

## Is Your God Too Small?

The Opening Address of the Big Bear Conference on Reformed Theology 2008

Many people have been aware of the fact that in recent years there has been a very strong movement toward the Reformed Faith among evangelical Christians. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when this movement began. When I was in college in the 1970s most of my classmates were not Calvinists. One or two were. Some of us knew a little about it, but most were what we would call Arminians. By the time we all graduated in 1974 all of the members of our class were reformed. In fact, all of the men in our graduating class except one went on to seminary, with plans to enter the ministry. The fact is that becoming reformed also played a very big part in developing a sense of calling to the ministry. That pattern has happened over and over again. In fact, both Jesse Pirschel and Chris Rehers (speakers at the conference) are part of that pattern as well, though they did not become reformed in school. They became reformed when they were already in ministry.

But our stories are being repeated by the tens of thousands if not more. I recently read the book *Young, Restless, and Reformed* by Collin Hansen of Christianity Today magazine. He chronicles the growth of the Reformed Faith among young people across the country. J. I. Packer, John Piper, R. C. Sproul, Al Mohler at the Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville, KY, the Presbyterian Church in America and even our own Orthodox Presbyterian Church have been involved in this growth. In the past 20 years our own denomination has just about doubled in size. While we have seen many conversions during this time, much of that growth has come from Christians who have become increasingly frustrated with the shallowness of modern evangelicalism. They are looking for something more biblical; they are looking for churches where God is presented in all his transcendent glory. If you'll pardon the rather chauvinistic turn of phrase, they are looking for a more muscular, manly expression of the Christian faith.

Why is this happening? Well, for one reason there are churches, like Calvary Chapel, that do a pretty good job of bringing people in and encouraging them to read and study their Bibles. However, as many people do this, they begin to realize that the Bible teaches a view of God that is very different than what they are presented with at church. They begin asking questions; questions that their pastor can't or doesn't want to answer. If they persist, they might find themselves ostracized. Where do they go? Many of them find their way to a reformed church.

It is admirable that churches begin the process of teaching their people according to the Scriptures. But then, because those churches are opposed to the reformed faith, they end up starving those people who are sincerely learning about the sovereignty of God in the Scripture. How do many churches present God to their people, particularly in the realm of salvation? In other words, what is the picture of God that is presented to people in many churches today and why do so many people find that picture of God unsatisfying?

One way that many churches present God's role in salvation is by trying to explain the doctrine of election as simply God looking down through the corridors of time and foreseeing who would believe. God then elects those he foresees. Now this is

a standard Arminian explanation of the doctrine of election. It goes all the way back to the original followers of Jacob Arminius who were known as Remonstrants. But look at what this explanation of election does to our view of God. God is not sovereign. He does not take the initiative. He is simply responding to man's choice. If God is the one who must respond to man's choice then man is superior to God! God's choice is dependent on man's choice. Later on today we will look at what the Bible says about election. It presents us with a much different picture of God. But for now let us say that this non-reformed attempt to explain in election leaves us with a small God.

Another way that many people have been taught to understand election is to portray God and Satan having a tug-of-war over an undecided sinner. You have probably heard this explanation. We are told that Satan gets a vote, God gets a vote, but you, the sinner, get to make the deciding vote. Notice that this explanation puts God and Satan on an equal level. God is not superior to Satan. Instead, they have reached a stalemate as they wrestle over the soul of the sinner. It is the person who gets to decide the wrestling match. Now how many of you really believe that God and Satan are equals? This presents us with a view of God that is kind of like the far Eastern concept of the two opposite principles *yin* and *yang*. But even more of a distortion is the way that this illustration presents us with a man who is neutral. God and Satan are wrestling over this man but the man gets to make the ultimate choice. He is in the middle between the two. Does the Bible tell us that man is neutral between God and Satan? No! The Bible is clear that man is already the slave of Satan. He is not neutral, he is a sinner. So, if we think of salvation as a contest between God and Satan with man making the ultimate decision, we not only have a distorted view of man, being neutral, but we also bring God down to the level of Satan. Again, we are left with a small and powerless God.

Or perhaps you might remember another picture. This one is based on Revelation 3:20. In this verse Jesus is saying, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." We have all seen pictures of a nice little country cottage with a wooden door and Jesus standing outside. We notice that there is no door handle on the outside. We are told that the door can only be opened from the inside. You are the one who must open the door to Jesus. He cannot open the door himself. You must open your heart to Jesus because he cannot come in until you make the right choice. Now, I would remind you that this verse was not written to unbelieving individuals. Rather, it was written to a church; a church that is described as lukewarm. But it is a church. Christ is calling to his church to repent. The distortion in this illustration is that Christ is depicted as powerless to enter his own church. Again, the picture of God, this time God's Son, is of someone who is powerless to act. He must wait for man to act.

Finally, you all remember I'm sure another way of illustrating God's role in salvation. It is often presented this way: there is a great canyon or chasm that separates God and man. This chasm is our sin. God does not want us to perish in our sin, and so He sent his son to die in our place so that we might be saved. God has done all he could do to save us. He has built a bridge halfway across the chasm. But now it is up to us. We must make the right choice. We must choose to believe in

Christ. And only by choosing to believe in Christ will that bridge across the chasm of sin be completed. God has done all he could do, now it is up to us to finish the work and believe in Jesus Christ.

Is that really how it is? Did God leave the work of salvation incomplete? This is really an important question. Did God make salvation possible for all people but really not complete the work for anyone? Or, did God actually accomplish completely the work of salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ, and then sovereignly apply that work of salvation through his Holy Spirit? Once again, we are presented with a God who is subordinate to human will and effort. The non-reformed, Arminian approach to describing God's place in salvation always leaves us with a small, tame and impotent God. He does what he can, but he can't complete the work of salvation. He makes his choice, but he has to wait for us to make our choice. He can only foresee what man will do, and then he makes his plan accordingly.

I would submit to you that this view of God leaves many people starving. This is a God who cannot even guarantee that those who believe in Him will remain saved. The consistent Arminian is required to maintain the sovereignty of man's will by claiming that man, if he does not remain faithful, may lose his salvation. Now, thankfully, many non-reformed people are blessedly inconsistent at this point. They do not want to believe that we can lose our salvation. But if they were to follow their theology to its logical conclusion, they would have to admit that the same human will that makes the sovereign choice to believe the gospel will also have to keep us in a state of salvation.

Even more, I would also say that the reason that so many people are moving toward the Reformed Faith in our day that they see a very different God in the Bible. They see a God who takes the initiative in salvation. He acts sovereignly over His creation. He acts sovereignly in history and He acts sovereignly in the plan of salvation.

Let's look at what the Bible says. First, the Bible shows us a God who is almighty and sovereign over His creation. Genesis 1 tells the history of creation. God is so powerful that He simply spoke the words, "Let there be..." and the vast expanse of the heavens came into being. By the word of His power He created the heavens and the earth and everything that is in them, including mankind. The sovereignty of God in creation is captured in these brief phrases of Psalms 33:6-9:

"By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (7) He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap; he puts the deeps in storehouses. (8) Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! (9) For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."

God is also depicted in the Bible as controlling all of His creation. Remember the story of Joshua in the battle against several kings. He prayed and God made the sun stand still. It is recorded in Joshua 10. When God impressed Job with His sovereignty, He reminded Job that He not only created the constellations of the heavens, but He also controls the greatest of the earth's creatures as if they were His pets. Jesus made His disciples marvel at Him when He commanded the wind and the waves to be still.

Also, Jesus taught us that God is sovereign over little things as well as large things. He knows the hairs on our head and a sparrow does not fall to the ground apart from our Father's will. He is the sovereign creator; and He is sovereign in his government of His creation.

Let us also consider how God is sovereign over the course of history. Is God taken by surprise by the events of history? No, in fact God is in such control of history that He tells us by way of prophecy what he will do. He assures us that the course of this world is determined by His counsel and that it is racing to the destiny that He has ordained. Ponder these words from Isaiah 46:8-11:

Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, (9) remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, (10) declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' (11) calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

Consider something that I think is very interesting. Many of the same people who deny the sovereignty of God in salvation are at the same time very interested in understanding the prophecies of the Bible. They are convinced that the Bible gives detailed information about the course of history and the way which the world will head toward the second coming of Christ. They are certain that they understand God's plan in history. But how is that possible if God is not firmly in control of all the events of history? They want a sovereign God when it comes to their confidence in prophecy, but they do not want an absolutely sovereign God when it comes to election and predestination. However, you can't have one without the other. God's control of the history of this world relies on His absolute control over the will of man.

Actually, God tells us in Isaiah 42:8-9 that it is precisely because of His unique and transcendent power that He tells us what He will do in the future. He says, "*I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. (9) Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.*"

But God also reveals Himself as not only absolutely in control of the heavens; not only in control of the course of history; but also in control of the will of man. Proverbs 21:1 teaches: "*The King's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*" We see a specific example of this in the case of Pharaoh. Through Moses the LORD spoke to Pharaoh "*But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.*" Exodus 9:16. The Apostle Paul quotes this verse in Romans 9 to illustrate the sovereignty of God over the will of man. Indeed, later in Exodus God also said, "*And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.*" (Exodus 14:4) Consider that it was God who determined Pharaoh's choice to pursue the Israelites to the Red Sea. God did not just foresee Pharaoh's choice and then make His plan according to what He foresaw.

He determined by His own sovereign will what Pharaoh would do. He did it so that Pharaoh would be destroyed and that God would be glorified.

Again, Paul uses this very event to show that "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." (Romans 9:16) This same principle is also laid out as the reason that some people did receive Jesus as their savior during the days when He walked among His own people. John 1:12-13 states: *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*

You see we get a very different view of God's sovereignty over man when we look at the Bible. He does not just foresee; He ordains. He does not just respond to man's choice; He determines it. Even Kings are not sovereign over their own intentions and choices; God turns their hearts whichever way He wants.

Now some people will say that if we believe that God is absolutely sovereign over even the will of man, that we make man a mindless robot. We are simply going through the motions. Well, first I would say that if you have such an objection, you need to wrestle with the Scripture, no argue with me. It is the Bible that we have appealed to in our presentation of a sovereign God. Moreover, it is not just a verse here or there that you need to confront. It is whole passages and chapters of the Bible. John 10; John 17; Ephesians 1; Romans 9. All of these extended passages show us a God who decides based on His own good pleasure. He decrees what He will do for His own glory and no one can stop Him or even question him. The objection that God's sovereignty reduces man to being a robot is very close to an objection that Paul raises in Romans 9. He anticipates that some people will try to escape their own responsibility for their unbelief. He writes:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" (20) But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" (21) Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (*Romans 9:19-21*)

You see, we are not robots; but we are clay. God does not force us against our will; but He molds us in such a way that our decisions are encompassed in His will. We make decisions, no one denies that. But we make those decisions based on how God has shaped us. Some as a vessel for honorable use, others for dishonorable use. Some for a destiny of salvation; others for a destiny of judgment. Both kinds of vessels, though, are shaped and molded by the sovereign Potter for His own glory.

Another way that God shows His sovereignty in the realm of salvation is by giving to us the very thing that he requires. We believe that the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith. We are not justified by works but by faith alone. But in Paul's letter to the Ephesians we find that God gives us the very thing he requires. If we look at Ephesians chapter 2 we find that Paul first of all describes our condition in sin. He says that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. How then can we be saved? It is by grace and it is through faith. Paul writes: *"For by grace you have been saved through*

*faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" (Ephesians 2:8-9) Notice here that faith is the instrument of our salvation, God's grace is the cause. But faith did not come from within us, it was a part of the entire gift. It was not our own doing. God requires faith and he gives faith. He does it sovereignly according to his own will. Paul even states in the next verse that we are *"his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand."*

Now, the last point I want to make is that only a sovereign God can love us with a love that cannot fail; and only a sovereign God can make a promise that cannot be broken. Please turn to Romans chapter 8. We all love the conclusion of this wonderful chapter of the Bible. In verse 31 Paul asks a question, *"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"* If you versus further he also asks "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" Of course, his answer is that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. It is a love that cannot fail. Notice, though, that these questions follow the passage in which Paul teaches us about God's predestination. He says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." You see, God is sovereignly in control of all things, therefore, all things work together for the good of those whom He has called and predestined and justified and glorified. In the end it is his purpose that we will be conformed to the image of Christ. Nothing in heaven or on the earth can stop God's purpose from being fulfilled. Therefore, the love which he has given to us in Christ is an unailing love. It will accomplish its purpose.

In the same way, God has promised eternal life to those who believe in him. But those who believe in him do so because He has chosen us from before the foundation of the world. The Bible reminds us that we love Him because He first loved us. Once we have believed can anything break God's promise? No! God's covenant promises cannot be broken. It is His sovereignty that guarantees His promise. If God were not sovereign how would we know that we could trust His promises?

A God whose love might fail is a small God. A God whose promises might not come to pass is a weak God. A God who cannot control his own creation is powerless. So I ask you a question: is your God too small? Is your God mighty to save, or is he subservient to your will? I will put it bluntly. The God that is portrayed in Arminian doctrine is too small. This is the heart of the reason why many people today are turning toward the Reformed Faith. They see in the Reformed Faith the God of the Bible. A God who is transcendentally powerful, a God in whom we trust with complete confidence. My will is weak. It is unstable. It vacillates from one day to the next. It is hot and cold. But God never changes, His purposes do not fail. His Word always accomplishes what He intends it to accomplish and He never loses any of His people. This is a large God. This is a sovereign God. And it is in this God that we have trusted for our salvation!

Amen!