

How Divine Sovereignty Should Affect Our Philosophy Of Ministry

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Introduction:

As we contemplate an appropriate and biblical plan to carry out our mission, there is no more significant doctrine to ponder than the sovereignty of God. Doctrine will always shape our philosophy of ministry. Whether a person has thought through his philosophy of ministry or not, his activities will reveal what he really believes about God and His control of the universe. The purpose of this workshop is to explore the ways ministry is affected by committed belief in the absolute sovereignty of God. We will begin with an explanation of the doctrine of God's sovereignty and then offer a brief survey of the concept of a philosophy of ministry.

I. What do we mean by the sovereignty of God?

A. Definition

The sovereignty of God is "his absolute right to govern and dispose of all his creatures, simply according to his own good pleasure."¹

Biblical data:

2 Chronicles 20:6

Psalm 135:6

Daniel 4:35

B. Corollary truths

1. God expresses his sovereignty in a comprehensive plan for history.

Because God is sovereign, he has decreed all that comes to pass in his universe.

*God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*²

¹Hodge, A.A. *Outlines of Theology*, (Electronic ed. based on the 1972 Banner of Truth Trust reproduction of the 1879 ed.), Page 162.

²Smith, Morton H. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. (Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), Page 2.

The all-encompassing nature of God's decree is beyond full understanding because of our finitude.

The decree being the act of an infinite, absolute, eternal, unchangeable, and sovereign Person, comprehending a plan including all his works of all kinds, great and small, from the beginning of creation to an unending eternity; ends as well as means, causes as well as effects, conditions and instrumentalities as well as the events which depend upon them, must be incomprehensible by the finite intellect of man.³

Biblical data:

Ephesians 1:11
Proverb 16:33
Isaiah 45:7, 9-12
Isaiah 46:9-11

2. God exercises his sovereignty through providence.

The Heidelberg Catechism defines providence as,

The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand; that we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

Biblical data:

Job 38-41
Matthew 10:29-30
Acts 17:24-28
Romans 8:28

3. God exercises his sovereignty in such a way that he incorporates human responsibility.

³Easton, M.G. *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1897; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996).

A term commonly used to describe this view is “compatibilism.”

Compatibilism is the view that the following two statements are, despite superficial evidence to the contrary, mutually compatible: (1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty does not in any way mitigate human responsibility; (2) human beings are responsible creatures (i.e., they choose, decide, obey, disobey, believe, rebel, and so forth), but their responsibility never serves to make God absolutely contingent.⁴

Compatibilists affirm the sovereignty of God. Incompatibilists necessarily deny the sovereignty of God.

Biblical data:

Genesis 50:20
Acts 2:23; 4:23-28
Romans 9:15-23
Philippians 2:13

4. God exercises his sovereignty in redemption.

Historically, Baptists have upheld the doctrine of God’s sovereignty vis-à-vis redemption.

The Philadelphia Baptist Confession declares:

Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.⁵

The New Hampshire Confession declares:

We believe that Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which he graciously regenerates, sanctifies, and saves sinners;

⁴ D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” *Westminster Theological Journal* Philadelphia: (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998).

⁵ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959).

*that being perfectly consistent with the free agency of man, it comprehends all the means in connection with the end; that it is a most glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, being infinitely free, wise, holy, and unchangeable. . .*⁶

Biblical data:

John 6:37, 44, 65

Acts 13:48

Romans 8:29-30

Philippians 1:29

II. What is a philosophy of ministry?

The term *philosophy* simply means "the love of wisdom." A philosophy is a statement of the principles that guide someone in the wise accomplishment of a task. Everyone *has* a philosophy of ministry whether he has carefully thought it through or not. It is vital to think it through from a biblical perspective rather than to absorb it from other sources.

A clear and complete philosophy of ministry must answer three basic questions.

A. *Why* are we doing what we do?

Or, what is our *purpose*?

A statement of purpose must be *doxalogical* in character (it must focus on the glory of God), cf. Ephesians 3:21. It must also take into account the specific means by which the church is to bring glory to God, namely the ministry of the Word.

B. *What* are we to do?

Or, what are our *objectives*?

The objectives of the ministry must clearly articulate the details of the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:19-20. Both from the words of Christ and the New Testament account of the early church's obedience to the His commission, we may deduce that the objectives of the church include: edification of believers, evangelization of the lost, and expansion of ministry.

C. *How* are we to do what we do?

Or, what are our *goals*?

⁶ Ibid.

The specific goals that the early church utilized to accomplish their objectives must be identified. These biblical goals include such basic ministry concepts as teaching, worship, fellowship, missions, church polity, etc.

III. How does an understanding of the sovereignty of God affect one's philosophy of ministry?

In short, a grasp of the sovereignty of God will safeguard a ministry from the corrosive influence of a man-centered worldview. Broadly speaking, there are essentially only two approaches to ministry: theocentric and anthropocentric. The latter appears in a variety of forms ranging between two poles: pragmatism and traditionalism. On the surface, these seem to have nothing in common, but they are outgrowths of the same foundational worldview.

A. In relation to pragmatism

Those who believe in the sovereignty of God protect the church from the destructive influence of pragmatism.

1. Those who believe in the sovereignty of God reject pragmatic measurements for success.
 - a. Pragmatic measurements of success:
 - 1) Successful ministry always grows numerically.
 - 2) Successful ministry always produces professions of faith.
 - b. Biblical measurements of success:
 - 1) Successful ministry is always faithful to God's word.
 - 2) Successful ministry always promotes God's glory.
2. Those who believe in the sovereignty of God reject pragmatic tools for success.
 - a. Pragmatic tools for success:
 - 1) Marketing techniques
 - Appeal to "felt needs"
 - Depend on entertainment

- Modify the message

2) Professionalism in leadership

Contra:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5
1 Thessalonians 1:4-5
1 Thessalonians 2:1-6a

b. Biblical tools for success:

1) Utter dependence on prayer

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

2) Uncompromising ministry of the Word of God

- Accurately
- Clearly
- Comprehensively

Acts 20:20-21, 27

3) Unquestionable character in leadership

- Holy
- Loving
- Humble

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

4) Unmistakable testimony of transformed lives

2 Corinthians 4:1-7
1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

B. In relation to traditionalism

Those who believe in the sovereignty of God protect the church from the ineffective complacency of traditionalism.

1. Those who believe in the sovereignty of God reject the objectives of traditionalism.

a. Traditionalism is driven by institutional interests.

- b. Biblical ministry is mission-driven.
- 2. Those who believe in the sovereignty of God reject the methods of traditionalism.
 - a. Traditionalism codifies man-made methods.
 - b. Biblical ministry applies theologically constrained contextual methods.