

THEOLOGY PROPER

(The Doctrine of God)

INTRODUCTION:

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON GOD:

1. *Knowledge of the Holy* by A. W. Tozer

Tozer opens his book with these quotes: pp. 9-11:

- "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."
- "We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God."
- "I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God."
- "The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long..."
- "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."

2. *The Attributes of God* by A. W. Pink

3. *The God You Can Know* by Dan DeHaan

4. *Serving God* by Richard Mayhue

5. *The Existence and Attributes of God* (2 Vols.) by Steven Charnock

6. *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer

Packer quote: p. 13

- "I believe that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead."

7. *The Forgotten Trinity* by James White

8. *Trusting God* by Jerry Bridges

9. *God's Lesser Glory* by Bruce Ware

10. *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* by Bruce Ware

A. Definition (Chaffer): An investigation into what may be known of the existence, persons and characteristics of the Triune God.

B. How we obtain knowledge about God. (What are limits or drawbacks of each?)

1. Intuition – A belief is intuitive if it is universal and necessary (cp. Ecclesiastes 3:11)
2. Tradition – A passing of knowledge from one generation to the next (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).
3. Reason – By reasoning man can arrive at a God, but he can never reason about the God of the Bible.
4. Experience (cp. song, "He Lives").
5. Observation (natural or general revelation) – God's creations reveal God (Psalm 8; 19; 89) (Read Psalm 19:1-6).
6. Revelation (or specific revelation) – The only real solution or source to the knowledge of God – the Bible. (Read Psalm 19:7-14)

I. THEISM

A. Four different possibilities about the existence of a divine being:

1. Supernatural power(s) – one of many gods (polytheism).
2. The existence of only one God. May be personal or impersonal, active or inactive.
 - a. Monotheism
 - b. Pantheism – God in everything/everything is God.
 - c. Deism – Transcendent but not immanent.
3. A personal God – Transcendent and immanent who exists in one person. This is theism of Judaism, Islam and universalism.
4. A personal God both immanent and transcendent, who exists in three personal personalities (Christianity).

B. Naturalistic Theism

Note: There are two basic approaches to apologetics: Evidentialism - represented below; and presuppositionalism which begins with a biblical worldview. It confronts the believer head-on. The common ground is not facts but the sense of deity based on Romans 1:18ff.

1. Theistic arguments (these demonstrate but do not prove God).

a. The cosmological argument – cause and effect: (Thomas Aquinas)

- 1) Every effect must have a cause; therefore since the universe exists something (one) caused the universe (the only other option is that nothing caused the universe).
- 2) It has to be either a divine being or chance. We must believe in the eternal existence of something. This is all this argument can prove.

Opposing View: Hume's argument is that we believe this based on experience, but it cannot be proven that all effects have a cause.

b. The teleological argument – argument from purpose. There is an observable order or design in the universe, which argues for an intelligent designer. A design requires a designer (Thomas Aquinas). The universe shows evidence of design, therefore it must have had an intelligent designer. This argument is constantly found in the Bible (Acts 14:15-17).

Opposing View: We have never seen a world made so we can not know with certainty who/what made it (Humes & Kant).

c. The anthropological (or moral) argument – or the nature of man (Immanuel Kant).

Note: All have a sense of right & wrong, that sense must come from God (Romans 1:32).

1. Man is seen as a moral, intellectual being, therefore he must have a creator that is a moral, intellectual being.
 2. C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* strongly supports this argument.
- d. The ontological argument – Because everyone, everywhere has a concept and innate belief of a supreme being, therefore that supreme being must exist (Anselm of Canterbury). We have an idea of an infinitely perfect being, therefore such a being must exist.

Opposing View: An a` priori argument, assuming what it wants to prove.

- e. The subjective argument – Mankind has experienced God in a subjective way, therefore God must exist.

Note: Paul Little used this as one of two great arguments for Christ, the other being the resurrection, in *How To Give Away Your Faith*.

- f. Conclusion – These arguments give us a predisposition to theism, but they do not give conclusive evidence of the God of the Bible.

C. Schaffer's approach.

Note: Explain Schaffer's approach – as found in his three books: ***The God Who is There; Escape From Reason; He Is There and He Is Not Silent.***

1. The Existence of God:

All men are philosophers for all must live by some worldview. There are 3 basic questions that a philosophy, which meets man's needs, must answer:

- 1) Who am I (what am I doing here, etc; what is my purpose)?
- 2) How do we know truth?

3) How do we overcome man's dilemma (man is able both to rise to great heights and to sink to great depths of cruelty and tragedy)?

2. There are basically only 2 philosophical answers to these 3 questions:
 (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 112,156,133; Albert Camus, *The Fall*, p 6, 7). There is no logical, rational answer. Everything is irrational and absurd. There is a logical, rational answer.

3. Man cannot live consistently with view #1.

a. So if you take view #2 you are left with only 3 basic possibilities:

b. Everything that exists has come out of nothing.

c. Oppose:

- No one believes this.
- Does not answer the 3 questions.

d. That the impersonal + time + chance has produced a personal man.

Oppose:

- Faith in matter (where did it come from) and chance.
- Does not answer the 3 questions.

f. Everything began with a personal beginning:

- Gives man meaning.
 - Answers 3 questions.
 - Faith in eternal God or gods.
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4. If we take the personal beginning view we have 2 possibilities:

1) Many gods (mythology).
 Oppose

- Fate controls the gods.
- The gods were little more than super saints and super sinners.
- No absolutes - does not answer the 3 questions.

2) One God (the Christian view).

Answers 3 questions:

- Man made in God's image; the purpose of man to glorify God.
- The Bible provides absolutes.
- Man was normal before the fall.

2. Presuppositional Apologetic

a. Man is not epistemologically neutral.

1) Epistemology addresses one's theory of knowledge or source of truth.

a) Ephesians 2:1-2—Dead in trespasses and sins.

b) Romans 1:18-20—Man has an inescapable sense of deity.

(1) v. 20—He has knowledge of the true God from the creation:

(a) God's eternal power, omnipotence.

(b) God's character, His unchanging glory, unity, and consistence.

(2) v. 18—They suppress (holds down) the truth in unrighteousness.

(a) They rebel in pride against the truth.

(b) This suppression is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness.

(c) They pretend to be neutral.

- 2) We do not have to prove God to the unbeliever—he already knows God.
- 3) Metaphysically or ontologically, believers and unbelievers are in agreement because they both know God and are made in His image, yet unbelievers are always inconsistent.
 - a) Romans 2:14, 15—their conscience accuses them. In contradiction to their view they continue to rely on God!
 - b) v. 21-22—they offer lame excuses, vain reasoning, speculations, foolishness.
- 4) Epistemologically, believers and unbelievers do not ultimately agree on anything because each interprets every “fact” from a different starting point. At the same time unbelievers borrow from the believer’s worldview because their own view does not make sense, but they will not admit it. The KEY issue is authority, and the unbeliever will not honor and submit to God as his source of authority (Romans 1:21).

b. Man’s problem is not intellectual but moral.

- 1) Romans 1:18—Willful suppression
- 2) 2 Corinthians 10:5—Speculations, prideful and lofty thoughts outside of God must be destroyed and taken captive by obedience.

c. In the end, all men have faith and they reason from that faith.

- 1) Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning God”
- 2) Genesis 3:5—Faith in themselves as god
Unbelievers say that they have facts but their facts rest in nothing, chance, irrationality. They offer no intelligible basis on which to build a worldview. The questions must ultimately become for every man, “What is the object of your faith?”

3. A biblical or presuppositional apologetic.

a. What is Presuppositionalism?

It is a view that places the Christian worldview as its starting point over against the non-Christian worldview and its starting point! It places presuppositions (or ultimate starting points) over against other presuppositions. It addresses the preconditions of intelligent thought. It attacks the unbeliever with a head-on collision presenting him with the opposite of what he believes. It understands that common ground is not "facts" upon which both agree, but rather the inescapable sense of Deity that exists in every sinner (Romans 1:18-22).

Presuppositionalism presents reason and evidences within a biblical framework and thus reasons from faith to faith. It calls the unbeliever to submit to the Lordship of Christ, thinking His thoughts after Him (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The presuppositionalist puts the unbeliever on trial in God's court and exposes his sins of the heart and mind. It defends the truth in a way consistent with the truth.

b. The features of presuppositionalism.

1) A head-on collision with the unbeliever.

- a) The opposite of foolishness is truth—call him from sin to obedience (Isaiah 1:18).
- b) He must take his faith out of himself and put it in Christ.
- c) Challenge his proud right to judge God—confront his pre-commitment to naturalism.
- d) Ask him to embrace the Christian faith and its Christian evidences not as a fideistic irrational leap of faith, but as faith rooted in biblical reasoning.

2) An absolute case rather than mere probable or permissibility.

- a) Christianity offers absolute certainty.
 - (1) Acts 2:36—"All the house of Israel knows for certain..."
 - (2) Luke 1:4—"So that you may know the exact truth..."
 - (3) John 20:31—"These things were written that you might believe..."

- b) Christianity offers infallible proofs.
 - (1) The witness of God in nature and in man's conscience.
 - (2) The uniqueness of the Bible in all of history.
 - (3) The authority of Scripture—it speaks like no other book.
 - (4) The incomparable message of the Bible—it alone calls for a broken submission to God in repentance and biblical faith.
 - (5) The miracles, the resurrection, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

3) A fundamental conflict over the issue of authority.

Arguments for the existence of God.

Note: Information taken from *A Closer Look at Biblical Apologetics* by James F. Stitzinger, Associate Professor, Historical Theology, The Master's Seminary.

D. Unbiblical theories

a. Atheism (three kinds) – Psalm 14:1.

Dogmatic atheism – denies existence of God.

Virtual atheism – holds principles that are inconsistent with the belief in God.

Practical atheism (Psalm 10:4) – life as if God did not exist.

b. Agnosticism (Thomas Huxley, 1870).

1) "I do not know."

2) "I cannot know."

c. Materialism – That system which ignores the distinction between matter and mind and it refers all the phenomenon of the world to

the function of matter. (Example: explaining human choices and actions on the basis of chemical reactions)

- d. Polytheism – The belief in many distinct and separate deities (e.g. Hinduism, Confucianism).
- e. Pantheism – God is everything and everything is God. Assumes the eternity of matter.
- f. Deism – Belief in a personal, holy, infinite God, but denies the immanence of God. Deism has been called the religion of nature. That is, we can only learn about God through nature.
- g. Animism – All nature is alive with spirits, which can injure or help men.
- h. Dualism – Everything is explained through a two-fold principle. These two principles are good (God) and evil (Satan). Zoroastrianism is the best known example.
- i. Dynamism – There exists an impersonal life energy, or force, pervading all things. This force can be tapped for good or evil (e.g. witchcraft, shamanism, “Star Wars,” “Harry Potter”) as opposed to worship of Satan.
- j. Secular evolutionary theory – Change due to natural causes. Matter is eternal and constantly changing.

Three Types:

Atheistic theory.

Theistic theory – God created the world through the means of the evolutionary process.

Progressive Creationism – God created the world and allows it to evolve, but He occasionally steps in to create or adjust.

Main Ideas of Evolutionary Theory:

- 1) Living things change from generation to generation producing descendents with new characteristics.
- 2) This process of change has been going on so long that it has produced all the changes that we have today.
- 3) These different living things are all related to one another.

Unsolved Problems of Evolution:

- 1) The cause of variation.
 - 2) Beneficial mutations unobserved.
 - 3) Missing links:
 - a) The introduction of life.
 - b) The introduction of man.
 - 4) Objection from the Bible.
- k. Idealism – True reality rests in the ideal world so the only reality that makes any sense is what we perceived in our mind. The physical world does not exist.

Biblical Theism

1. The Westminster Catechism gives this definition for God: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."
 - a. By "being" is meant essence
 - b. By "spirit" it meant that God is immaterial. A spirit is an immaterial person who possesses intellect, emotions and will. (John 4:24)
2. Descriptions of God

a. Taken from creation

- 1) Lion (Isaiah 31:4)
- 2) Eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11)
- 3) Lamb (Isaiah 53:7)
- 4) Hen (Matthew 23:37)
- 5) Sun (Psalm 84:11)
- 6) Morning Star (Revelation 22:16)
- 7) Light (Psalm 27:1)
- 8) Torch (Revelation 21:23)
- 9) Fire (Hebrew 12:29)
- 10) Fountain (Psalm 36:9)
- 11) Rock (Deuteronomy 32:4)
- 12) Shadow (Psalm 9:1)
- 13) Shield (Psalm 84:11)
- 14) Temple (Revelation 21:22)

b. Taken from human experience

- 1) Bridegroom (Isaiah 61:10)
- 2) Husband (Isaiah 54:5)
- 3) Father (Deuteronomy 32:6)
- 4) Judge (Isaiah 33:22)
- 5) King (Isaiah 33:22)
- 6) Shepherd (Psalm 23:1)
- 7) Physician (Exodus 15:26)

“In one sense or another all of creation reveals something about God to us” (Grudem, p. 158).

3. The names for God.

a. The primary Old Testament names:

- 1) Jehovah (Yahweh) = English translation: LORD

- a) Genesis 2:4 – The Jews would substitute other names for “Yahweh,” believing that “Yahweh” was too holy to pronounce.

b) It came from "to be" – Exodus 3:14 "It means the active, self-existent One . . . is especially associated with God's holiness, His hatred of sin, and His gracious provision of redemption." *Ryrie Study Bible*, note on Genesis 2:4

2) Elohim = Means the strong one, the mighty one (Genesis 2:4).
English translation: God

a) Can also be used of the pagan gods.

b) It is a plural word and leaves room for the teaching of the Trinity, but does not teach the Trinity in and of itself.

3) Adonai = English translation: Lord. Means "master" (Genesis 15:2; Deuteronomy 6:4). It can refer to human masters.

b. Compound Old Testament names:

1) El-elyon = strongest mighty one (Isaiah 14:14).

2) El-roi = strong one who sees (Genesis 16:13).

3) El Shaddai = Almighty God (Genesis 17:1).

4) El-Olan = Everlasting God (Isaiah 40:28).

5) Jehovah Shalome = The LORD is peace (Judges 6:24).

6) Jehovah Raah = The LORD is my shepherd (Psalm 23:1).

7) Jehovah Sabboth = The LORD of hosts (armies) (1 Samuel 1:3).

8) Jehovah Elohim = The LORD, the mighty one (Judges 5:3).

c. Primary New Testament names:

1) Theos = The same as Elohim in Hebrew translated "God."

2) Kurios = Same as Hebrew word for Jehovah. Translated "Lord."
Sometimes a substitute for Adonai.

3) Father – Son – and Holy Spirit.

Note: While the members of the Trinity are found in the Old Testament, they are not usually referred to by these names. For example, the Jews normally did not call God "Father," Christ is often found in the form of the Angel of the Lord; and the Holy Spirit is called God's Spirit.

3. Attributes of God:

a. Definition: Qualities that belong to God. "In no sense has He acquired these attributes. They are what He is, and ever has been, and ever will be. Without such attributes He would not be God."

b. Description:

1) **Noncommunicable attributes** would be one which belong "to God, considered in Himself, and which implies no relation to other beings" (C. Hodge, Vol. I, p. 375).

Note: Listing of all noncommunicable.

- **Independence** – God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify Him and bring Him joy (Job 4:11; Psalm 50:10-12) (Grudem, p. 160).
 - God did not create mankind because of any need within Himself. For example, God was not lonely before creation (John 17:5, 24).
 - God's existence and character are determined by Himself alone and are not dependent on anyone or anything else (Exodus 3:14).
 - Yet creation can glorify God and bring Him joy and grief (Ephesians 1:11-12; Revelation 4:11; Isaiah 43:7; 62:3-5; Ephesians 4:30).
- **Unity** – God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).
 - "God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times."

- "When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than the rest" (Grudem, pp. 177-178).
- **Infinite** – God is not bound by time or events. This does not mean that time is unreal to God (Psalm 90:2; 102:12; 1 Kings 8:27). "God reveals Himself as a personal being...; nevertheless He fills heaven and earth; He is exalted above all we can know or think. He is infinite in His being and perfections.... No limitation can be assigned to His essence" (C. Hodge, Vol. I, pp. 380-381).
- **Eternal** – "God has no beginning, end or succession of moments in His own being, and He sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time" (Grudem, p. 168). (Genesis 21:33; Psalm 90:2)
 - Yet, while God is Lord over time and exists apart from time, He nevertheless sees events in time and acts in time (Galatians 4:4-5; Acts 17:30-31).
 - "The infinitude of God relative to space, is His immensity or omnipresence, relative to duration, it is His eternity. As He is free from all the limitations of space, so He is exalted above all the limitations of time" (C. Hodge, Vol. I, p. 385). (Psalm 90:2-4; Revelation 1:8; Genesis 1:1; John 1:1-3)
 - When God created the universe He also created time.
- **Immutable** – God never changes and is unchangeable (James 1:17; Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). "He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been or ever must be" (C. Hodge, Vol. I, p.391).
 - What about God changing His mind (Jonah 3:10) or expressing displeasure over something He has done

(Genesis 6:6)? This is an anthropomorphism (i.e. God seems to change His mind from our point of view).

- These instances could also be “understood as true expression of God’s present attitude or intention with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment” (Grudem, p. 164).

In this regard some have ascribed the attribute of impassibility to God – that is, He does not have passions or emotions (The Westminster Confession makes this claim). But Scripture claims that God does have emotions: He rejoices (Isaiah 62:5), He is grieved (Ephesians 4:30), gets angry (Exodus 32:10), loves (Isaiah 54:8).

- Two recent challenges to immutability:
 1. Process theology which sees God as changeable in His essence.
 2. Open theology which sees God as less than omniscience and thus capable of changing His mind as events unfold. (Also see “Omniscience” below)

Pinnock's remarks about God changing, *Openness of God*, p. 133.

- **Omnipresent** – God is everywhere, personally present (Psalm 139:7-12; 1 Kings 8:27). “He is equally present with all of His creatures, at all times, and in all places” (C. Hodge, Vol. I, p. 383).
 - Pantheism says God is in everything, Scripture says that He is everywhere present
 - This doctrine teaches that we cannot escape God.
- **Omniscience** – God knows all things, actual and possible (Psalm 139:4-6; 147:4,5; Isaiah 40:13,14,28; Hebrews 4:13; 1 John 3:20; Revelation 2:23). This means He has perfect knowledge of what is happening right now, what will happen in the future and what could happen or could have happened

(known as middle knowledge – evidence for middle knowledge can be found in Matthew 11:21; 2 Kings 13:19; etc.). This means God is always aware of everything. He does not learn and He does not forget. His knowledge does not change or improve; else He would not have been omniscient in the past.

This leads to the problem of the freedom of human choices. How can our choices be free if God already knows the future? No totally satisfactory answer can be given except to accept at face value that Scripture teaches both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. These are not contradictory in the mind of God. Augustine suggested that God has given us “reasonable self-determination” meaning we consciously make choices that determine our actions (Grudem, p. 192). These choices are not outside the realm of God’s knowledge and providence yet they are self-determined from our vantage point.

Note: On the other hand Open Theism resolves this tension by limiting the knowledge of God.

Note: *Letters From a Skeptic*, P. 30; *Openness of God*, p. 122; *Grace and Freewill of Man*, p. 134.

- **Omnipotent** – All-powerful: “God’s omnipotence means that God is able to do all His holy will” (Grudem, p. 216). (Revelation 19:6; Genesis 18:14; Matthew 19:26; Isaiah 44:26; Jeremiah 32:17)

Fifty-six times the Bible declares that God is the Almighty One, and this word is used of no one but God.

Yet there are some things that God cannot do. He cannot do anything that would be contrary to His divine nature. For instance, He cannot sin or even be tempted to sin (James 1:13); God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18); God cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Since God cannot cease to be God He cannot do anything that would be inconsistent with His divine attributes.

- **Sovereignty** – The word means chief, highest or supreme. God is the supreme ruler (Ephesians 1:11); even over evil (Genesis 50:20; Genesis 45:5-8; 1 Samuel 16:14; Romans 9:17, 18; Revelation 17:17). “God’s exercise of power over His creation is also called God’s sovereignty.” Grudem

God’s sovereignty is universal and absolute (Daniel 4:35; Ephesians 1:11).

2) **Communicable attributes** are those which imply relation to an object. God possesses these attributes without limit. Mankind can possess them to a degree.

- **Wisdom** – “God’s decisions about what He will do are always wise decisions: that is, they always will bring about the best results” (from God’s ultimate perspective). Grudem (Romans 11:33)

We too can have wisdom (James 1:5; Psalm 19:7).

- **Holy** – He is separated from all evil and sin (Revelation 4:8; Isaiah 6:3; 1 John 1:5).

As to be healthy is more than not being sick so holiness is more than absence of sin; it is a positive, healthy state of being right, pure.

“God’s holiness means that He is separated from sin and devoted to seeking His own honor.” Grudem

Christians are called to holiness (1 Peter 1:16).

Justice/Righteousness – “God’s righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is Himself the final standard of what is right.” Grudem

Because God is righteous it is necessary for God to punish sin.

While holiness principally concerns the character of God, justice deals with His actions. It means moral equality. God

is no respecter of persons (Acts 17:31; Psalm 19:9; Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Revelation 16:5-7).

"The doctrine of satisfaction and justification rest on the principle that God is immutably just, i.e., that His moral excellence in the case of sin, demands punishment, or expiation." Hodge

- **Goodness** – God deals kindly with all of His creatures (1 Peter 2:3; Psalm 34:8; Psalm 84:1).

Three aspects:

- Grace – Unmerited favor of God (Romans 5:15).
- Mercy – Man in need of divine help (Romans 12:1).
- Longsuffering – God bears with evil men (Romans 2:4).

As God is the final standard of good so we are to be good as well (Galatians 6:10).

- **Truth** – God is consistent with Himself and thus everything He does is true (Romans 3:4; John 17:3).

"God's truthfulness means that He is the true God, and that all His knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth." Grudem (John 17:17)

God's promise cannot fail; His word never disappoints. His word abides forever.

Believers should seek to live and teach truth (Ephesians 4:15, 25; Colossians 3:9).

- **Love** – "God's love means that God eternally gives of Himself to others." Grudem (1 John 4:8-10; Psalm 103:11; Romans 5:8)

"The love of a holy God to sinners is the most mysterious attribute of the Divine nature." Hodge

The Trinity loved before creation (John 17:24) and it continues to the present (John 3:35; 14:31).

Christians are to exhibit this same love for God and others (Matthew 22:37-38; 1 John 5:1-4).

- **Faithful** – 2 Timothy 2:13; Lamentations 3:22-23; Psalm 36:5; Deuteronomy 7:9; Hebrews 10:23.

“God will always do what He has said and fulfill what He has promised” (Numbers 23:19). Also, “All of God’s words about Himself and about His creation completely correspond to reality.” Grudem (Proverbs 30:5; Psalm 12:6; John 17:17).

God wants His children to be faithful as well (2 Timothy 2:2; Revelation 2:10; 1 Corinthians 4:2).

II. TRINITARIANISM

“The Old Testament constantly insists that there is only one God, the self-revealed Creator, who must be worshipped and loved exclusively (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 - known as the Shema, which is the first word in the passage and means "hear". The Shema is considered the very center of Judaism; Isaiah 44:6-45:25). The New Testament agrees (Mark 12:29-30; 1 Corinthians 8:4; Ephesians 4:6) but speaks of three personal agents, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working together in the manner of a team to bring about salvation (Romans 8; Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2). The historic formulation of the Trinity (derived from the Latin word *trinitas*, meaning ‘threeness’) seeks to circumscribe and safeguard this mystery (not explain it; that is beyond us), and it confronts us with perhaps the most difficult thought that the human mind has ever been asked to handle. It is not easy; but it is true” (Packer, *Concise Theology*, 40).

A. Introduction to Trinitarianism

1. Definition – “The Trinity (a better term is triunity = three in one) is composed of three united Persons without separate existence – so completely united as to form one God. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

- "There is only one God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal and coequal persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence." Charles Ryrie.
 - "Each fully shares the one being that is God. The Father is not 1/3 of God...." James White.
2. Why is it important to even understand the Trinity? Because we must worship God as He is, not as we wish Him to be, nor as we imagine Him to be.
3. Nature of this study
- The doctrine of the Trinity is completely and exclusively a matter of revelation (Isaiah 40:25).
 - The Trinity is incomprehensible and must be accepted by faith.
 - The Trinity is based on the whole of Scripture and yet the word Trinity is never found in the Bible.

B. Erroneous concepts

1. Gnosticism

- "The Gnostics held that there was a series of emanations from the primal Being of different orders or ranks....It reduced Christ to the category of dependent being, exalted above others of the same class in rank, but not in nature. It moreover involves the denial of His true humanity." Hodges

2. Tritheism (i.e. polytheism) – An attempt to preserve the Deity and personality of each member of the Godhead. This fails to do justice to God. The Word of Faith Movement teaches that each member is a triune being (P. 49 of *Charismatic Movement* booklet by Gary E. Gilley).

3. Modalism

- 1) An effort to preserve monotheism, and an attempt to make the Trinity understandable to the human mind.

2) A lack of personal distinction between the members of the Godhead. The Holy Spirit and Christ are the ones who usually suffer.

3) Three Types:

- Monarchianism – Emphasis on the Father as the Supreme Ruler. Denial of the real deity of Christ.
- Dynamic Monarchianism – Father is God; Christ is a good man, the Holy Spirit is an influence.
- Modalistic Monarchianism – (also know as Sabelliusism after Sabellius who lived in the early third century). There is only one God that has existed in three modes or manifestations:

Old Testament = Father

Incarnation = Son

Church Age = Holy Spirit

4) Example of “Oneness” (or “Jesus only”) Pentecostals: “The One true God has revealed Himself as Father, through His Son, in redemption; and as the Holy Spirit, by emanation . . . This one true God manifested Himself in the Old Testament in diverse ways; in the Son while He walked among men; as the Holy Spirit after the ascension.” (*Articles of Faith*, United Pentecostal Church International)

5) They would teach that “Jesus is the Father in His divine indwelling nature; the Son in His begotten manhood; and the Holy Spirit by emanation. **‘Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,** and beside Him there is no God and I condemn everything else!’” (Ross Drysdale, *If Ye Know These Things*)

6) Modelism denies the personal relationships within the Trinity. It also loses the heart of the doctrine of the atonement—the Father sending the Son as our substitution and pouring out His wrath on the Son in our place (propitiation).

4. Arianism – Denies deity of Son and Holy Spirit. The Son was the first creation of the Father and the Holy Spirit was the first creation of the Son.

- The Nicene Creed (first formed in 325 and later revised at the Council of Constantinople in 381) stated that Jesus was of the same substance as the Father (homoousios—“of the same nature” not “of a similar nature” (homoiosios).
- The Council of 381 clarified the deity and role of the Holy Spirit.
- The Nicene Creed reads:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father **and the Son**, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

- In AD 589 at the Council of Toledo (Spain) a Latin word filioque was added to the creed. The Nicene Creed read that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” Toledo added *Filioque* so that it read “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.” This

was based on John 15:26; 16:7. The phrase was officially added to the Nicene Creed in 1017. The Eastern Church (their real issue was over Papal authority) rejected this clause leading to a division between the Catholic and Orthodox churches which stand to this day.

5. Subordinationism – While the Son was eternal (not created) and Divine, He was nevertheless inferior to the Father in His being.
 6. Adoptionism – Jesus was an ordinary man until His baptism when God adopted Jesus as His Son and gave Him supernatural powers.
 7. Barthianism – Is similar to Arianism.
 8. Unitarians and liberal theologians – Believe Jesus is a Divine teacher, and identifies the Holy Spirit with the immanent God (i.e. an influence).
- C. The results of the erroneous statements:
1. Destroys the deity and work of Christ.
 2. Rejects the deity of the Holy Spirit.
 3. Rejects the witness of Scripture.
- D. Proof for the Trinitarian doctrine (sometimes called Tri-unity).
1. From the Old Testament.
 - a. All doctrines of the Bible are progressively revealed. Those who use the Old Testament *only* will not understand the whole doctrine. In the Old Testament preparation is the key word.
 - b. Unity (Deuteronomy 6:4; I Kings 8:60; Isaiah 43:10,13; 44:6,8; 46:9).
 - c. Threeness:

- 1) The Hebrew word for God – “Elohim” is a plural word, therefore could be translated as “Gods.” The Jews say that this is just a plural of majesty (el is the singular form).
- 2) Use of plural pronouns (Genesis 1:26).
- 3) The angel of Jehovah – Old Testament appearances of Christ. He is co-equal with God (Judges 2:1-5).
- 4) Isaiah 48:16 – Three persons in the Trinity.
This is the strongest O. T. verse for the Trinity.

2. From the New Testament

- a. Unity (Ephesians 4:3-6; I Corinthians 8:4-6).
- b. The Father is declared to be God (John 6:27; I Peter 1:2).
- c. The Son is declared to be God – (John 1:1,14; 20:28; Titus 1:3,4).
 - He also claimed attributes of God:
 - Omniscience (Matthew 9:4).
 - Omnipresence (Matthew 28:20).
 - Omnipotence (Matthew 28:18; John 1:1-2,14; Hebrews 1:8,9).
- d. The Holy Spirit is recognized as God (Acts 5:3-4). Compare Isaiah 6:9 with Acts 28:25. Compare Jeremiah 31:31-34 with Hebrews 10:15.
 - He also possesses the same attributes as God:
 - Omniscience (I Corinthians 2:10).
 - Omnipresence (Psalm 139:7).
 - Omnipotence (Romans 8:11).
- e. Passages that link all three together:
 - Matthew 28:19 – name (not names) of . . .
 - 2 Corinthians 13:14
 - Matthew 3:16-17
 - Ephesians 1:3-14 – The work of the Trinity spelled out.

As someone has said concerning the Trinity: "Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind; but try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul."

GOD THE FATHER

A. Introduction

1. Doctrines concerning the Holy Spirit and Christ are considered in detail in separate studies; therefore, we will concentrate here on the Father.
2. In Scripture there are particular works ascribed to the Father. However, since God is a Trinity, the works of the Godhead overlap so that each member of the Trinity participates in the work of the other.

ATTRIBUTES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE TRINITY

(adapted from H. Wayne House, "A Biblical Presentation of the Trinity," *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, p. 49)

	<u>ATTRIBUTE</u>	<u>FATHER</u>	<u>SON</u>	<u>HOLY SPIRIT</u>
Persons of the Same Essence: Attributes Applied to Each Person	Eternality	Psalm 90:2	John 1:2; Rev. 1:8,17	Heb. 9:14
	Power	1 Peter 1:5	2 Cor. 12:9	Rom. 15:19
	Omniscience	Jer. 17:10	Rev. 2:23	1 Cor. 2:11
	Omnipresence	Jer. 23:24	Matt. 18:20	Psalm 139:7
	Holiness	Rev. 15:4	Acts 3:14	Acts 1:8
	Truth	John 7:28	Rev. 3:7	1 John 5:6
	Benevolence	Rom. 2:4	Eph. 5:25	Neh. 9:20
	Equality with Different Roles: Activities Involving All Three Persons	Creation of the World	Psalm 102:25	Col. 1:16
Creation of Man		Gen. 2:7	Col. 1:16	Job 33:4
Baptism of Christ		Matt. 3:17	Matt. 3:16	Matt. 3:16
Death of Christ		Heb. 9:14	Heb. 9:14	Heb. 9:14

B. The first member of the Trinity is often called the Father. He is the Father of:

1. The nation Israel (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:6; also see Isaiah 9:6).

- It is interesting to note, however, that God is not commonly addressed or referred to as "Father" in the Old Testament. Jesus was the first to regularly speak in this manner.
- Not all in Israel were redeemed, so this relationship was both spiritual (with believers) and governmental (with all in Israel, whether believers or not).

2. To the angels (Job 38:7).

3. To the Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:1).

a. What does it mean?

- Though nowhere clearly explained, it is fundamental. He is the only begotten Son (John 3:16) from all eternity. "Begotten" not created. Begotten means one of a kind, unique.
- While angels and believers are called sons of God, they are not sons of God in the same sense that Christ is John 17:5; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2, 5).
- "The fact of this relationship is an illustration of vital truth which accommodates itself to the mode of thought of a finite mind." -- Chafer

b. When did He become a Son?

- He was the eternal Son (Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1, 2, 14; 3:16; Psalm 2:7; Galatians 4:4; 1 John 4:9).
- The Bible teaches that the Son has eternally existed in the bosom of the Father.

- John 1:14-18 translated literally from the Greek says this: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, THE ONE EVER BEING (existing) IN THE BOSOM OF THE FATHER, He hath declared Him."
- The many passages which speak of the Father SENDING the Son all imply that Christ existed as the Son prior to His mission (Galatians 4:4; 1 John 4:10, 14; John 20:21).
- God gave His Son (John 3:16-18), implying that Christ was God's Son before He was given.
- God the Father did not give One who would become His Son, but He gave One who already was His Son.
- Even in the Old Testament period we find evidence that God indeed had a Son such as Proverbs 30:4 and Psalm 2:7-12 (compare also Daniel 3:25; Isaiah 9:6).
- Differences between the eternal Sonship and incarnational Sonship view.

4. To all believers.

- a. Believers are regenerated (John 1:12, 13; John 3:3-6; 1 Peter 1:3, 23). To be regenerated is to be given new life.
- b. Believers are adopted (Galatians 4:5-7) – giving us adult standing in the body (Romans 8:14-17). Adoption is the act of God, which places the believer into God's family as an adult son.

C. The particular works of the Father.

1. Author of election (Ephesians 1:3-6; John 6:37, 44).
2. Sent the Son to this world (John 5:37).

3. Is the disciplinarian of His children (Hebrews 12:9).

D. The creative acts of God.

1. Creation in general – Creation of the universe is an act by which something is brought from nothing, *ex nihilo* (Psalm 148:5; Hebrews 11:3; Genesis 1:1). The Son was involved in creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Isaiah 44:24); as was the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2).
 - a. “The scriptural doctrine is: that the universe is not eternal. It began to be. It was not formed out of any preexistence or substance; but was created *ex nihilo*. That creation was not necessary.” Hodge
 - b. While the universe is created out of nothing, God used substance for some things He created, for example, humans (Genesis 2:7, 19, 21-22).
 - c. Biblical support of *ex nihilo*: Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6,9; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11; Acts 4:24. That God created the universe out of nothing shows both the sovereignty of God and the fact that the universe has purpose and meaning.
 - d. Creation is distinct from God (transcendent), yet dependent on God (immanent). God is far above His creation but vitally involved with it.
 - e. This rules out monism (that God and creation are the same); dualism (that God and the material universe have eternally existed side by side); deism (that God created but has no involvement with His creation) and materialism (that matter, not God is eternal).
 - f. God did not need the universe, but He created it for His own glory (Isaiah 43:7; Psalm 19:1-2; Revelation 4:11).

- g. Creation primarily shows the glory of God in relationship to his power, wisdom and divine nature (Jeremiah 10:12; Romans 1:20).
- h. Views of creation take on one of three forms.
- 1) Secular theories—usually some form of evolution.
 - 2) Theistic evolution—evolution was the means God used to create the universe. Yet, the Scriptures clearly states that God’s creative word brings immediate response.
 - 3) Creationism.
- i. Gap theory
- 1) The theory that there is a gap of millions of years between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. The idea is that God made an earlier creation, but that creation rebelled against God, and God judged the earth so that it became “formless and void”. Genesis 1:3-2:3 is the second creation of God, which is of recent origin (perhaps 10,000-20,000 years ago). The first creation was billions of years ago and is the source for the fossils found on earth. The Scofield Reference Bible supported this view.
 - 2) However, there are several problems with the gap theory.
 - “Without form and void” means not yet fit for habitation, it does not imply Divine judgment.
 - No other Scriptures speak of an earlier creation.
 - Exodus 20:11 attributes creation of all things to the six days of creation, but the gap theory would say that many things on earth (fossils, remains of dead animals and earth itself) as well as stars, were not made at the second creation.

j. Age of the earth

1) Old earth position (the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old).

- This view necessitates the “day-age” theory which claims that each day of creation represents millions of years.
- Not only does the day-age theory lack biblical support it does not correspond with accepted views of science on the order of creation. For example, Genesis has the creation of vegetation (1:11), before that of the sun (1:16), yet plants need sunlight.

2) Young earth position (the earth is between 10,000-20,000 years old).

- Each day in Genesis 1 is framed by “there was evening and there was morning,” indicating a twenty-four hour day.
- Exodus 20:11 uses the word “day” as a twenty-four hour period.
- Problems with this position include the difficulty of accomplishing so much in a single day, especially day 6 (1:26-30; 2:1-25). Also the appearance of age in the universe and current dating techniques used by science contradict a young earth.
- None of these problems are insurmountable however. We can not limit what God could accomplish in a single day; God could easily create a universe with the appearance of age, and dating methods have not been proven reliable for long periods of time.

2. Creation of the spiritual world.

Unfallen angels:

- a. The existence of angels is taught throughout the Scriptures. There are 275 references to angels.
- b. Creation of angels (Colossians 1:16) – Angels are not a race but a host; they are the sons of God not of other angels.
- c. They were created (Job 38:6, 7) – At some point in time before the creation of the physical world. The state in which the angels were created was a state of holiness (Jude 6; Matthew 25:31; Revelation 14:10).

3. Creation of the spiritual world.

Fallen angels:

- a. God is Holy – not the author of sin.
- b. The original state of angels' holiness was unconfirmed until tested.
- c. The environment of the angels was conducive to holiness. They lived in a holy environment and had no sin nature.
- d. Ezekiel 28:15 – Sin was found in Satan. Sin began with Satan —sometime after creation of the physical universe (Ezekiel 28:12-14) and before the fall of man.
- e. One-third of angels fell with Satan (Revelation 12:4).

E. The sovereign rule of God:

- Introduction: Answers the questions of how God runs His universe. (*see Appendix) God's sovereign rule involves three categories: preservation, government and concurrence.

1. Doctrine of preservation:

- Creation does not act independent of God. He maintains that which He has created (Colossians 1:17; Nehemiah 9:6; Hebrews 1:3; Acts 17:28).

2. Doctrine of providence (government):

"God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all their actions."
Hodge

- a. This is the out-working of God's plan for His universe (Daniel 4:35; 1 Corinthians 15:27).

"God has a purpose in all that He does...and He providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish His purpose." Grudem

b. Scriptural proof:

- 1) God controls the physical universe (Matthew 5:45; Psalm 147:16-18; Acts 14:17).
- 2) God controls the animal creation (Psalm 147:9; Matthew 6:26).
- 3) God controls the nations (Daniel 2:38,39; 4:17, 25; Romans 13:1).
- 4) God controls all individuals:
 - a) Birth (Galatians 1:15,16; Psalm 139:13-16).
 - b) Success and failures in our lives (Luke 1:52).
 - c) "Accidental" and insignificant things in our lives (Matthew 10:30; Romans 8:28).
 - d) God's people (Philippians 4:19).
 - e) Destiny of the wicked (Psalm 11:6).
- c. Purpose in God's providence – So that God's purpose for the universe might be worked out (Ephesians 1:9-11).

d. Means employed: God uses all creatures and circumstances to accomplish His purposes. Even the sinful actions of fallen creatures are but tools in His hands (Genesis 50:20).

3. Doctrine of concurrence (Acts 2:23, 36):

a. "God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do." Grudem

b. "God causes all things that happen, but He does so in such a way that He somehow upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices." Grudem

F. Application:

1. "There is no other God but the one we have been trying to describe. Gods of our making . . . are false. Even good Christians can fall into the trap of trying to mold God according to their own thinking or wishes or pleasure." Ryrie

2. "If we accept the facts about the true God which have been revealed, then it shouldn't be difficult to believe He could and can do what is claimed of Him. That is why the knowledge of God takes first priority in the study of doctrine." Ryrie

3. We cannot totally comprehend God's sovereignty.

"It is enough for us to know that God does govern all his creatures and all their actions, and that his government while absolutely efficacious is infinitely wise and good, directed to secure the highest ends, and perfectly consistent with his own perfections and with the nature of his creatures." Hodge

"The fact of this universal providence of God is all the Bible teaches. It nowhere attempts to inform us how it is that God governs all things, or how his effectual control is to be reconciled with the efficiency of second causes." Hodge

"It cannot be proved that it is inconsistent with the nature of God that He should call into existence creatures capable of originating action. It is enough that such creatures should derive all their powers from God, and be subject to his control in all their exercise. This doctrine contradicts the consciousness of every man. We know, as certainly as we know anything, that we are free agents, and that free agency is the power of self-determination, or of originating our own acts." Hodge

"It is to put philosophy in conflict with common sense, and with the universal convictions of men, to teach that all this is a delusion." Hodge

APPENDIX

JUST HOW SOVEREIGN IS GOD ANYWAY?

(This appendix is a reprint of the fourth "Think on These Things" paper on the Sovereignty of God.)

The issue that we have been dancing around for the last several papers, and now must seriously address, has to do with the sovereign nature of God. Our context, so far, has been that of pain, suffering and evil in this world. And while this continues to be a good springboard into our discussion, it certainly does not exhaust the pool of topics and questions emerging from the subject. The broader discussion must include the whole gamut of problems that swirl around the "sovereignty of God" vs. the "freewill of man" debate.

As we approach this theme we immediately recognize two obstacles that menace our progress: First, this is a huge, emotionally laden subject that has long divided the Christian community. I won't pretend that this four-page paper will do anything more than scratch the surface and probably please few of my readers. On the other hand I would like to attempt to offer a balance that I believe is often missed. The other obstacle has to do with the strong hatred of God's sovereignty even among many Christians. While it is rare for a believer to actually admit that they do not believe in a sovereign God, many deny it when dealing with the particulars. We have seen examples of this in our last three papers on pain, and we will document the widespread denial of God's sovereignty found in open theism in our future papers. Perhaps Charles Spurgeon said it as well as anyone when he wrote,

There is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except upon His throne. They will allow Him to be in His workshop to fashion worlds and to make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of Heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth; and when we proclaim an enthroned God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter, then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. They love Him anywhere better than they do when He sits with His scepter in His hand and His crown upon His head. But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust.¹

BLESSED BE THE TIES THAT DIVIDE?

While Spurgeon seemed to have the unbeliever in mind in the previous quote, it is not uncommon for the child of God to struggle with the same issue, either through ignorance or rebellion. Let's take a moment to stake out the opposing viewpoints, which historically have been represented by Arminians and Calvinists, and now open theists.²

ARMINIANISM

(1) Protects man's freewill at the expense of God's sovereign control; (2) God's reputation is still at risk since He knows of future tragedies, etc. and allows them anyway.

There are a number of distinctions between Arminian theology and Calvinism, but the only one I want to address at this time is the opposing views on the sovereignty/freewill controversy. Arminians believe that God knows all things, past, present and future, but God does not determine all things. In order to allow for freewill in humans, God cannot force His will upon mankind or else they would not be free agents and therefore responsible for their actions and choices. God can look into the future (*foreknowledge*) and know with certainty which people will choose salvation, invent cures for diseases, bomb buildings, and all else, but He seldom sovereignly determines what they will do. Of course God can and does intervene in the affairs of the human race in order to prod, persuade and move them in the directions He desires, but the choice as to how they will act is theirs not His. God, under the Arminian system, is more a passive watcher of the activities of His creations than He is an almighty determiner of those activities. Arminianism seeks to safeguard the freewill and responsibility of man, but does so at the expense of the sovereignty of God.

OPEN THEISM

(1) Protects man's freewill at the expense of God's sovereignty; (2) Protects God's reputation at the expense of God's omniscience and omnipotence.

The open view has a lot in common with Arminianism, especially its emphasis upon its defense of the freewill of man. But openism differs significantly in a number of places. For example, open theologians teach that God has indeed determined certain things about the future, and because of His great power has guaranteed to bring these things about. But most things about the future are "open," that is, undetermined by God and dependent upon the free choices of God's creatures. This sounds much like Arminianism until we learn that under the open system, not only does God not determine the future, but He does not even know the future. In other words, while God knows all things that are knowable, even He cannot know the future because it has not happened yet and even God cannot know the unknowable. God did not know beforehand, according to this view, that Islamic fanatics would crash jetliners into the Trade Towers. He learned about and experienced this tragedy only as He watched it unfold, first in the minds, and then in the actions, of the terrorists. So under the open view not only does God not determine much of the future, He doesn't even know what will happen. This gives ultimate supremacy to man and his free choices, which will determine how the future turns out.

CALVINISM

(1) Protects God's sovereignty at the expense of man's freewill; (2) Protects God's omniscience and omnipotence at the expense of God's reputation.

The Calvinist believes that God not only knows the future, He determines the future. God is the ultimate cause behind the universe, and nothing happens that is beyond His sovereign control. Yet, and this is the hard part for many to grasp, He does all of these things without violating the freewill of man. J. I. Packer, an indisputable Calvinist, states, "God's control is absolute in the sense that men do only that which He has ordained that they should do; yet they are truly free agents in the sense that their decisions are their own, and they are morally responsible for them."

A BIBLICAL CASE FOR DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

Christians of every stripe claim to believe in the sovereignty of God. But many renege when sovereignty is defined as God's right to do whatever He pleases, whenever He pleases, to anyone He pleases, without seeking anyone's permission. And yet the Bible teaches exactly this. Let's look at some samplings.

Psalm 135:6 –

Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, the seas and in all deeps.

Isaiah 14:27 –

For the Lord of host has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back.

Isaiah 46:9-10 –

*Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, "My purpose will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure."*

Other good Scriptures on the subject include Psalm 33:8-11; Isaiah 10:5ff; 41:21-23; Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 4:34-37; Jeremiah 18:4-6; and Isaiah 40-48, which is perhaps the most comprehensive section on the sovereignty of God found in the Bible.

A BIBLICAL CASE FOR FREEWILL

On the other hand, the Scriptures teach with equal authority the freewill and responsibility of the human race. That this is true hardly needs proof-texting. The Word of God is replete with calls for humans to believe, repent, obey, choose, etc. In addition, people are held accountable for their actions, attitudes, choices and even beliefs.

THE TENSION

Problems arise when we attempt to fuse together the concepts of a sovereign God and the freewill and responsibility of man. D. A. Carson frames the tension like this in his excellent book on the topic, “If God is absolutely sovereign, in what sense can we meaningfully speak of human choice, or human will?” On the other hand, Carson continues, “Must God be reduced to accommodate the freedom of human choices? Does significant human responsibility so lean on power to the contrary that God becomes contingent?”³ In other words, do sovereignty and freewill cancel each other out? Is it possible to maintain that both are true, at least in some sense and to some degree, or must one be sacrificed for the sake of the other? Is there no choice but to polarize around one position or the other?

First, we must be humble enough to recognize that we do not have all the pieces to this puzzle. While I am absolutely certain that God sees no contradiction at all between the two truths, the same cannot be said for us. No position that we can take is without problems.

It is when we forget this and claim that we have the final word to this divine riddle that we end up in trouble. I find myself in substantial agreement with Carson when he writes,

It seems to me that most (although not all) of the debate can be analyzed in terms of the tendency toward reductionism. I have argued at length that a fair treatment of the biblical data leaves the sovereignty-responsibility tension restless in our hands. If a person disagrees with this conclusion and seeks final solutions to the problem, we will enjoy little common ground in the debate. Suppose, for example, that my opponent is so impressed with God’s sovereignty that he constructs his theological system out of all the texts and arguments which support this important truth, and then with this grid filters out evidence which could be taken to call some of his theological system into question. My instant response is that his procedure is methodologically indistinguishable from the person who first constructs his theological system out of those texts and theorems which seem to support some form of human freedom and who then filters out election and predestination passages until he can safely defuse them by re-defining them. The name of the game is reductionism. In fact, reductionism doesn’t *really* work. Even if we discount the fact that it plays with the evidence selectively, reductionism never solves or eliminates the sovereignty-responsibility tension, but only changes its shape.⁴

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not in the end two doctrines at odds, at least in the mind of God. While we may not see logically how the two fit together, ultimately they must for God’s Word declares both to be true. When all the dust has settled we will find that these two seemingly opposites are not at war. They are not enemies but friends, and rather than fight over them they should both be embraced.

God is absolutely sovereign. Nothing occurs outside of His will and control. Nothing happens that He has not determined, even if we do not understand God’s methodology. At the same time, God so created man that his actions are free; his choices are his own; he is responsible for how he lives. Such a conclusion perhaps satisfies very few, but I believe it is

faithful to the biblical data that we have been given. To God none of this is a mystery. One day, in glory, He will most certainly unravel all of this for us. In the meantime, let us rest in our all-wise and powerful God as we live for His glory.

¹ "Divine Sovereignty," a sermon delivered May 4, 1856, as recorded in *The Potter's Freedom* by James R. White, p. 37.

² The view of open theism, while having its roots in Arminianism, goes far beyond classical Arminianism, as we will see in our next paper on this subject.

³ *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* by D. A. Carson, p. 1.

⁴ Carson, p. 220.

Southern View Chapel is an independent Bible church affiliated with the IFCA and dedicated to the careful, systematic, expository teaching of the Word of God. "*Think on These Things Ministries*" is the publishing ministry of Southern View Chapel. It focuses primarily on contemporary theological issues that face the church today.

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