

2nd Opinion: God is sovereign over his sovereignty

May 26, 2006

Posted: 5/26/06

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By Roger Olsen

Baptists have a habit of recycling hot theological topics. God's sovereignty and human free will is one that keeps coming around. Right now, the debate between Calvinists and Arminians is heating up again. Recently, a Baptist seminary president suggested that the Southern Baptist Convention has no room for Arminians, which should come as quite a shock to the millions of believers in free will who are loyal Southern Baptists.

What many people miss is that Calvinists and Arminians agree God is sovereign and God rules providentially over creation and predestines people to salvation. Their areas of agreement are much larger than their disagreements over specific interpretations of these biblical concepts.

Sovereignty has to do with God's governance of all things; the Christian doctrine of God's sovereignty is that God is in charge of the universe and everything in it. He rules over it. Providence is nearly identical with sovereignty; it deals with the way in which God rules over his creation.

Predestination is another doctrine linked to God's sovereignty, but it is not

identical with providence. Predestination is the biblical teaching that God foreordains or foreknows which of his human creatures will be saved. The “elect” are chosen by God. On these doctrines, Calvinists and Arminians agree. They disagree on the role free will plays in whether a person is among the elect and thus predestined by God. Calvinists deny free will as power of contrary choice and argue that God’s grace is irresistible. Arminians believe in free will as power of contrary choice and say grace is never imposed on anyone; people can and do resist the grace of God.

Following Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (who died in 1609), Arminians believe God is sovereign. In fact, God is so sovereign that he is sovereign over his sovereignty. In other words, God limits his power to make room for human power of free choice, including freedom to resist grace. Free will is not a relic of human goodness that survived the fall in the garden; it is a gift of God’s grace that enables us to respond freely to the offer of Christ in the gospel.

Calvinism is belief in divine determinism; God is the all-determining reality who sovereignly plans and controls all events, including the free choices of humans. Arminians ask how free people can be if their decisions are controlled. Arminians wonder how God is good and loving in light of the combination of evil in the world and God’s all-determining sovereignty and power. Even the most die-hard Calvinist hesitates to lay sin and evil at God’s doorstep. After talking about God’s all-determining power, they wince at saying God determined the fall of humanity in the garden or Hitler’s holocaust. A hardy few press on and say God even caused the terrorist acts of Sept. 11.

Those of us who believe in real freedom of will, liberty and power of contrary choice see that as the only escape from making God the author of sin and evil. A God who determines people to sin, even if only by “efficacious permission” (withdrawing the grace necessary not to sin), is the ultimate sinner. A God who could save everyone, because salvation is

unconditional, but passes over many—sending them to eternal damnation—is morally ambiguous at best. As John Wesley commented, if this is love, it is such a love as makes the blood run cold.

Admittedly, most Calvinists do not follow the logic of their own view of God’s sovereignty to its good and necessary conclusion. They affirm God is loving, but they say that “world” in John 3:16 refers not to everyone but to people of every tribe and nation—the elect. God loves all people in some way but only the elect in every way.

Arminians embrace the universal love of God for all people created in his image and likeness. God is not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9) because he desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

Clearly, God does not completely get his way, because he is sovereign over his sovereignty and allows sinful people to thwart his will. But that in no way detracts from his greatness or power; it is evidence of his self-limiting and loving respect for people.

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in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.