

# THE CALVINIST PERVERSION OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The term “*sovereign*” refers to one who is supreme, above all others, who possesses authority above all. It involves freedom from limitation by any external power or authority. Interestingly, the term “*sovereign*” is never used in the *King James Bible*. In fact, no Hebrew word that could be properly translated “*sovereign*” occurs in the *Old Testament*. However, the Greek word *kyrios* is translated into the English word “*Lord*” and is used throughout the *New Testament* while the Greek word *pantokrator* is translated as “*Almighty*” in several verses in the book of *Revelation*. Thus, the concept of God as “*sovereign*” is indeed communicated in the Scriptures. Hence, all genuine Christians agree that God is the *Sovereign Ruler* over the universe. He is supreme in authority. There are no authorities, whatever they may be, that are not delegated by Him and deferential to His supreme authority. Therefore, God, as *Sovereign*, is never forced into any action by any external power; He possesses ultimate *authority over all things*. *A.W. Tozer* says...

*“The sovereignty of God is a fact well established in the Scriptures and declared aloud by the logic of truth. But admittedly it raises certain problems which have not to this time been satisfactorily solved. These are mainly two...”* —*A.W. Tozer (The Knowledge Of The Holy, p. 109)*

*Mr. Tozer* goes on to elaborate on these two theological and philosophical issues raised by the truth of *God’s Sovereignty*, namely: (1) the *existence of evil*, and (2) the *free will of man*.

*Calvinistic* theology has attempted to address these two issues with less than stellar results. As we discussed in the article, “*Is God the Author of Sin?*” we learned that the logical end of *Calvinistic determinism* inescapably makes God the cause of all things, even sin. And, no doubt, though many sincere *Calvinist* would decry such a conclusion, this is the irrefutable implication of their theology.

In the matter of *man’s free will*, *Calvinists* again do violence to the Scriptures and sound reason. At the very heart of *Reformed* theology is an erroneous interpretation and overstatement of *God’s sovereignty*. *Calvinists* view *God’s sovereignty* in such a way as to deny the possibility of man’s will opposing God’s will. They view *God* as not only possessing ultimate *authority over all things*, but likewise, that He is also the ultimate *cause of all things*. *Augustine* was one of the first theologians to formulate a doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God. This extra-Biblical concept is at the heart of the *Calvinistic* system. The *Calvinistic* concept of God’s *sovereignty* was not derived from the Scriptures, but from

philosophical considerations. Then, accordingly, this presupposition was imposed on the interpretation of Scripture to conform to the basic tenets of the system.<sup>1</sup>

One example of this presupposition playing a part in *Calvinistic* theology is found in *Augustine's* treatment of *1 Timothy 2:4*...

*"When we hear and read in sacred Scripture that God, 'willeth that all men should be saved,' although we know well enough that not all men are saved, we are not on that account to underrate the fully omnipotent will of God. Rather, we must understand the Scripture, 'Who will have all men to be saved,' as meaning that no man is saved unless God wills his salvation: not that there is no man whose salvation he doth not will, but that no one is saved unless He willeth it."*

*—Augustine (Confessions and Enchiridion, Vol. VII of The Liberty of Christian Classics)*

Here, *Augustine* obviously forces Scripture to conform to his doctrine. No contextual or linguistic consideration could render this verse as he interpreted it, yet he violently alters the meaning to protect his false presupposition of divine sovereignty.

*John Calvin* adopted and enlarged the teaching of *Augustine*, upholding the claim that no other *will* can resist God's will. Like his predecessor, *Calvin* also took great liberties in interpreting God's Word. Concerning the same passage, *1 Timothy 2:4*, he commented...

*"By this he assuredly means nothing more than that the way of salvation was not shut against any order of men...since it clearly appears that he is speaking not of individuals, but of order or men, let us have done with a longer discussion."* *—John Calvin, (Institutes of the Christian Religion)*

Again, a brazen dishonest handling of the *Word of God* is necessary to arrive at such conclusions. No doubt, the presupposition of God's absolutely sovereignty plays into this false interpretation of *God's Word*. Notice, although both *Augustine* and *Calvin* arrived at different conclusions regarding *1 Timothy 2:4*, it was their skewed view of *God's sovereignty* that fueled their misinterpretations. This erroneous concept of God robs men of libertarian free-will which ultimately makes God the cause of all things, including sin. Unfortunately, this perverted view of God's sovereignty is at the foundation of the misguided theological system of *Calvinism*.

As mentioned earlier, God is indeed *sovereign*, meaning He is over all things and He, ultimately, is in control of all things. However, as a limitless God, He has chosen, in His sovereignty, to limit Himself by granting man free will. Thus, God sovereignly

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<sup>1</sup> Research resource: *Creeds in Contrast*, Dr. Dale Yocum

decreed that man should be free to exercise moral choice. Moreover, the doctrine of man's free will is not that man can choose a relationship with God, apart or independent from God (*Jn 6:44*), but rather, that man has the ability to selectively resist God (*Isa 63:10; Acts 7:51; Eph 4:30*).

This view is verified not only by the Scriptures but by the early church as well. It is interesting to note that none of the early church fathers held to a view of God's sovereignty that included divine predestination which denied the free-will of men.

*"Lest some suppose...that we say that whatever happens, happens by a fatal necessity, because it is foretold as known beforehand, this too we explain...if, all things happen by fate, neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it be fated that this man, e.g., be good, and this other evil, neither is the former meritorious nor the latter blamed. And again, unless the human race have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions of whatever kind they be. But, it is by free choice they both walk uprightly and stumble."*

—Justin Martyr (*The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p.177*)

*"We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishments, chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit's of each man's actions. Now, if this is not so, but all things happen by fate, then neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it is predetermined that this man will be good, and this other man will be evil, neither is the first one meritorious nor the latter man to be blamed. And again, unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions."* —Justin Martyr (c. 160, Vol. 1, p. 177)

*"I have proved in what has been said that those who were foreknown to be unrighteous, whether men or angels, are not made wicked by God's fault. Rather, each man is what he will appear to be through his own fault."* —Justin Martyr (c.160, Vol. 1, p. 269)

*"The Stoics, not observing this, maintained that all things take place according to the necessity of fate. But since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free-will, they will justly suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed. and this is the nature of all that is made, to be capable of vice and virtue. For neither would any of them be praiseworthy unless there were power to turn to both (virtue and vice)."* —Justin Martyr (*The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p.354*)

*"Choice depends on the man as being free. But the gift depended on God as the Lord. And He gives to those who are willing, are exceedingly earnest, and who ask. In this manner, their salvation can become their own. For God does not compel."* —Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, Vol. 2, p. 593)

*"I find, then, that man was constituted free by God. He was master of his own will and power...For a law would not be imposed upon one who did not have it in his power to render that obedience which*

*is due to law. Nor again, would the penalty of death be threatened against sin, if a contempt of the law were impossible to man in the liberty of his will...Man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.” –Tertullian (c. 207, Vol. 3, pp. 300-301)*

Admittedly, God’s sovereignty is difficult for the finite mind to grasp. In closing, allow me to share a simple illustration, from *A.W. Tozer’s* excellent book, “*The Knowledge Of The Holy*”, that may help us understand the Biblical view of this doctrine.

*“An ocean liner leaves New York bound for Liverpool. Its destination has been determined by proper authorities. Nothing can change it. This is at least a faint picture of Sovereignty. On board the liner are several scores of passengers. These are not in chains, neither are their activities determined for them by decree. They are completely free to move about as they will. They eat, sleep, play, lounge about on the deck, read, talk, altogether as they please; but all the while the great liner is carrying them steadily onward toward a predetermined port. Both freedom and Sovereignty are present here and they do not contradict each other.” –A.W. Tozer (The Knowledge Of The Holy, p. 111)*

–B.W.

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