in the decree of

salvation, is nevertheless not to be favoured, and that for the following reasons.

(1) It is extremely unlikely that Paul in tracing our salvation to its source in the mind and will of God would have omitted reference to the first decree, namely, the decree to work faith.

(2) According to the teaching of Scripture in general and of Paul in particular, faith is included in, or associated with, “calling”, and “calling” is in this very passage made the consequence of foreknowledge and predestination. It cannot be both the condition of predestination and the consequence of it.

This consideration is confirmed by verse 28. “All things work together for good to them that love God, to those who are the called according to purpose”. If called according to purpose, the purpose is prior to the calling, and if faith is associated with calling, the purpose itself cannot be conditioned upon faith.

(3) This interpretation is in conflict with what is said to be the purpose of predestination -- conformity to the image of His Son. Conformity of this kind is surely meant to include every phase of likeness to Christ. 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 realised must be in subordination to this purpose. In other words, the goal is surely prior, in the order of thought, to the process by which it is to be achieved. But the process by which the end is to be achieved includes faith and perseverance. Faith cannot, then, be the logical antecedent of predestination; it is rather that predestination is the logical antecedent of faith, even of faith as foreseen by God in His eternal counsel. That is just saying that faith follows, in the order of divine thought, upon the destined end of conformity to the image of the Son. But faith would have to precede predestination, if foreknowledge is the foreknowledge of faith.

Faith therefore is two steps, in the order of divine thought, from foreknowledge, and two steps after not before, two steps in the order of consequence not of causation.

(4) This interpretation that foreknowledge is the foresight of faith is not in accord with Paul’s teaching elsewhere, and particularly not with that one passage which more than any other expands the very subject in debate. It is Ephesians 1:3-14.

(a) 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 through Jesus Christ unto himself”. The elect are chosen to holiness; in the divine love they are predestinated to adoption.

(b) 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. Paul, it is to be noted, piles up expressions almost to the point of what, on superficial reading, might be considered redundancy, in order to emphasise the sovereign determination of the divine will and purpose -- “having been predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things according to the purpose of his will” (vs. 11). To find the determining factor of this predestination in a human decision would be to wreck the whole intent of Paul’s eloquent multiplication of terms.

(c) The choice in Christ and the consequent union with Him is the foundation of all the blessings bestowed. It is in the Beloved we were abundantly favoured with grace (vs. 6); it is in Him we have the redemption, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace (vs. 7); 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 were given an inheritance (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, therefore, that the very exercise by the Christian of believing and persevering grace, occurs in the sphere and on the basis, of

union with Christ. Union with Christ, then, (which has its origin in God's choice of the elect in Christ before the foundation of the world) must be regarded as the basis of believing and persevering grace received by believers. It follows, therefore, that belief in Christ and final perseverance foreseen by God in the elect, cannot be the conditioning cause of their election to salvation.

If this interpretation of "foreknow" in Romans 8:29 is not acceptable what then, we may ask, is the meaning of foreknowledge? The answer, given repeatedly by the ablest of commentators, is not difficult to find. The word "know" in Hebrew and in Greek is used quite frequently in a pregnant sense, that is, with a fuller meaning than that of merely "perceiving", or "taking cognisance of", a fact. It often means to "take note of", to "set regard upon", to "know with peculiar interest, delight, affection and even action". Indeed it is the practical synonym of to "love", or "set affection upon". The compound "foreknow", as Sanday and Headlam observe, "throws back this 'taking note' from the historic act in time to the eternal counsel which it expresses and executes" (Com. Rom. 9:29). So we should paraphrase by saying, "Those whom He loved beforehand".

This pregnant meaning of the word is in accord with the context. In every other link of this "golden chain of salvation", as it has been called, it is a divine activity that is spoken of. God is intensely active in every other step. It is God who predestinates; it is God who calls; it is God who justifies; it is God who glorifies. It would be out of accord with this emphasis, a weakening at the point that can least afford it, to make the originative act of God less active and determinative. The notion of foresight has distinctly less of the active and distinctly more of the passive than the emphasis of the whole passage' appears to require. It is not a foresight of difference but a foreknowledge that makes difference to exist. It does not simply recognise existence; it determines existence. It expresses the volitional determinative counsel of God with reference to those who are the objects of it. It is sovereign distinguishing love.

If this is the meaning the question may well be asked: what is the difference between foreknowledge and predestination in the text concerned? For, after all, some distinction there must be.

The distinction is simple and significant. Foreknowledge is the setting of loving and knowing affection upon those concerned. It concentrates attention upon the love of God. But it does not of itself intimate the specific destiny to which the objects of love are appointed. That, in turn, predestination precisely does. It reveals to us the high and blessed destiny to which the objects of His distinguishing and peculiar love are assigned. And it reveals, in so doing, the greatness of His love. It is love of such a sort that it assigns them to conformity to the image of Him who is the eternal and only-begotten Son.

When we ask the reason for the love that foreknowledge intimates, the greatness and security of which predestination expresses, we are uniquely confronted with the grandeur of the divine sovereignty. It is love that is according to the counsel of the divine will. The reason is enveloped in the mystery of His good pleasure. We are face to face with an ultimate of divine revelation and therefore with an ultimate of human thought. This love is not something that we can rationalise or analyse. We are in its presence, as nowhere else, overwhelmed with a sense of the divine sovereignty. We are struck with amazement. It is amazing inexplicable love. But to faith it is a reality that constrains the deepest and highest adoration. It is love the praise of which eternity will not exhaust. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I 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 for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36).

The sovereignty of God is exemplified in regeneration by the Spirit.

Nowhere is this truth so plainly and directly affirmed as in the two familiar passages in the Gospel of John (John 1:12, 13; John 3:3-8).

The three negations of the former passage -- “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man” -- are cumulative in their effect, and the implication is that in the whole realm of nature there is no element, impulse, instinct, desire, volition or purpose, and no combination or collusion of these, that will produce “sons of God”.

These negations are, however, followed by an affirmation that is placed in sharp antithesis to what is denied -- “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”, The force of the affirmation is that the kind of birth that is to produce sons of God, that is to issue in the reception of Christ and abiding trust in His name, is birth from God. Of this birth God is the agent and God alone. The eloquent accumulation of negatives by which the affirmation is preceded excludes human determination and volition as in any way capable of effecting this supernatural result. It is not wrought by convergence of divine and human factors. God is the agent without cooperation on the part of man. The intrusion of a humanly decisive factor would nullify the force of the antithesis expressed by the negations, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man”, on the one hand, and by the affirmation, “but of God”, on the other.

In the discourse to Nicodemus Jesus says in effect that any intelligent appreciation of, and entrance into, the kingdom of God requires birth from above, birth of water and of the Spirit. He states the reason when He says, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). The word “flesh” in this passage may designate simply human nature. It is more probable, however, that it reflects on the ethical and spiritual condition of human nature as dominated and controlled by sin. But whether we take the word “flesh” as designating simply human nature, or as designating human nature controlled by sin, the result is to the same effect. What Jesus says, in either case, is that human nature can never produce anything that transcends the conditions under which human nature finds itself. Like propagates like, and this is a law that holds in the moral and spiritual sphere as well as in the physical. That which is born of human nature is still simply human nature, and since human nature is sinful and corrupt it cannot by any power or law inherent in itself overcome these corrupt and sinful conditions. And not only so, but it is also true that human nature inevitably produces just such human nature. That which is born of the flesh is without fail still flesh.

But on the other hand it is just as true that human nature under the dominance and control of the Holy Spirit is human nature born of the Spirit. It is the Spirit alone who can produce it and the Spirit does produce that kind of human nature. This is what our Lord means when He says, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”.

There are, then, two kinds of birth and each birth conditions with absolute invariableness the character of its product. The natural cannot produce anything but that which is natural, and it does, by an unbreakable law, produce the natural. The supernatural alone originates the supernatural, and the supernatural infallibly secures the supernatural character of its product. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”.

It is, however, in the verse, “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8), that Jesus particularly stresses the sovereignty of God in this supernatural birth. In this verse there is expressed: (1) the invisibility and mysteriousness of the Spirit’s operation, -- “thou canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth”, (2) the irresistibility and efficaciousness of the Spirit’s operation -- “The wind blows where it wills”, (3) the sovereignty of the Spirit’s operation -- “where it wills”, and (4) the necessary observable fruit -- “thou hearest the sound thereof”.

Just as we in the realm of physical life do not control the wind so we do not control the Spirit. Just as the wind blows and produces its effects apart from our cooperating will so the Spirit efficaciously and irresistibly

produces this effect by His own sovereign volition.

It is true that the birth that is from above by the Spirit is always accompanied by the appropriate effects in the heart and life of those who are the subjects of it. They see, and enter into, the kingdom of God. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”. But these effects we must remember are after all effects and not predisposing and predetermining causes.

This teaching of Scripture is often resisted as fatalistic and tending to promote human sloth and inactivity. But such distortion and abuse arise from failure to appreciate the depth of human depravity, the desperateness of our spiritual condition, and our complete dependence upon God’s grace. When we become aware of our hopeless plight and bow humbly before the counsel of God, then we glory in that efficacious grace which, by reason of the sovereign counsel of His will, has reached down to the lowest depths of our sinful need as it has also extended to the furthest reaches of our guilt.

The sovereignty of God is exhibited in the free overtures of grace to lost humanity.

It is too often thought, and even argued, that the doctrine of sovereign and unconditional election and the doctrine of efficacious regeneration are inconsistent with the free, full and unfettered offer of Christ to lost sinners.

That Christ in all the glory of His person and in all the perfection of His work is without reservation presented to men in the gospel and freely offered to them is a truth never to be gainsaid nor withheld. “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst, Come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). So we must never place the sovereignty of God in His eternal election nor the sovereignty of God in the actual operations of His grace in a position that will do prejudice to that other aspect of truth.

What we find in the teaching of Scripture is that these two truths lie side by side without any suggestion that they are incompatible the one with the other.

For example, our Lord said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (John 6:37). This points to the great mystery of the Father’s election and to the committal of the elect to Christ. It points to the certainty that those given to the Son by the Father will in due time believe in the Son. The certainty of their salvation is grounded in the fact that they are elect of the Father and are given by the Father to the Son.

But in that same discourse our Lord also said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him”. And again, “No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father” (John 6:44, 65). This shows that men do not and can not come to Christ in faith by the exercise of their own native and natural power. Rather it must be given to them by the Father; they must be drawn by the Father. This drawing can be none other than the efficacious working of His grace in their hearts and minds. So we have the sovereign election of the Father and the sovereign operations of His grace.

It is, however, in that very same discourse and in immediate conjunction with these same truths that Jesus says, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). In that word there are both assurance and promise. The assurance and promise provide the firmest ground for faith in Christ and the sure warrant that in coming to Him we shall be received.

However, there is more than conjunction of those truths in the teaching of Scripture. It is not simply that they lie side by side, not simply that they are integral parts of the whole counsel of God. It is rather that the full and free overtures of Christ in the gospel proceed from the very heart of God’s sovereign election and efficacious grace.

It is in pursuance of the Father's election that Christ came into the world and suffered and died and rose again. Christ's mission and work as Mediator and Redeemer were the provision of God's wisdom so that the great purpose of His sovereign love to His own might be fully realised in the glory of His name and in the eternal blessedness of the elect. It is as the Mediator, Redeemer and Saviour, who perfected redemption in pursuance of the Father's purpose of love, that He is freely offered to sinners in the gospel. In a word, it is the Saviour that sovereign love and grace provided who is proffered so fully and freely. And it is by sovereign grace that He is so freely offered. Sovereign grace is not then incompatible with the free offer of the gospel. It is rather sovereign grace that makes the gospel free. The fount of grace freely offered is grace sovereignly devised and framed. And not only is sovereign grace the fount, but sovereign grace is also the stream on the bosom of which Christ is borne to the very door of our responsibility and opportunity. To change the figure but a little, it is upon the crest of the wave of the divine sovereignty that the full and free overtures of Christ in the gospel break upon the shores of lost humanity.

## The Sovereignty of God in Human Responsibility

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are often placed in sharp antithesis to each other. It is true that we are not able to comprehend how divine sovereignty as it comes to expression in the absolute foreordination of all events works harmoniously and consistently with the exercise of our responsibility. We have simply to recognise and accept both and believe that divine foreordination embraces our responsibility but does not in the least nullify its reality or exercise.

The divine sovereignty, moreover, has a manifoldness of aspect or expression, and the aspect with which we are now mainly concerned is that the sovereignty of God as absolute authority demands total subjection to His will in every sphere and activity of life. If God should require less it would be a denial of Himself and it is His glory that this one thing He cannot do. When man yields less than total subjection this is a denial of God's supreme Lordship, repudiation of His authority, and contradiction of His glory. It comes, then, to this that the correlate in man of sovereignty in God is subjection wholehearted, undeviating and unceasing. It is the irreducible obligation of all men in all departments of life to bring the whole of life into subservience to the totality of God's revealed will.

The implications of this truth are too frequently overlooked, if not virtually denied, by many Christians. By too many the revelation of God's will, particularly His will as revealed in Holy Scripture, is regarded as having application merely to the private or, at least, religious relations of men. It is true that we may use the distinction between the private and the public as also the distinction between the religious and the secular. But these distinctions do not in the least imply that the public any more than the private or the secular any more than the religious can ever be removed from the domain of the divine sovereignty. No sphere is independent of religious demands.

It is this principle that is asserted in the word of the apostle, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). And it is expressed in its application to the mediatorial headship of Christ in the word of the same apostle when he describes the Christian warfare as, "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:5).

In the discharge of every function and in every detail of that discharge the will of God is supreme and obedience to it the controlling principle. The state, the school, industry, agriculture, science, and art come within the domain of responsibility to God, and therefore the statesman in the discharge of state-craft, the industrialist and mechanic in the promotion of industrial production, the farmer at his plough, the teacher in the school, and the scientist in his laboratory have no less an obligation to apply the revealed will of God to every detail of their

respective vocations than the preacher in the pulpit or the mother in the home. It should, of course, be obvious that the scientist in his laboratory is not to discharge the same function as the preacher in the pulpit, nor the legislator the same function as the mother in the home. There are distinct spheres, and one sphere must not trespass upon the prerogatives of another. But all spheres come within one domain -- the supreme government of God. And so, in the way appropriate to each sphere and to the full extent of the bearing of the divine will upon it, each sphere must bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. God's kingdom is over all and Christ's mediatorial kingdom is over all, too. It is the eternal Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who speaks in the words of the second psalm, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession" (Ps. 2:7, 8). And the sequel to this declaration and investiture is, "Be wise therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him" (vss. 10.12).

The goal or aim that the sovereignty of God has set for us is nothing less than complete subordination to, and fulfilment of, the whole will of God in the whole domain of the divine sovereignty, and the domain of the divine sovereignty as it concerns us is life in its broadest extent and minutest detail. It is this goal as the irreducible implication of the divine sovereignty that is epitomised in the prayer our Lord taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

## Conclusion

These are days when international conflict has taken on staggering proportions. Men's hearts fail them for fear. Barbaric tyranny has brought its cruel heel upon millions of our fellowmen. In words that Calvin wrote four centuries ago, "the turbulent state of the world deprives us of our judgment". In such days there is inexpressible comfort in the sovereignty of God. The world has not been abandoned to cold and relentless fate, nor has it been given over to the totalitarianism of man or devil. God's counsel still stands and He still does all His pleasure. It is still true, "Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isa. 14:24). Through all the disquieting events of our history there runs the sovereign and holy purpose of the Lord God omnipotent. Justice and judgment are the habitation of God's throne even though clouds and darkness are round about Him. He fulfils His righteous purpose through the unrighteous wills of wicked men. He holds the reins of universal government and not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and ordination.

In this let the believer take solace, for it is the secret place of the Most High and the shadow of the Almighty. It is the absolute sovereignty of the eternal God. It is the absolute sovereignty of none other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is even with equal universality the mediatorial sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, the incarnate Son, the Saviour-King, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

"Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6).

## End-notes

1. Cf. Oehler, *Old Testament Theology*, Eng. Trans. Vol. I, pp. 139f.  
Geerhardus Vos, *Old and New Testament Biblical Theology*, Philadelphia, 1934, pp. 72-76.

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