

# The Sovereignty of God

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The sovereignty of God I take to be the absolute authority, rule, and government of God in the whole of that reality that exists distinct from Himself in the realms of nature and of grace. It is a concept that respects His relation to other beings and to all other being and existence. It is, therefore, a relative concept, or a concept of relation.

If God possesses and exercises this absolute authority, rule, and government, the necessary presupposition of it is the *oneness*, or *unity*, of God. It is a fact to which Scripture bears constant witness in a great variety of contexts because it is a truth that underlies and determines the whole superstructure of divine revelation.

An examination of this witness will show that it is not mere uniqueness or supremacy or even transcendence in the realm of Deity. It is not as if there were a host of lesser deities over whom God is supreme and therefore demands from us supreme worship and devotion. It is rather that He alone is God. "The Lord he is God; there is none else besides him." "He is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else" (Deut. 4:35, 39). "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me" (Deut. 32:39). "Thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth" (II Kings 19:15).

It is significant that it is precisely this line of Old Testament witness that is appealed to by our Lord as the answer to the question, "What commandment is the first of all?" "The first...is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29). And the necessary consequence for us is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30). "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10). The pivotal character of the oneness of God appears, for example, in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, when it is made the hinge upon which turns and hangs no less important a doctrine than that of justification by faith. "Or is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith" (Rom. 3:29-31). And again in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the foundation that "to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him" (I Cor. 8:6) is the first principle regulative of worship.

The concept of divine sovereignty presupposes also the fact of *creation*, that is, the origination of all other existence by the fiat of God. The moment we posit the existence of anything independent of God in its derivation of factual being, in that moment we have denied the divine sovereignty. For even should we grant that now or at some point God has assumed or gained absolute control over it, the moment we allow the existence of anything outside of His fiat as its principle or origination and outside of His government as the principle of its continued existence, then we have eviscerated the *absoluteness* of the divine authority and rule. Scripture is paramountly conscious of this fact, and so its witness to the absolutely originative activity of God is pervasive. It does not depend wholly upon a few well-known texts, however important these may be.

Perhaps no word expresses it more pointedly than that of the Psalm: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Ps. 33:6). The import is that the word, or breath of God, breath being the symbol of His almighty, creative will, is the antecedent, or prior cause, of all that is. "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (vs. 9). This

mode of statement harks back to the first chapter of Genesis, where on some eight occasions the successive steps of the creative drama are introduced with the formula, "and God said."

God made heaven and earth; by His Spirit the havens were garnished; He laid the foundations of the earth; by wisdom He founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens; His hands stretched out the heavens, and all their host He commanded; heaven and earth, His hand made, and so all those things came to be; He made the sea and the dry land; He is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega; He is the beginning of creation; by His will, heaven and earth were, and were created (II Kings 19:15; Job 26:13; 38:4; Prov. 3:19; Isa. 42:5; 44:6; 45:12; 66:2; Jonah 1:9; Rev. 1:8; 3:14; 4:8).

The piety on which the Scripture places its imprimatur is true piety; this, we find, rests upon, and is necessarily suffused with, the recognition of God's creatorhood. The address to God in adoration, prayer, and praise begins with it; the address to men in law and gospel rests upon it. The faith that is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," the faith through which the catalogue of saints had witness borne to them that they were righteous, is the faith through which "we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3). And when Paul made his appeal to the idolatrous Athenians that God now commandeth men that they should all, everywhere repent, he began his address by saying, "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24).

If the sovereignty of God rests upon the fact of His oneness and upon the fact of creation, it may be said to consist, first of all, in the right of dominion and rule over all and in the fact of universal possession. The Psalm sounds this note succinctly. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Ps. 24:1). The prophets do the same when they affirm that He is "the God of the whole earth" and as the "Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Isa. 54:5; Dan. 4:17, 25). In the formula of Melchizedek and of Abraham, He is the "possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19, 22), and in the words of Paul, "in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

But, secondly, sovereignty, as the right of dominion and the fact of possession, comes to its full all-pervasive and efficient exercise in government. As such it is (1) sovereignty exercised in accordance with antecedent decree. What God decrees is infallibly determined and accomplished. "Hast thou not heard," He protests, "long ago, how I have done it, and of ancient times that I have formed it? now have I brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste fenced cities into ruinous heaps" (II Kings 19:25). "Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isa. 14:24). "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isa. 26:10). In Job's words, "He is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desireth, even that he doeth. For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him" (Job 23:13-14). "I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee" (Job 42:1-2). It is that "the counsel of the Lord standeth forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations," that He "worketh all things according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ps. 33:11; Eph. 1:11).

This purposive decree is not only stated positively but also negatively. No purpose of His can be restrained, and every creature purpose that is contrary must be frustrated. "For the Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27). "He maketh the devices of the people of none effect" (Ps. 33:10). "He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:35).

As sovereignty coming to all-pervasive and efficient exercise in government, it is (2) sovereignty exercised with omnipotent and undefeatable efficiency. The mighty hand of God is the executor of His

will. He is the great, the mighty, the terrible. He rideth upon the heavens and, in His excellency, on the skies. There is none who can deliver out of His hand, for He frustrateth the devices of the crafty, and the counsel of the cunning is carried headlong. He breaketh down, and it cannot be built up again. There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against Him. None can stay His hand nor say unto Him, “What doest thou?” for human might is of one sort with that of the Egyptians, and they are men and not God, and their horses flesh and not spirit (Deut. 10:17; 13:26; Job 5:12-13; 12:14; Prov. 21:30; Dan. 3:35; Isa. 31:3).

It is (3) sovereignty that is all-pervasive. This all-pervasiveness rests upon His omnipresence. “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me” (Ps. 139:7-10).

We may illustrate this all-pervasiveness in three of the ways in which Scripture exhibits it:

(a) It respects the events of ordinary providence. It is God who gives rain upon the earth and sends water upon the fields. He makes His sun to shine upon the evil and the good: and sends rain on the just and the unjust. He clothes the grass of the field, causing the grass to grow for cattle and herb for the service of man. He feeds the birds of heaven. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and will. He gives us our daily bread. He gives wine that makes glad the heart of man oil that makes his face to shine, and bread that strengthens man’s heart. He crowns the years with goodness and the paths drop fatness. He even gives that which is abused and used in the service of another god. He gave grain and new wine, and the oil, and multiplied silver and gold, which they used for Baal. He makes the wind His messengers and flames of fire His ministers. The whole earth is filled with His glory. So that the pious contemplation of His working brings forth the exclamation of adoration: “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches” (Job 5:10; Matt. 5:45; Ps. 104:4, 14-24; 63:11; Hos. 2:8).

(b) It respects the disposition of all earthly authority. He alone is God of all the kingdoms of the earth. He removes kings and sets up kings, for as the Most High, He rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever He will. He sets up over them even the lowest of men. It is He that gives even to ungodly men the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory. He overthroweth the throne and strength of kingdoms (Deut. 4:35, 39; II Kings 5:15; 9:15; Isa. 37:16; Dan. 4:11; 5:18, 21; Hag. 2:22).

The very division of the kingdom of Israel fraught with dire consequences for the true worship of Jehovah was yet a thing brought about of the Lord that He might establish His word (I Kings 12-15). “Thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel: return every man to his house; for this thing is from me” (I Kings 12:24). For He ordains kings for judgment and establishes them for correction, so that Assyria is the rod of His anger and the staff of His hand the divine indignation to perform the divine judgment upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem (Hab. 1:12; Isa. 10:5, 12).

It is not simply, then, that the powers of civil government are ordained by God to be the ministers of equity and good and peace, for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise of them that do well (Rom. 13:3; I Pet. 2:14), but it is also true that usurped and corrupt government that violates the very principles of government itself is within the government of God and fulfils His sovereign purpose. In perpetration of iniquity, they fill up the cup of divine indignation. “Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks” (Isa. 10:12).

(c) It respects good and evil, so that even the sins of men come within the scope of His rule and providence. “What,” asks the oppressed and the afflicted Job, bereft of flocks and herds and smitten with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto the crown, “shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). For “with God,” he says again, “is wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding. Behold, he breaketh down, and it cannot be built again; he shutteth up a man, and there can be no opening” (Job 12:13-14). He forms the light and creates darkness; He makes peace and creates evil. He kills and He makes alive; He wounds and He heals (Isa. 45:7; Deut. 32:39). He “hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4). “Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” (Amos 3:9).

I am not in the least forgetful of the very acute problems raised by such pronouncements of Scripture. It will be the task of other speakers at this conference to deal with these in more detail, and I have no doubt but they will be ably and judiciously handled. Nevertheless it does appear necessary to the topic assigned me to affirm that the teaching of Scripture on the divine sovereignty requires us to recognize with Calvin that all events are governed by the secret counsel and directed by the present hand of God and that God’s omnipotence is not the vain, idle possession of potency but the most vigilant, efficacious, and operative, “a power constantly exerted on every distinct and particular movement” (*Inst.* I, xvi. 3). “Whence we assert, that not only the heaven and the earth, and inanimate creatures, but also the deliberations and volitions of men, are so governed by His providence, as to be directed to the end appointed by it” (*Inst.* I, xvi. 8).

The problems raised come to their most acute expression in those instances where the agency of God is affirmed in connection with what is not only evil in the generic sense but evil in the specific sense of sin and wrongdoing. It appears to me that Calvin again is right when he contends that “nothing can be desired more explicit than His frequent declarations, that He blinds the minds of men, strikes them with giddiness, inebriates them with the spirit of slumber, fills them with infatuation, and hardens their hearts. These passages also many persons refer to for permission, as though, in abandoning the reprobate, God permitted them to be blinded by Satan. But that solution is too frivolous, since the Holy Spirit expressly declares that their blindness and infatuation are inflicted by the righteous judgment of God. He is said to have caused the obduracy of Pharaoh’s heart, and also to have aggravated and confirmed it. Some elude the force of these expressions with a foolish cavil—that since Pharaoh himself is elsewhere said to have hardened his own heart, his own will is stated as the cause of his obduracy; as though these two things were at all incompatible with each other, that man should be actuated by God, and yet at the same time be active himself. But I retort on them their own objection; for if *hardening* denotes a bare permission, Pharaoh cannot properly be charged with being the cause of his own obstinacy. Now, how weak and insipid would be such an interpretation, as though Pharaoh only permitted himself to be hardened! Besides the Scripture cuts off all occasion of such cavils. God says, ‘I will harden his heart’” (*Inst.* I, xviii. 2).

In this connection, it is noteworthy to observe that the prophet was commanded to go and tell the people, “Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears and understand with their heart, and convert and be healed” (Isa. 6:9-10). In the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, we have allusion to this part of Isaiah’s prophecy (see Matt. 13:14-15; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27). In Matthew and Acts, the blinding of the eyes is represented as the blinding on the part of the people of their own eyes; in John it is represented as blinding on the part of God. This variation should serve to remind us that the positive infliction on the part of God must not be abstracted from the sinful condition of the heart, the moral perversity and responsible action of those who are the subjects of the divine retribution. Paul tells us that, because men will not receive the love of the truth that they might be saved, “for this cause God shall send them strong delusion [working of error], that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (I

Thess. 2:11-12 cf; I Kings 22:19-23). But while we may not abstract the divine infliction from the moral situation in which those concerned find themselves, we must frankly acknowledge the reality of the divine action and the sovereignty of His agency. "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:18).

Perhaps most familiar to us in the matter of the divine agency as it respects evil are Acts 2:23; 4:28, where the arch-crime of human history is referred to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God and the treatment meted out to Jesus. In the conspiracy devised against Him by Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel is that which the divine hand and counsel foreordained to come to pass.

We are now attempting, only very briefly, to show some of the ways in which the witness of Scripture establishes the all-pervasiveness of the sovereignty of God. When we find this sovereignty coming to expression in the most unequivocal way even in those acts of subordinate agents where their moral responsibility is most intensely active in the perpetration of wrong, we can hardly go any farther in demonstrating the all-inclusiveness of it.

But just then we must ever remind ourselves that God contracts no defilement or criminality from such agency. He is just in all His ways and holy in all His works. While everything that occurs in God's universe finds its account, as B. B. Warfield says, "in His positive ordering and active concurrence," yet "the moral quality of the deed, considered in itself, is rooted in the moral character of the subordinate agent, acting in the circumstances and under the motives operative in each instance" (*Biblical Doctrines*, p. 20). God is not the author of sin. Sin is embraced in His decretive foreordination; it is accomplished in His providence. But it is embraced in His decree and effected in His providence in such a way as to insure that blame and guilt attach to the perpetrators of wrong and to them alone.

And again there comes to us with renewed force the significance and even preciousness of the truth that inscrutable mystery surrounds the divine working. "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all" (Eccl. 11:5). We cannot rationalize it; we cannot lay it bare so as to comprehend it. We bow in humble and intelligent ignorance and reiterate, "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven: what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea" (Job 11:7-9). His way is in the sea and His path in the great waters. His footsteps are not known (Ps. 77:19). Clouds and darkness are round about Him. Yet, in accordance with His holiness, Scripture never permits us to forget that justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne (Ps. 89:14).

The sovereignty of God is in a unique and peculiar way exemplified in the election to saving grace. In the Old Testament one of the most significant episodes is the revelation of the redemptive name "Jehovah." There have been various attempts to interpret the precise meaning of the name. The older view that it expresses the self-determination, the independence, in the soteric sphere, the sovereignty of God, appears to be the most acceptable and tenable. It finds the key to its meaning in the formula, "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14). In all that God does for His people, He is determined from within Himself. Paraphrased, the formula would run, "What I am and what I shall be in relation to my people, I am and shall be in virtue of what I myself am. The rationale of my actions and relations, promises and purposes, is in myself, in my free self-determining will."

The correlate of this sovereignty in the choice and salvation of His people is the faithfulness and unchangeableness of God. He consistently pursues the determinations that proceed from Himself, and so His self-consistency insures steadfastness and persistence in His covenant promises and purposes. "For I am Jehovah, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). [\[1\]](#)

Perhaps the most plausible and subtle attempt to eliminate the sovereignty of God in the election to saving grace is the interpretation that posits foreknowledge in the diluted sense of foresight or prescience as the prius, in the order of divine thought, in predestination to life. The *locus classicus* in the argument is Rom. 8:29. It is contended that the foreknowledge spoken of is the divine foresight of faith, or, more comprehensively, the divine foresight of the fulfilment on the part of men of the conditions of salvation. Those whom He foreknew, therefore, are those whom He foresaw as certain to fulfill the conditions of salvation.

It is thought that this removes the reason for the discrimination that exists among men in the matter of salvation from the sovereign discrimination and fore-ordination on the part of God to the sovereign volition on the part of man. Of the Pelagian or Arminian conception of the origin of faith, it must be understood that it makes no real difference that the matter concerns the eternal decree of God. The question really is, what is the crucial and determining factor in predestination to life? Is it a sovereign act on the part of God or is it an activity or exercise of will on the part of man? Once the predestinating decree of God is made contingent upon the divine foresight of an autonomous action or decision on the part of man, then it is that action on the part of man that accounts for discriminating foreordination on the part of God. And so the sovereignty of God in the election to life is eliminated at the crucial point. Predestination is made to rest upon a condition resident in, or fulfilled by, man.

If, for the sake of argument, we were to adopt this diluted interpretation of the verb “foreknow” in Rom. 8:29, we are not to readily conclude that what we call the particularistic exegesis would have to be abandoned and the absolute sovereignty of God in the matter of election to life be eliminated. If we say that the meaning of the verb “foreknow” in Rom. 8:29 is “whom He foresaw as believing and persevering,” we are not to think that we have ended the matter, for we are compelled to ask the further question: Whence this faith which God foresees?

The answer that Scripture itself affords is that faith itself is the gift of God, not of course gift in some mechanical sense, but gift in the sense of being graciously wrought in men by the operation and illumination of the Spirit (see e.g., John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:21). Since faith is thus given to some and not to others, and given to those who are equally unworthy with those to whom it is not given, the ultimate reason is that God is pleased thus to operate in some and not in others. The divine foresight of faith, therefore, would presuppose an antecedent decree on the part of God to work this faith in some and not in others. The foresight of faith would have as its logical prius the sovereign determination to give faith to them. And so even foresight would, on a Biblical conception of the origin of faith, throw us back on the sovereign determination of God.

This exegesis, however, though really providing no escape from the sovereignty of God in the decree of salvation, is nevertheless not to be favored, and that for the following reasons: (1) It is extremely unlikely that Paul, in tracing our salvation to its source in the mind and will of God, would have omitted reference to the originative decree, namely, the decree to work faith.

(2) According to the teaching of Scripture in general and Paul in particular, faith is included in, or associated with, κλησις, and κλησις is in this very passage made the consequence of foreknowledge and predestination. It cannot be both the condition of predestination and the consequence of it. This consideration is confirmed by verse 28: “All things work together for good to them that love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.” If called according to His purpose, the purpose is antecedent to the calling, and if faith is embodied in or associated with calling, the purpose itself cannot be conditioned upon faith.

(3) This exegesis is in conflict with what is said to be the end of predestination—conformity to the image of His Son. Conformity of this kind is surely meant to include every phase of likeness to Christ. Conformity to the image of the Son, no doubt, points to the ultimate perfection to which the elect will attain. If so, then the whole process by which that conformity is secured and realized must be in subordination to this end. In other words, the end is surely prior in the order of thought to the process by which it is to be achieved. But the process by which the end is to be achieved includes faith and perseverance. Faith cannot then be the logical antecedent of predestination; it is rather that predestination is the logical antecedent of faith, even if faith is foreseen by God in His eternal counsel. That is just saying that faith is consequent, in the order of divine thought, upon the destined end of conformity to the image of the Son. But the antecedent of predestination faith would have to be if foreknowledge is the foreknowledge of faith.

Faith, therefore, is two removes in the order of divine thought from foreknowledge, and two removes posterior, not prior, two removes in the order of consequence, not of causation.

(4) This line of interpretation is in accord with Paul's teaching elsewhere and particularly in that one passage which more than any other expands the very subject in debate. It is Eph. 1:4.

(a) Paul there affirms that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: having predestinated us unto adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself." The elect are chosen to holiness; in the divine love, they are predestinated to adoption.

(b) This election and predestination are according to the good pleasure of His will and according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things according to the purpose of His own will. Paul, it is to be noted, piles up expressions almost to the point of what might be, on superficial reading, considered redundancy, in order to emphasize the sovereign determination of the divine will and purpose: "προορισθεντες κατα προθεσιν του τα παντα ενεργουντος κατα την βουλην του θεληματος αυτου" [Eph. 1:11]. To find the determining factor in this predestination in a human decision would be to wreck the whole intent of Paul's eloquent multiplication of terms.

(c) The choice in Christ and the consequent union with Him is the antecedent or foundation of all the blessings bestowed. It is in the Beloved we were abundantly favored with grace (vs. 6); it is in Him we have the redemption, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace (vs. 1); the making known of the mystery of His will was purposed in Christ (vs. 9); it is in Him that all things in heaven and earth will be summed up (vs. 10); it is in Him we are called (vs. 11); it is in Him that the Ephesians, when they had heard the word of truth and believed, were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (vss. 13, 14). It is obvious that the very exercise of grace, believing and persevering grace, is grace exercised in the sphere and on the basis of union with Christ, and so the union with Christ which has its genesis in the choice of Christ before the foundation of the world, must be regarded as the prius and basis of that rather than, by way of prescience, its conditioning cause.

If this exegesis, which takes the verb "foreknow" in the diluted sense of prescience, is not acceptable, what then, we may ask, is the meaning of foreknowledge? The answer, given repeatedly by the ablest commentators, is not difficult to find. The words *yādhā* in Hebrew and *γινώσκω* in Greek are used quite frequently in a pregnant sense, that is, with a fuller meaning than that of merely perceiving or taking cognizance of a fact. It often means to "take note of," to "set regard upon," to "know with peculiar interest delight, affection, and even action." Indeed, it is the practical synonym of "to love" or "set affection upon." "The compound *προγινώσκω*," as Sanday observes, "throws back this 'taking note'

from the historic act in time to the eternal counsel which it expresses and executes” (Comm., *in loco*). So that we should paraphrase by saying, “Those whom He loved beforehand.”

This pregnant meaning of the word is in accord with contextual considerations. In every other link of this “golden chain of salvation,” as it has been called, it is a divine activity that is spoken of. God is intensely active in every other step. It is God Who predestinates; it is God Who calls; it is God Who justifies; it is God Who glorifies. It would be out of accord with this emphasis, a weakening at the point that can least afford it, to make the originative act of God less active and determinative. The notion of foresight has distinctly less of the active and distinctly more of the passive than the divinely monergistic emphasis of the whole passage appears to require. It is not a foresight of difference but a foreknowledge that makes difference to exist. It does not simply recognize existence; it determines existence. It expresses the volitional determinative counsel of God with reference to those who are the objects of it. It is sovereign distinguishing love.

If this is the meaning, the question may well be asked: What is the difference between foreknowledge and predestination in the text concerned? For, after all, some distinction there must be. The distinction is simple and significant. Foreknowledge is the setting of loving and knowing affection upon those concerned. It concentrates attention upon the love of God. But it does not of itself intimate the specific destiny to which the objects of love are appointed. That, in turn, predestination precisely does. It reveals to us the high and blessed destiny to which the objects of His distinguishing and peculiar love are assigned. And it reveals, in so doing, the greatness of His love. It is love of such a sort that it assigns them to conformity to the image of Him Who is the eternal and only-begotten Son.

When we ask the reason for the love that foreknowledge intimates and the greatness and security of which predestination expresses, we are uniquely confronted with the grandeur of the divine sovereignty. It is love that is according to the counsel of the divine will. The reason is enveloped in the mystery of His good pleasure. We are face to face with an ultimate of divine revelation and, therefore, an ultimate of human thought. This love is not something that we can rationalize or analyze. We are in its presence, as nowhere else, overwhelmed with a sense of the divine sovereignty. We are struck with amazement. It is amazing, inexplicable love. But to faith it is a reality that constrains the deepest and highest adoration. It is love, the praise of which eternity will not exhaust. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33-36)

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1. Cf. Oehler, *Old Testament Theology*, Eng. trans., vol. I, pp. 139 ff., Geerhardus Vos, *Lectures on the Theology of the Old Testament*, ch. VIII. [\[back\]](#)