

The Evangelical and Reformed Journal

There comes a time in all of our lives when we must take the faith that we have, and make it our own. Owning one's faith is not a decision of whether or not one wants to attend their parent's church. It is a commitment that requires a lifetime to form one's way of thinking and the humility to re-form it when they are wrong. It is a life that is marked by seeking God in study, discussion, and meditation. In Deuteronomy 6:5 Israel is commanded to "Love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, with all your soul, and with all your might." (NKJV, emphasis added). In the Hebrew text there is no word for "mind", so rabbinic tradition understands that the "heart" was the mind. The implications are that one's cognitive focus is to be God and His Word. It was common place for the scribes and the teachers of the law to zealously and emphatically debate *Torah*. They would meditate upon it and exegete truth from it. They not only loved Yahweh, they could not get their minds off of Him.

Those of us at the Evangelical and Reformed Journal ascribe to the discipline of owning ones faith. We have chosen this medium as a platform to spark discussion among believers and hopefully bring a greater passion for the Word of God. We want to take relevant areas of theology, doctrine and Christianity and present them in such a way that our readers can grow in their understanding of who God is.

However, we at the ERJ come to this platform with some presuppositions. We are Reformed Evangelical Protestants. This means that we believe primarily in preaching the Word of God to the lost and the hurting. It also means that we are committed to the five basic principles of the Protestant or Evangelical movement which are: *sola fide* (faith only), *sola gratia* (grace only), *sola Christos* (Christ only), *sola scriptura* (scripture only), and *sola Gloria Deo* (Glory to God alone). By this we mean that we endorse the same views of God, sin, and man as such great thinkers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and St. Augustine. In this point of view we stress two things, man's inability to save himself and God's ability to save man.

We realize that most people will not agree with everything we have to say, and rightly so. However, we at the ERJ want our audience to be those who have an open mind and the

humility to submit to scripture. Because of this we have in addition to the different articles, a portion dedicated to answer your questions and respond to the feed back received via e-mail. In these "Letters to the Editor" we want to resurrect the zeal of the scribes who loved the LORD their God with all of their *heart*. In addition, we wish to provide council to those who desire Biblical advice. In these "Pastoral Epistles" one can count on sound advice that is not merely practical, but most importantly, advice that is Biblical.

The vision of the ERJ is to build a stronger Christian community. This news letter is not our soap-box, nor is it our method of doctrinal propaganda. It is a medium dedicated to seek out the mysteries of God and the depths of His Word.

- R. William Danaher

Please send all thoughts, comments, critiques, nasty-grams and praises to: erjournal@hotmail.com. Any interesting or thought provoking letters will be read and possibly reprinted and responded to in our next edition. Thanks!

Editor-in-Chief

S. Douglas Hedgcock

Contributing Writers

R. William Danaher
Brant "Boss" Bosserman
Matthew L. Miller

Contributing Editor

Carrie Pitts

Not ashamed of the Gospel

This October 31, it will have been 485 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the castle door in Wittenburg, Germany. In his 95 theses Luther took issue with many of the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Martin Luther rejected the religion of Rome because over time it had become a religion of men. As Dr. James R. White once stated, the religions of men are easy to spot because they always denigrate the power and attributes of God. This fact is well evidenced in many of the world's religions. Jehovah's Witnesses denigrate God by saying that it was not him who saved us it was merely the Angel Michael. Mormons denigrate God by saying that He is not the only god and that some day we may come to be like Him. Muslims denigrate God by thinking that even though He is holy and perfect their good works can impress Him enough that He will spare them.

In light of this, we must ask if many evangelicals are committing a similar act when they say that in God's ultimate act of sacrifice, justice, wrath, and love He did not save a single person. Instead, they suggest that God simply put every individual into a state in which they could be saved if they would only choose Him. Thus, God made mankind the ultimate sovereign by giving them the choice to save themselves or to let themselves perish. The end result is a man centered theology in which God is subject to the will of men.

The gospel of Christ has not always been preached in this manner by the evangelical church. It is interesting to note that it has only been in the last century that the majority of evangelical Christians have gone away from a Reformed or Calvinistic view of salvation. A sad fact of this development is that this view has been abandoned not because it was proved false or lacking in scriptural support. Instead it was the demand for cultural relevance which led many away from declaring the hard truths of the Gospel (man's inability and God's ability).

Today too many evangelicals have turned to preaching a gospel shaped by marketing experts, psychologists and a myriad of others. This has led to the preaching of "a kinder gentler gospel" which hopes to attract people to God. While the end goal of seeing people saved is admirable do we honestly believe that this gospel can stand under rigorous biblical

scrutiny? Could it be that in our zeal for evangelism we are in fact watering down the gospel?

In this new era, too often the gospel has been reduced to an attempt at influencing people's feelings to "make a decision" regardless of the reason(s) for that decision. The proclamation of the gospel is not viewed as the very method of salvation. Instead, it must be made "relevant" so that people will save themselves by making the right choice. This is the problem we face today: in order to see people commit men have altered the Word of God.

The problem is before us. The question is raised; what is to be our response? Our response is to reform the Church by returning to the simple truths of the Word and boldly proclaiming them. As individual believers read and rediscover God's Word, the Church as a whole will begin to realize its place in God's plan. It was Christ who said, "I will build my Church," and accordingly we should trust Him to do just that. With this renewed confidence we can throw off the fear of man and do what He commanded us to do: constantly share the good news of God's grace and disciple others.

Once we stop fearing man what can we do but tell people of the God who is completely sovereign and who works out ALL things according to the good pleasures of His own counsel (Ephesians 1:11)? Because we do not seek approval from men but from God we can proclaim a Savior who so loved the world that He died and in so doing actually saved a multitude of sinners so large that no man can number them. We can preach a God who is not so limited that all He can do is sit back and try to woo people to Himself in the same way Satan woos people to himself. Instead, we can preach about the God who goes out and actually saves His people.

In the end, our response is to preach that it is God who chooses, God who justifies, God who regenerates, God who sanctifies and finally God who glorifies. If we love God we can no longer proclaim Him as a cosmic failure that tries to save all but is only able save those who choose to save themselves. We cannot preach this view because it is not the truth of the gospel and it does not honor God. In the end, our response is to return to the Word of God and preach what it says. When God's people do this, we will show the world the truth of what Paul said long ago: that we are not ashamed of the gospel for IT is the power of God unto salvation... (Romans 1:16).

-S. Douglas Hedgcock
The Truth About Doctrine

In this day and age, when people think about theology and doctrine, they imagine aging men in dusty old libraries stewing over the depth of scripture. Unfortunately, most Christians recoil at these highbrow issues, fearing their thoughts are wrong. They retaliate by painting anyone who questions their interpretation as one who does not love the body of Christ; a divider of the Church. In their eyes, these areas of thought only result in an unbelieving and doubtful heart that turns one away from Christ. If this is the case, should we not charge Paul with this apostasy? For Paul himself instructs Timothy to watch his doctrine closely because it will save both himself and his hearers (1Ti 4:16). Could it be that it has not been the doctrine of the theologian that has been destructive, but rather the pride of the layman and his stubborn ideology that divides the Church? We live in a time when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (2Ti 4:3).

Today, there is a myth plaguing the Church that studying doctrine will lead believers astray. However, the truth about doctrine is that it does not devastate our faith in an intimate God, but rather takes the true image of God far from our corruptible and limited mindset, and bases it on His infallible word. By this, we find a greater reverence and understanding of the Lord God Almighty.

There needs to be an understanding that the Word was made flesh and we have been called to stand under *its* authority. To this day I wonder when exactly Christians came to the conclusion that their opinions, feelings and personal experiences outweigh the inerrancy of scripture. Sound doctrine is a necessity that has been found wanting in our post-modern, evangelical, American faith. Without it, we have bred an anemic and timid Christian who cannot tell their pneumatology from their soteriology.

Good doctrine strengthens us as Christians; it solidifies our beliefs, bringing reason together with faith. Reason and faith do mix. Reason is a gift given by God only to man, so that we can judge by what is right, and not by mere appearances (Jn. 7:24). We cannot dismiss such a gift when we enter into the world of faith. The Church is being undermined by this lack of sound reasoning. When asked why Christians

believe in certain things they respond, "Because *pastor* said so," dismissing any critical thought. However, it is the responsibility of every believer to know what and why they believe. God gave us the Scriptures for this very reason. The Bible is not meant to be a self-help book, nor a reference of quaint little catch phrases to quote amongst ourselves. It is the revelation of God, his attributes, and his relationship with man in the universe. It is His unquestionable testament, given to us for *proper* study.

As Christians, we need to discern the teachings we receive in our churches. Is it possible that what we hear from the pulpit may not be true? Are pastors human, thus fallible in their interpretation of scripture? Should we be like the Bereans who examined the scriptures when Paul was preaching to see if what he said was true (Acts 17:11)? Would it be better to let scripture interpret scripture, or allow our own experiences interpret it for us? Scripture is not subject to our lives, but rather our lives are subject to scripture. I am not advocating a complete dismissal of what we hear, but rather like R.C. Sproul and James R. White, I call for a reformation of how we hear it; a reformation where we base our belief on *sola scriptura*, or scripture only. We should be taught the hard teachings of the Bible, not the opinions of man with select passages or verses supporting a three-point sermon. If we lean on such eisegetical principals, the outcome will be a perverted gospel and a heretical church. Should we let our churches be corrupted by man, or instead, let them be governed by God through his word? Unlike most of my contemporaries I do not pray for revival, but rather reformation. For how can we be the light unto the world when we are stumbling in the dark?

- R. William Danaher

The Churches Greatest Weakness

Christianity Today

The Church today is in theological peril. Both the laity and the pastorate suffer from an acute willful ignorance of theological understanding. It is not uncommon in our day and age to hear verses taken severely out of context, nor is it less common that the typical Christian feels that he/she has the authority to place a meaning on scripture that is derived from their life experience. In other words, many today

feel that their life experience dictates to scripture. It is a monumental misconception of scriptural intent to submit it to the experience of life. We must rather allow scripture to dictate what is normative practically and theologically. The fundamental difficulty with the former type of thinking is the placement of autonomous authority upon the human experience instead of God's revelation. Hence, what is to be the greatest strength of the church—a solid theological foundation built upon Christ and the Apostles, is instead an experientially based faith; its greatest weakness.

Cultural Influence and the Gospel

American culture has set for the church a pragmatic tone. Experiential Christianity under the guise of cultural relevance has led the church into a dark world of anti-intellectualism, as Bertrand Russell (who is very decidedly non-Christian states, "Most Christians would rather die than think—in fact they do". Unfortunately his point is incisively true. Christian author, Os Guinness agrees in his book, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds* saying, "Failing to think christianly, evangelicals have been forced into the role of cultural imitators and adapters rather than originators. In Biblical terms, it is to be worldly and conformist, not decisively Christian". A conformist Christianity is a weak Christianity. We have replaced theology with emotion, and the eternal word for a momentary terrestrial Christianity.

Christ taught his disciples to seek not the experience of signs and wonders, but rather the solid foundation of the ultimate truth in the word of God. A simple reading through the gospel of John (esp. Chapters 2, 4 and 10) makes this abundantly clear. In case John does not suffice a reading of the Pastoral Epistles of Paul will repeatedly stress the necessity of guarding Gospel truth from poisonous heresy. Despite the teaching of Paul and John, the church is failing to protect the eternal truth of the God's word. Therefore it follows that Christianity today languishes in theological peril. We are overrun by the world, poisoned by ignorance and hung in a web of the subjective experiential. All the while the power of sin and the world wait to nibble away the beliefs and doctrines that are established foundation of the church; first by Christ and then by the Apostles.

This descent has taken place over no small period of time. Historian and theologian Mark Knoll notes in his recent work *The Old Religion In a New World* (Eerdmans 2002) the

roots of the transition trace back to the early days of the American republic. As the church crossed the Atlantic, it underwent a slow, but radical transformation. Noll shows that this transformation involved two major aspects. First, due to the holiness movements spurned by *The Great Awakening*, as John Macarthur also notes in his essay, *Unafraid to Preach* that Evangelicalism was forced to accept a new definition of itself. This included, in addition to traditional Reformed doctrines, the various flavors of pietistic oriented, Armenian theology at the grass roots level, and modernist liberalism in the mainline churches. Hence, denominational and theological pluralism ensued. Second, the theological life of the church became regarded as a divisive and unholy institution. Both of these developments according to Guinness were direct outgrowths of the American culture. The infiltration of scientific modernism into mainline Christianity, and the fundamentalism of myriad, emerging blue-collar holiness sects, both arose from a the churches pragmatic acceptance of American culture. The Church traded in the community of believers for individual holiness and experience. Moreover, the Church also traded in reformed thinking for the precepts of the Enlightenment, Modernity, and Postmodernism. The former of which sought, ultimately to bring man to God's level, and the latter which seeks to bring God to where we are.

From Europe to America

In Europe, the *status quo* of the Protestant Church revolved around the rediscovered doctrines of the 16th century Reformation. Proclaiming the doctrines of the Reformation, men such as, John Calvin and Martin Luther paved the way for the birth of the Protestant Movement, which included laying out the fundamental doctrines of grace as related in scripture. With the promise of freedom in the New World, the Puritans made the voyage from the Old Continent to America. Landing in what is known today as Massachusetts. Upon arrival they established the first communities governed by the theological precepts of the reformers. However, as the American experiment began to take shape and expand both geographically and in population the Puritan culture and its ideals gave way to the larger American context.

During the Colonial Period (1730-1800 app.), *The Great Awakening* swept the infant

American republic. This movement was spearheaded by the vision of a young minister named John Wesley. A theological Calvinist, Wesley intenerated across the United States, preaching the gospel of Christ. Soon the movement grew into a nationwide phenomenon. Although Wesley's preaching was Calvinistic in many ways, he departed in one significant way: Wesley's ideas on sanctification led his converts to believe that perfection was attainable in the earthly life. From this, both Guinness and Macarthur argue, came pietism, "a religion of the heart" which stressed personal holiness; the ability through one's own efforts to be holy before God. Moreover, experiential aspects also became prominent in this line of theology. An emphasis on supernatural gifts cropped up and with it the emphasis of "empowerment" by the Spirit. As a result, theology was no longer needed. For who needs theology when we can tap into the very power of God? Although space limits discussion here it is necessary to point out that this type of thinking is disastrous to the church. For when pietism and experience dictate religion, a correct view of God is no longer needed; a simple feeling and devotion will do. Theology is easily disposed of and experiential pietism is ignited. Therefore, in the process, what was supposed to be the churches greatest and most exclusive strength, the knowledge of God, (i.e. theology), became its greatest weakness.

So Where are We Today?

We are languishing in the risk of theological ignorance. We labor for "charismatic experience" in our self-centered form of religion; we dare to call orthodox Christianity. We have sacrificed the solid theological foundation provided by the Reformers and exchanged the truth of sound Christian doctrine for the lie of pragmatic piety and experience. Indeed the indictment by author William Willomon is painfully true. Whether by pragmatic adaptation or by modern liberalism, "Today's Conservatives sound like yesterday's liberals". We may think that his statement is harsh and condemning. But is it not true?

Solutions

In light of this assessment, what are we to do? Throughout the ages the Church has had but one sure way of removing corrupted theology and practice; the living word of God. The author of Hebrews beautifully asserts this saying, "For the

Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (4.12a). We must return to a Christianity that is based on the word of God, and its precepts rather than our own. Only a faithful, systematic and holistic understanding of scripture will suffice. Although it is certain that this approach will not solve every difficulty we face, it will certainly help us digest the milk our lactose intolerant Christianity today asks of us. When the Reformers recognized that the churches greatest strength had become its weakness, they through the truth of the scripture, the power of God unto salvation, set about the task of reforming the Church. May we be at the task of daily reforming our theology so that the church may reclaim, without descent, its greatest and most exclusive entity, solid theological understanding of the God who saved her.

-Matthew L. Miller

What Does it Mean to be Sovereign?

What is sovereignty? No doubt most Christians are familiar with the term as one of God's attributes. But how many Christians could define, or explain the implications that this attribute has on the Christian view of God? Do you understand sovereignty? Despite the fact that God's sovereignty is a solid theme throughout the Old and New Testament, most Christians are not familiar with it. Therefore, this article will seek to provide a basic biblical definition of God's sovereignty, and illuminate its implications.

The New Webster's Dictionary provides the following definitions for the term sovereignty, "1: supremacy in rule or power 2: power to govern without external control." Without a doubt most Christians would not deny that God is the supreme power. Nor is it difficult to accept the fact that if God is the supreme power then nothing can frustrate His will. Hence, Jeremiah sighs, "Ah, *sovereign* LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. *Nothing is too hard for you*" (Jeremiah 32:17). Although the average Christian is able to assert that God is supreme in rule and in power, rarely does he understand the implications of the second definition; that God's rule is without external control. To be without external control is to be autonomous, or self-governed. In other words

there is no criterion outside of God through which He makes His decisions. On the contrary, God is the criteria. God's autonomy is alluded to in the passage previously quoted, when reference is made to the creation, "you have made the heavens and the earth by your outstretched arm." When God created He was alone, "I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself" (Isaiah 44:24). No one inspired God to create. In addition, God created the universe ex-nihilo (out of nothing), "the universe [ages] was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." (Hebrews 11:3, cf. Romans 4:17). Before God said, "Let us make man" (Genesis 1:26) no model for man existed. On the contrary, the proper nature of man was established and created by and in the will of God Himself. This concept is difficult to grasp because human decisions are always based on some criteria apart from themselves. For example, a Christian might provide the following line of reasoning for his actions—I work in order to make money; I make money in order to buy food; I buy and eat food in order to live; I live in order to serve God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). However God provides no such line of reasoning for His actions or His existence, He simply asserts, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

Therefore, to state that God is sovereign indicates that God has supreme ruler over the universe that cannot be frustrated, and that God in Himself is the sole criteria by which he makes decisions. It may be easy enough to accept that God is sovereign in regard to the creation, but what about the course of history since? What about sin? What about Salvation? Is God still sovereign in regard to all of these things? Are you ready for a direct answer? YES! God cannot cease to be sovereign anymore than he can cease to be loving, triune, or just. God is Love, God is Triune, God is Just, and God is Sovereign, and concerning His sovereign will God says, "I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6). The author of Hebrews concurs by establishing the eternal security of Christian salvation on the basis of God's unchanging nature and His unchanging sovereign will,

"Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the *unchanging nature of His purpose* very clear to the heirs [Christians] of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that by *two unchangeable things* [Himself, and His Sovereign

Promise or Will] in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us [Christians] may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." (Hebrews 6:16-18)

God's sovereignty does extend throughout human history, and thus the, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, says the following, "God's sovereignty is expressed, exercised and displayed in the divine plan for and outworking of salvation history."¹ Everything that occurs is part of God's sovereign plan, even evil actions. In fact every act of sin will be used by God to meet His righteous end. For example when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, it was no doubt an evil act, but Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:19). In accordance Paul says, "We know that in *all things* [good and evil] God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:27).

Finally God's sovereignty is apparent in the process of salvation. For example, there does not appear to have been any criteria by which God chose Abraham and his descendants to be His people (Genesis 12:1-4). And Paul confirms that God's choice of Jacob to be the father of His people, rather than Esau, was not based on anything that either son had done, but according to His sovereign will (Romans 9:11-13). In the same way that God determined the nature of the universe in and through Himself, and on the basis of nothing else, God chose Israel not because of anything that the Patriarchs had done, but according to His perfect will. Likewise Christians are not born again according to, "human decision" (John 1:12), but according to God's sovereign purpose in election (Ephesians 1:11-14).

-Boss

¹ S.J. Grenz, D. Guretzki, and C.F. Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 109.