

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

The Sovereignty of God

Gordon H. Clark

Many of the matters discussed in the earlier sections—the Covenants, the Incarnation, the Satisfaction, and indeed Absolute Necessity—come to a head under the rubric of sovereignty. One question previously raised was whether God could have sovereignly dispensed with justice. The two Hodges decide in favor of justice and reject sovereignty. Let the reader understand that this treatise maintains that Christ satisfied the justice of his Father. What the treatise aims to show is that the Hodges and others have formulated an incorrect disjunction between the two. Or, to anticipate, justice is itself based on sovereignty. This includes the idea that the atonement was absolutely necessary. The theology of Charles Hodge is impeccable on nearly every point, yet some of his paragraphs (as I have indicated in other publications) suffer from confusion.

The question, "How is justice related to sovereignty?" can arise only within the sphere of Calvinism. Lutheran theology is more anthropocentric than theocentric. Krauth, an influential Lutheran theologian, in his *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology* (123ff.) claims that Arminius was largely influenced by Lutheranism. Krauth's decisive example is Arminius' choice and denial of the five points of Calvinism: It was Arminius, not some Calvinist, who selected the TULIP as the essence of Calvinism. On this, says Krauth, Arminianism and Lutheranism are in accord. Some semi-Calvinists

are in partial agreement. A. H. Strong (*Systematic Theology*, II, 635) remarks, "We prefer to attribute God's dealings to justice, rather than to sovereignty." This statement is immediately connected with the imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity, but it is reasonable to suppose that Strong would say the same thing of the atonement also. The statement is vague, suggesting a mere preference that would allow some role to sovereignty if one should press it. Strong supports his preference by five considerations. The first is, "A probation [in the case of Adam] is more consistent with divine justice than a separate probation of each individual...." If we end the sentence here, the reply is that most people would insist that a probation of each individual is more just, while imputation more clearly depends on sovereignty. Actually the sentence continues "of each individual with [his] inexperience, inborn depravity, and evil example, all favorable to a decision against God." But with the exception of the evil example, the conditions falsify the situation. Adam was equally inexperienced, and a probation for each individual could occur only if each were innocent as Adam was. That is, the theory rejects inborn depravity. Hence the argument fails on two counts. Second, "A constitution which made a common fall possible may have been indispensable to any provision of a common salvation." The answer is, "may have been" is insufficient. To prove his point, Strong should have said, "must have been." Perhaps it is wise to omit Strong's other

reasons. They all seem irrelevant to me, but the reader can read Strong for himself and decide.

However, as was just said, the problem is essentially a problem for Calvinism because, unlike the other theologies, it stresses both justice and sovereignty. The question is, How are they related? On this subject, Charles Hodge has a peculiar paragraph. It seems to contradict itself. The subhead (*Systematic Theology*, I, 539) is "The Decrees of God are Free," and the following quotation is a part of it.

1. They [the decrees] are rational determinations, founded on sufficient reasons. This is opposed to the doctrine of necessity, which assumes that God acts by a mere necessity of nature, and that all that occurs is due to the law of development or of self-manifestation of the divine being. This reduces God to a mere *natura naturans*, or *vis formativa*, which acts without design. The true doctrine is opposed also to the idea that the only cause of events is an intellectual force analogous to the instincts of irrational animals. The acts performed under the guidance of instinct are not free acts, for liberty is a *libentia rationalis*, spontaneity determined by reason. It is therefore involved in the idea of God as a rational and personal being that his decrees are free. He was free to create or not to create ... to act or not act ... not from any blind necessity, but according to the counsel of his own will.

This paragraph contains considerable confusion; but before examining it, it will help to quote parts of a subsequent paragraph in which Hodge more clearly shows his basic orthodoxy.

The decrees of God are free in the sense of being absolute or sovereign.... the decrees of God are in no case conditional. The event decreed is suspended on a condition, but the purpose of God is not. It is inconsistent with the nature of God to assume suspense or indecision on his part. If he has not absolutely determined on what is to occur, but waits

until an undetermined condition is or is not fulfilled, then his decrees can neither be eternal nor immutable.

This latter paragraph is much clearer than the former. We may agree with the former that the decrees, including of course everything connected with the atonement, are "rational determinations." By this phrase, I understand that the whole plan of history is teleological. Prior events prepare for later events. Judas's betrayal prepared for the arrest and the crucifixion. But contrary to what Hodge says, this does not rule out "the doctrine of necessity." While one must reject the idea that there is any development in God, there is indeed development in history. Nor is the word "mere" very clear, when Hodge says that God does not act by a mere necessity of nature. If the term *natura* is meant to indicate the physical universe—Mother Nature as some poets call it, and *natura naturans* as Spinoza said—of course we agree with Hodge's statement. Furthermore, Hodge's reference to Spinoza seems to support the idea that he is thinking of the universe. Spinoza was a pantheist who frequently used the phrase *Deus sive Natura*. But Hodge seems to me to have confused Mother Nature with the nature of God. The important question is whether God acts necessarily by his own nature. Could God have willed to save no one? Could God have willed that Antony should have been victorious, or that the Duc de Guise should have defeated Henry IV? If one says that the defeat of Antony was necessitated and that God could not have willed otherwise, it does not follow, as Hodge seems to say it does, that God would have acted without design. Nor does the doctrine of necessity require that God's intellectual force be analogous to the instincts of irrational animals. At best Hodge has in his attack on Spinozism used language that can be applied to views that are not at all Spinozistic. And one of these views is the Christian doctrine of God and his decrees.

One of the terms the Hodges use with confidence and satisfaction is *freedom*. God was free to create or not to create; God was free to save or not to save men; but if he freely chose to save any, he was necessitated to sacrifice Christ. In this he was not free. It is reasonable to suppose that this language

somewhat reflects the discussions on the free will of man. At any rate, the idea of God's freedom should be clarified. Some types of freedom are obviously irrelevant to the present discussion: a man may be free from disease, free from prejudice, or free from his previous wife. Though these meanings are irrelevant, one notes that freedom is often, almost always, freedom *from* something.

Spinoza is an exception, for his freedom is a freedom *to*. A grain of wheat is free to grow, if it is planted in good soil rather than having fallen on a rock where a bird can pick it up. The bird is more free than a grain of wheat because, if this rock had no grain of wheat on it, the bird can fly and find food elsewhere. A man is more free than a bird because he can survive in many more circumstances. Thus, Spinoza says, freedom is not the ability to do either of two things in the same circumstance, but the ability to do the same thing in many circumstances.

Arminian and Romish freedom is the power of contrary choice. There is nothing, absolutely nothing in any circumstance in heaven above, or earth beneath, or the waters under the earth—but especially in heaven above—that necessitates a given volition. The opposite choice is always as possible as the one chosen.

But what might divine freedom be? One thing is clear. There is no power, circumstance, or principle external to God that necessitates or even induces him to do anything. Of course, before the creation of the world there were no circumstances at all, though some philosopher might say that there were eternal principles external to him. But for the Christian there was nothing before he created something. But does this mean that God could have chosen no to create?

The confusion that permeates discussion on this subject arises from the rather natural impulse to understand the will of God as similar to the will of man, or, more accurately, similar to what many theologians think the will of man is. In particular, they picture God as earlier undecided, and later at a moment in time God makes a choice. The theologian may indeed recognize that there is no

external motivation, but he still holds to the possibility that God could have willed otherwise.

This confusion is due to the fact that the authors often forget that God is immutable. Grotius seems to have argued that no one form of atonement is absolutely necessary. The law, he maintains, is a product of the divine *will* and not something inherent in his nature. Therefore God is *free* to enforce, to abrogate, or in any way to alter the laws. Grotius is not the only one who seems to assume that God's will is *free* in the sense that he can change his mind at any time. Freedom, however, should be defined, and the implications of the definition should be stated. For example, human freedom may consist in the circumstance that one's conduct is not determined by physicochemical law. From this definition, if accepted, it follows that the universe is not a mechanism. But, so far as this definition goes, human conduct can be necessitated by a divine teleological law. As for the freedom of God, he is surely free from control by any superior power, for there is no power superior to God. But as immutable by nature—see Grotius's distinction between will and nature a few lines above—God's will and action are unalterable.

Hodge—who rejects Grotius's view of the atonement—is perhaps a little, but not much, better. God, he says, "will the precept *because* it is *intrinsically* right.... There must be an absolute standard of righteousness." Such a statement places a standard of justice outside of God. The standard is *intrinsically* right, hence independent of God's sovereignty—indeed, sovereignty has been abandoned. Hodge, however, wants to avoid this implication, for unlike Grotius, Hodge immediately adds, "This absolute standard is the divine nature ... the divine intelligence." This addition gives the impression of maintaining divine sovereignty as against any external power or principle. But it faces an equally difficult objection. It raises the question as to the difference between will and nature. What is nature? Do we not speak of the nature of God, the nature of God's will, the nature of God's intelligence? Nature is not a constituent of anything. It is simply the thing's characteristics. God's nature, like a dog's nature, is such and such because such are the characteristics of the dog or of God. The

nature is simply the way the dog or God acts. There is no *nature* that controls God's will. As Isaac Watts once wrote, "Dogs delight to bark and bite, for 'tis their nature to."¹

In addition to examining the term *nature*, one must ask what is *will*? If we speak of the human will, we refer to a somewhat momentary act of choice. After having considered the relative desirability of this versus that line of action—or, what is the same thing, between an action and doing nothing—such as investing in AT&T or just leaving the money in the checking account—and having puzzled over it indecisively for a period of time—we come to a conclusion and make our choice: We decide and do it. Then when we start to study theology and to consider the will of God, we are apt to think, or subconsciously suppose, that God makes decisions. He willed to create, he willed—after some deliberation—to save some, and so on. Though we may not say so out loud, we suppose that God was puzzled: He could create or he could refuse to create; he could save or could refuse to save some; and if he decided to save some, he could use any means imaginable.

Now, although these choices are all of one nature, all subject to the same considerations, Hodge and others want to give the last question an answer different from their answer to the prior questions. This seems to me to be logically inconsistent, for if it relieves God of indecision on the last point, it pictures him as indecisive on the prior points and assigns to him a relatively momentary act of choice. This makes God a temporal creature—or if not a creature, at least a temporal being.

Such a view is utterly inconsistent with divine omniscience. The immutable God never learned anything and never changed his mind. He knew everything from eternity. This *everything* includes both the number of mosquitoes in Jackson Hole and the number of planets in the solar system. Underlying these two examples is the creation of a temporal universe. For time began with the creation of the first nonomniscient angel.

¹ The hymn, with animadversions on childhood, never became popular in the churches.

Without claiming infallibility, and certainly no omniscience, I believe the above to be substantially what the Bible implies. Perhaps one should quote a few of the more clearly supporting verses. This is all the more appropriate because many, even most, of the volumes on Systematic Theology are strangely deficient at this point. Fortunately the indispensable Charnock fills the gap. Yet as Charnock shows, most of the Scriptural references are examples rather than universal claims. If God knows the number of hair on our heads and calls all the stars by name and notices the fall of every sparrow, we are encouraged to believe that he knows everything. There are nonetheless certain more general statements and inferences from his other attributes. Some of the latter will be quoted first.

The first of these verses is one that can easily be misunderstood, but neither should it be undervalued.

Psalm 147:5: Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite.²

1 Samuel 2:3: The Lord is a God of knowledge.

Colossians 2:3: In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

These three—especially the latter two—are sufficiently universal and should, even by themselves, be considered conclusive. The next two might not seem universal by themselves, but it would be difficult to deny their implications.

² Though this verse helps to confirm God's omniscience, it must not be pressed too far. The Hebrew word does not mean *infinite*. In fact, Hebrew seems not to have any word meaning infinite. *Mispar*, the word in this verse, means a *number*. It can mean a small number or a large number. David sinfully wanted to know the relatively small number of his people. God knows the relatively large number of the stars. It is a delicate question whether God's knowledge is infinite in the English sense of the word. If it were, God's knowledge would be incomplete, if not unsystematic. The number of prime numbers equals the number of numbers because both are infinite; so that if God's knowledge were infinite, there would always be an extra item beyond the last. There would be no completeness. It is true that there can be an infinite 'number' of propositions by counting the series: Today is Tuesday, it is true that today is Tuesday, it is true that it is true that today is Tuesday, *ad nauseam*.

Isaiah 46:10: Declaring the end from the beginning.

Hebrews 4:13: There is no creature that is not manifest in his sight.

Could anyone be bold enough to assert that there are some non creatures which might not be manifest in his sight? The following verses show that God's knowledge neither increases nor diminishes because he is immutable and eternal.

Exodus 3:14: I AM THAT I AM.

Psalms 90:2: From everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

Malachi 3:6: I am the Lord, I change not.

1 Timothy 1:17: Unto the King eternal

James 1:7: The Father of lights with whom there is no variableness, nor shadow cast by turning.

Now come some verses that give examples, remarkable examples, of what God knows. Charnock cites dozens of such verses and expounds them all at length. Less than a half a dozen should suffice here. They all tie in with the doctrine of the Atonement.

John 13:18: I know whom I have chosen.

Romans 9:11: The children being not yet born ... That the purpose of God according to election might stand

Ephesians 1:4: ... chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1:9: ... according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.

2 Timothy 2:19: The Lord knoweth them that are his.

Notice that the first and fifth verses quoted, not to mention the others, make sense only if there are some whom God did not choose and are not his.

From the immutability and omniscience of God, it follows necessarily that there is indeed no other possible method of salvation—not, however, for the reasons Hodge gives, but simply because of this

immutability. In much of this discussion, the authors speak as if God on one occasion produced an act of will and on another occasion he made another voluntary act. The Westminster Standards, however, reproduce the Biblical position that God is immutable. Therefore, not only is the propitiatory method of atonement absolutely necessary, but also the number of mosquitoes in the world at any given instant. Every detail is a part of the all-comprehensive divine decree. God foreordains whatever comes to pass. Everything is necessary. This view exalts the sovereignty of God. This view exalts God. Do not think that the reference to mosquitoes was flippant. William Cullen Bryant was no Calvinist, and his theology is deplorable; yet on one occasion he stated the truth, even if he could not properly apply it to himself. A Christian can detach his lines from the Bryant theology and repeat with appreciation these words from *To a Waterfowl*:

There is a Power whose care

Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,

The desert and illimitable air—

Lone wandering, but not lost.

He who, from zone to zone,

Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,

In the long way that I must tread alone

Will lead my steps aright.

This settles the question as to whether the method of the atonement is based on sovereignty or on justice, and the question whether God could have refused or neglected to save anybody. Not a chance. As previously asserted by the present writer, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross satisfied the justice of the Father. But now it should be clear that justice is one facet of sovereignty. There is no moral principle superior to God. I can say that there is no moral principle superior to the will of God. God's will and God's intellect are identical. Justice is what God thinks. To suppose that anything could have been otherwise is to suppose that God could have been otherwise than he is. The salvation of the elect is a part of the sovereign play by which the universe

goes on. God had to create—not because there was some power external to him, but because he is God. A God who might not create, or would not have created, is simply not the Biblical God.

In this twentieth century, people like to be modern and up-to-date. Anything even ten years old—not to say two hundred or two thousand—is pass, benighted, medieval, stupid, unenlightened, erroneous, illogical, and just plain false. We today are educated. As one sweet little third-grader told her mother: I don't need to learn arithmetic; I'm developing a social consciousness. That is why Johnny can't read—theology.

Some Christians, *mirabile dictu* and *gloria in excelsisDeo*, still remember *Rock of Ages*. Of course, they do not know that the author wrote on the present subject, any more than they know of his other 149 hymns. Here then is something quite new and up to date, so far as the present generation is concerned.

Augustus Toplady wrote, among other things, "Observations on the Divine Attributes."³ The simplicity of God and the identity of all the divine attributes, used above to settle the relation between justice and sovereignty, Toplady expresses in the following words. "Although the great and ever blessed God is a Being absolutely simple ... he is, nevertheless, in condescension to our weak and contracted faculties, represented in Scripture as possessed of divers properties, or attributes, which though seemingly different from his essence, are in reality essential to him, and constitutive of his very nature" (p. 675, col. 1). Toplady, then, specifies "his eternal wisdom, the absolute freedom and liberty of his will, the perpetuity and unchangeableness, both of himself and his decrees, his omnipotence, justice, and mercy."

The material is so good that it demands great restraint not to quote the entire article, twelve pages of long double columns. Fear not, modern reader, I shall give only a few short paragraphs.

³ Pagination from *The Complete Works of Augustus M. Toplady*, London, 1869.

God is ... so perfectly wise that nothing ... can elude his knowledge ... 'Known unto God are all his works from eternity.' Consequently God knows nothing ... which he did not know and foresee from everlasting.... Whatever he foreknows to be future shall necessarily and undoubtedly come to pass. For his knowledge can be no more frustrated... than he can cease to be God. Nay, could either of these things be the case, he actually would cease to be God.

Some people argue that knowledge or foreknowledge does not necessitate anything. Even a man may know that an event will occur tomorrow, but this does not mean that he causes it to happen. Perhaps so. But if he does not cause it to happen, there must be some other cause which does; for unless it were certain, he could not know it.⁴ Now, then, since omniscience shows that all events are certain, it follows that if God does not cause them, there must be a cause external to and independent of God. In other words, God has ceased to be God. Toplady recognizes this in this paragraph: "God's foreknowledge, taken abstractly, is not the sole cause of beings and events; but his will and foreknowledge together. Hence we find, Acts 2:23, that his determinate counsel and foreknowledge act in concert, the latter resulting from and being founded on, the former" (675, col.2).⁵ Note that *foreknowledge* is dependent on determinate counsel. This is not true of a man. For example, I know that Christ will return. The event is determined, certain, and necessary. But I did not determine it.

Just a few more lines from Toplady: "Whatever comes to pass comes to pass by virtue of this absolute omnipotent will of God, which is the

⁴ The illustration is faulty from the start because no man knows what will happen tomorrow.

⁵ I have not quoted an intervening paragraph which asserts that though man acts "from the first to the last moment of his life, in absolute subserviency ... To the purposes and decrees of God concerning him; notwithstanding which he acts freely and voluntarily as if he was *sui prijuris*, ... absolutely lord of himself." Translating this, and John Gill's term, *coaction*, into twentieth-century English, it means that man is free from the compulsion or 'coaction' of physicochemical mathematical equations. But that the will is not free from God, and that it is God who makes us willing, is stated in the Westminster Confession, X, i; compare IX,3.

primary and supreme cause of allthings.... The will of God is so the cause of all things as to be itself without cause; for nothing can be the cause of that which is the cause of everything" (677). Later in the volume (784-819, all double columns) there is his article, "The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted."

In contrast with the types of interest prominent among the relatively conservative Christians of the present day, those of an earlier age can be instructive. William Cunningham, Professor of Church History at New College, Edinburgh, recounts⁶ an interesting attack on Dr. Chalmers by Sir William Hamilton. The latter denounced the former as a fatalist, a pantheist, and as being ignorant and suicidal in theology. His reason was that Chalmers taught the doctrine of philosophical necessity. Cunningham's conclusion was that the Westminster Confession permits but does not teach philosophical necessity, that Chalmers not only was at liberty to accept that view, but that also his orthodoxy was impeccable.

On a lower level, a much lower level, *The Presbyterian Journal*, November 18, 1981, includes an article by the Rev. Donald A. Dunkerley entitled "Hyper-Calvinism Today." This author is to be highly commended because he knows what hyper-Calvinism is, and he states the definition clearly. Most popular writers and preachers neither state nor know it. Hyper-Calvinism is "that view of Calvinism which holds that 'there is no world-wide call to Christ sent out to all sinners, neither are all men bidden to take him as their Savior.' Hyper-Calvinists ... maintain that Christ should be held forth or offered as Savior to those only whom God effectually calls" (14).

It seems that there are such people, people who are derisively called Hard-shell Baptists. There must be very few such, and I do not know of any Presbyterians who qualify. Dunkerley himself acknowledges that they are "an almost negligible minority."

Yet, though he knows very well what the term means, he wants to extend its pejorative overtones to people to whom the term does not apply. His method is to ask rhetorical questions which he wants his readers to answer in the affirmative, when clearly the correct answer is negative. In spite of his acknowledgment that Hyper-Calvinists are an almost negligible minority, and after describing various forms of evangelism, he complains that "we lack and urgently need in our day [a] compassionate evangelism." Well, this is true, but in its context it seems to mean that hyper-Calvinism is almost the worst aberration of the twentieth century. Perhaps also of the eighteenth century, for Whitefield, whom he cites with approval, hardly evinces the evangelistic methods he seems to require.

Of course the Bible commands us to preach the Gospel to all men. To a hyper-Calvinist who insisted that a minister should preach the Gospel only to the elect, Clarence Edward Macartney, if I remember correctly, replied, "You point out to me which persons are the elect and I shall confine my preaching to them."

But when Mr. Dunkerley wants to tell everyone that "God loves you," I wonder how he can defend that phrase when not only Jacob, but Esau also is in the audience.⁷

Such then is my view of sovereignty, and my replies to assorted objections. *Deo soli gloria.*

⁶ *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*; first published, 1862; London 1967; 471-524.

⁷ In the article it seems that the hyper-Calvinist and Mr. Dunkerley misunderstand John 3:16, and that the latter's doctrine of assurance is at variance with the First Epistle of John