

A DISTORTED SOVEREIGNTY

WHAT LOVE IS THIS?

What A Sovereign God *Cannot* Do

Vance points out, "The Calvinist perception of God as being absolutely sovereign is very much accurate; **however**, that doesn't mean that it takes precedence over his other attributes." Clearly, God's ability and even His right to act in His sovereignty are only exercised in harmony with His other qualities, which must all remain in perfect balance. Calvinism destroys that balance. It puts such emphasis upon sovereignty that God's other qualities are made inconsequential by comparison and God is presented as acting out of character....

Throughout history, sovereign despots have misused their sovereignty for their own evil purposes. Obviously, however, God employs His sovereignty not as a despot but in love, grace, mercy, kindness, justice, and truth - all in perfect symmetry with His total character and all of His attributes. Indeed, He cannot act despotically or use His sovereignty for evil. Cannot? Yes, *cannot*.

"Heresy!" cries the Calvinist. "God is infinite in power; there is nothing He can't do." Really? **The very fact that He is infinite in power means He cannot fail.** There is much else which finite beings routinely do but which the infinite, absolutely sovereign God *cannot do because He is God. He cannot lie, cheat, steal, be mistaken, etc. Nor did God will any of this in man. To will sin in others would be the same as practicing it Himself.*

What God cannot do is not *in spite of who He is*, but *because of who He is*. This fact was recognized by Augustine, who wrote, "Wherefore, He cannot do some things for the very reason that He is omnipotent." There are things which God cannot do because to do them would violate His very character. He cannot deny or contradict [H]imself. He cannot change. He cannot go back on His Word.

God Can Neither Tempt Nor Be Tempted

Scripture must be taken in context and compared with Scripture; one isolated verse cannot become the rule. Jesus said, "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Yet it is impossible for God to do evil, to cause others to do evil, or even to entice anyone into evil. This is clearly stated in Scripture: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man . . ." (James 1:13-14).

What about instances in Scripture where the Bible says God tempted someone or was tempted? We are told, for example, that "God did tempt Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). The Hebrew word there and throughout the Old Testament is *nacah*, which means to test or prove, as in assaying the purity of a metal. It has nothing to do with tempting *to sin*. God was testing Abraham's faith and obedience.

As for God being tempted, Israel was warned, "Ye shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16). They had done so at Massah, in demanding water: "they tempted the LORD, saying, Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7). Later they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust . . . they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? Yea, . . . they tempted and provoked the most high God" (Psalms 78:18,41,56).

Clearly God was not being tempted to do evil - an impossibility. Instead of waiting upon Him in patient trust to meet their needs, His people were demanding that He prove His power by giving them what they wanted to satisfy their lusts. Their "temptation" of God was a provocation that put Him in the position either of giving in to their desire or of punishing them for rebellion.

When Jesus was "tempted of the devil" to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple to prove the promise of God that angels would bear Him up in their hands, He quoted the same Scripture: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Matthew 4: 1-11). In other words, it is one thing to rely upon God to meet our needs as they arise, but it is something else to put ourselves deliberately in a situation where we demand that God *must* act if we are to be rescued or protected.

In the quotation above, James goes on to say, "every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his **own** lust and enticed." **Temptation to evil comes from within, not from without.** The man who would never be "tempted" by an opportunity to be dishonest in business may succumb to the temptation to commit adultery and thus be dishonest with his wife. It is said that "every man has his price."

God was not tempting Adam and Eve to sin when He told them not to eat of a particular tree; He was testing them. Eve was tempted by her own natural lust, her selfish desire. This shows that even in innocence mankind can be selfish and disobedient. We see this in very young infants who as yet presumably do not know the difference between right and wrong.

What God Cannot Do To Save Man

When it comes to salvation, it is essential to realize that there are three additional things which God cannot do. **First of all**, He cannot forgive sin without the penalty being paid. In the Garden the night before the cross, Christ cried out in agony, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. . ." (Matthew 26:39). Surely if it had been possible to provide salvation without Christ paying the penalty demanded by His justice, the Father would have allowed Him to escape the cross. We know, therefore, that it was not possible for God to save man any other way. **Secondly**, God cannot force a gift upon anyone. **Finally**, He cannot force anyone to love Him or to accept His love. Force would pervert the transaction. It is at this point that we see why man must have a free will. By the very nature of giving and receiving, and of loving and receiving love, man must have the power to choose freely, as God has sovereignly ordained. The reception of God's gift of salvation and of God's love (all in and through Jesus Christ and His

sacrifice for our sins) can only be by a free choice.

Christ repeatedly gave such invitations as "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), or "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (John 7:37); and "whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17). Relying upon the ordinary meaning of words, does it not sound as though Christ is offering to all a gift which may be accepted or rejected?

There is no question that salvation is a free gift of God's grace: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16); "If thou knewest the gift of God" (John 4:10); "But not as the offence, so also is the free gift" (Romans 5:15); "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23); "For by grace are ye saved . . . it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8); "God hath given to us eternal life" (1 John 5:11), etc. By its very nature a gift must be received by an act of the will. If forced upon the recipient, it is not a gift.

Free Will Does Not Conflict With God's Sovereignty

Again, relying upon the ordinary meaning of words, when Scripture says, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36), it sounds as though everlasting life is offered to all mankind and it is up to each one either to believe on the Son or to reject Him. So it is with literally hundreds of verses throughout the Bible.

The Calvinist objects that if man had the choice whether to say yes or no to Christ, then he would have the final say in his salvation and God would be at his mercy. By this reasoning, those places in the Bible where it seems to say that God desires all to be saved and is offering salvation to all either to be accepted or rejected cannot really mean what they say and must be interpreted to apply only to the elect- and they must have no choice. Thus Scripture's clear meaning is changed to make it conform to TULIP. We are testing that doctrine from God's Word.

Calvinists' sincere concern for God's sovereignty is not in question. The issue is whether they are being true to Scripture, to the character of God and to reason. The Calvinist argues that if God's desire is for all men to be saved-and obviously they are *not* all saved - then God's will is frustrated by rebellious, sinful men who by their wills have been able to overturn God's sovereignty. As a consequence, the plain meaning of numerous passages must be changed in order to conform to the Calvinist's mistaken view of sovereignty. As one of them has said, "The heresy of free will dethrones God and enthrones man." In fact, this statement was rejected by Augustine himself.

It has been clearly shown that there are a number of things which a sovereign God cannot do, yet none of these limitations impinges in the least upon His sovereignty. God is not the less sovereign because He cannot lie or sin or change or deny Himself, etc. These follow *because* of His sinless, holy and perfect character.

Nor is God any the less sovereign because He cannot force anyone to love Him or to receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Suggesting that God would be lacking in "power" (thus supposedly denying His sovereignty) if He offered salvation and some rejected it is missing the point. Power and love and love's gift do not belong in the same discussion. In fact, of the many things which we have seen that God cannot do, a lack of "power" is not the reason for any of them. Pusey points out that "It would be self-contradictory, that Almighty God should create a free agent capable of loving Him, without also being capable of rejecting His love . . . without free-will we could not freely love God. Freedom is a condition of love."

To recognize that mankind has been given by God the capacity to choose to love Him or not and to receive or reject the free gift of salvation, far from denying God's sovereignty, is to admit what God's sovereignty itself has lovingly and wonderfully provided. In His sovereignty, God has so constituted the nature of a gift and of love that man must have the power of choice, or He cannot experience either one from God's gracious hand.

It is impossible that the power of choice could challenge God's sovereignty since it is God's sovereignty which has bestowed this gift upon man and set the conditions for loving, for receiving love, and for giving and receiving a gift. In contrast, however, both to Scripture and common sense, as Zane Hodges points out:

If there is one thing five-point Calvinists hold with vigorous tenacity, it is the belief that there can be no human free will at all. With surprising illogic, they usually argue that God cannot be sovereign if man is granted any degree of free will. But this view of God actually diminishes the greatness of His sovereign power. For if God cannot control a universe in which there is genuine free will and is reduced to the creation of "robots," then such a God is of truly limited power indeed.

Dave Hunt's [What Love Is This?](#), 136-140