

THE GLORY AND SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD THE ULTIMATE COMFORT IN CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

As we were studying the eternal decrees of God at Westminster Theological Seminary, I considered the charge that theology is irrelevant to modern life. Several situations led me to contemplate just *how relevant* and *comforting* is the doctrine of God as enunciated by Reformed theology. In particular, God's sovereign foreordination of all events, for His own glory, is a truth that brings immeasurable comfort to the otherwise overwhelming struggles of life.

One situation was the failure of my car's alternator in the middle of Peter Jones' class on Gnosticism! I chuckled to think that even *this* was encompassed in the eternal plan of God. Yet the knowledge of God's ultimate control, His sovereign foreordination of this event, brought calm and a good night's rest to a situation that might otherwise have been the proverbial straw-that-broke-the-camel's-back in that chaotic week!

The second two situations were not so humorous. The evening news brought the report of a four-year-old girl killed by a bus after she stumbled over the curb. Then a close friend called to say that her daughter-in-law had left her son and run off with their church's pastor, leaving the congregation in a state of confusion and grief. The child's death seems a freak "accident," and without the proper doctrine of God's providential control, easily leads from grief into longterm bitterness. The last situation clearly involves human sin and personal responsibility before God for those actions. The Christian counselor must respond compassionately and clearly to situations such as these. Grounded in a biblical doctrine of the sovereign Lord, he must be prepared to offer *hope* to those crushed by the crises of life. The Reformed pastor, or other counselor, has a clear basis for such hope. The process theologian, the Pelagian, and the Arminian do not, despite their efforts to focus on God's love and the reality of human responsibility.

Process theology, taught by Pittenger, claims to make love and relationship central to the doctrine of God. Aseity as the "root attribute" is rejected, being too remote, too abstract or theoretical, supposedly not relating God to His creatures. God, says process theology, is the "chief causal principle" *but not the only cause*. God may sometimes use evil as an occasion for "new good," yet some evil must be rejected as not being "usable." Process theologians claim to reject the concept of a ruler who controls and imposes arbitrary laws without respect for decisions made by creatures. *What hope does this offer the young mother whose child was killed?* Perhaps this evil is not "usable."

God's love is a key to comforting other believers in crisis. But as Carl Henry points out, process theology confuses the traditional doctrine of God with Greek philosophy's static "being." Their concept of love is defined by the experiences of fallen man, whereas the Scripture reveals that *God is love*. Love is defined by God, not by man in his sinful autonomy. Process theology denies the election love taught by Scripture, love that finds an analogy in human marriage and that provides the glorious assurance to the Christian of eternal life--a life in intimate fellowship with God. Most importantly, process theology separates God's love from His sovereign control. It is ultimately *unloving*, in that it strips the believer of hope, leaving him stranded in a universe where chance reigns above the finite "god" of an unscriptural theology. Real love must be established on the truth: the truth taught in Scripture that God has foreordained all events for His own glory, working all together in one comprehensive eternal plan. The mother whose child was killed may never attain perfect understanding of God's purposes in this life, but she can be assured that *God is love*, that *God is sovereign*, and that these two truths are inseparable. The God of the Bible is worthy of worship: He has graciously revealed all that we need for life and godliness, yet remains ever beyond the bounds of our finite comprehension. Our friend Van Til is helpful in pointing out that because God's sovereign will is consistent with His *nature*, we are able to have confidence in every situation. Recognizing the Creator/creature distinction, we can acknowledge the limits of our finite understanding--and the incomprehensibility of God. We must depend on revelation and bow to mystery. God hasn't told us *everything* about the purposes of our suffering, but He has told us *something*. Our entire theology is shaken if God is not in control, because we are then ruled by impersonal chance--hardly loving!

Pelagianism and **Arminianism** seek to take full account of human responsibility, but at the expense of God's sovereignty. These views base "election" or foreordination on God's foreknowledge of free actions, not seeing that if such actions are "free" in the sense maintained, they are no more subject to foreknowledge than to foreordination. But if God is truly *God*, nothing is unforeseen to Him and nothing can resist the execution of His purposes. Man is responsible before God for his actions, even though those actions are foreordained by God. In fact, it is only on the basis of the self-contained God of Scripture that human responsibility has any meaning. Peter's powerful statements in Acts (2:23, 4:28) provide the ultimate example. Apart from God's foreordination of the acts of wicked men, there would be no salvation at all!

Pelagianism and Arminianism mutilate the assurance of salvation taught in the Scriptures, as well as the *basis* for salvation in God's sovereign *grace*. According to these unscriptural views, man in his fallen state retains a measure of autonomy--freedom from the control of God--and the ability to determine his own destiny. He may even forfeit his salvation after having attained it, since God's decrees concerning salvation are claimed to be *conditioned* on man's free acts. *This has crucial implication for counseling other Christians!* If a believer's salvation is conditioned on his own actions, which are beyond the control of God, how easily he is trapped in a legalistic struggle to meet the conditions, to remain in God's favor. But when he knows that his salvation depends wholly on God's grace, that he has been *elected* before the foundations of the world (Ephesians 1:4), how it frees him to act in *gratitude* to God for having chosen him! Election, with the comfort of ultimate victory over sin and death, is the strongest possible motivation to godly living for the glory of God--and contrasts sharply with the impersonal hopelessness of fatalism. Additionally, knowledge of God's sovereignty brings comfort to those who have been sinned against, as in the third situation described. The sinful acts of the woman and the pastor are not beyond the control of God, although they remain fully responsible before Him.

The idea of "**historical drama**" proposed by John Frame is one that helps direct the struggling believer to at least a *limited* understanding of God's eternal plan. We're still on the stage; the final curtain has not been drawn, although we are certain that one day the drama will be consummated in eternal victory over all the powers of evil. At the present time, believers and unbelievers share the stage of common grace. One day, the separation will be final and all that is "common" will come to a close. Meanwhile, knowledge of the final "act" of the drama gives believers the courage to remain on stage, fulfilling the roles God has ordained.

God's attributes, far from being dry, abstract, or irrelevant, help in building a biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty that relates to everyday life. The **unity** of these attributes makes it possible to guard against the unbiblical views of process theology, Pelagianism, or others that may arise. God's immutability, for example, cannot be emptiness or immobility, as it inseparable from His love, His goodness, and other such *personal* attributes. God's sovereignty is coterminous with His love, His grace, His truth, and other attributes, and thus it cannot be the frightening arbitrary rule of an unconcerned tyrant, or the power of unrestrained impersonal chance.

God's glory is the overarching purpose that drives His eternal plan. Both His decretive will and His preceptive will, declared by some to be contradictory, are designed for His glory. All that comes to pass is foreordained by Him *for His glory*. All that is prescribed by Him is designed so that man can *glorify Him*. Christian counseling has a goal that should delight the heart of every believer: to live a life that *glorifies God*. The knowledge of his sovereignty, coordinated with an understanding of His inseparable attributes, grants the struggling believer a basis for achieving this goal. He can know with absolute certainty that, whatever the circumstances, *God's glory* is the ultimate purpose. He can know with the same certainty that his eternal destiny was determined by God, who set him apart before his birth. Then, by heeding the preceptive will of God, can joyfully glorify Him in the midst of every trial.

8 1993, Christian Discernment Publications Ministry, Inc.
www.christiandiscernment.com