

## **The sovereignty of God and pastoral care**

*James Williams*

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness ...  
The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. (Psalm 28:2, 10)<sup>1</sup>

For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Isaiah 14:27)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. (Matthew 10:29)

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

The sovereignty of God is a juicy doctrine, a hard doctrine and a wonderfully comforting and energising doctrine. As with many theological truths it takes a moment to learn but more than a lifetime to master. We profit greatly from meditating on it, rejoicing in it and exploring its relationships with other doctrines – its fingers reach everywhere, like the God it describes. Equally, pastoral care is not a shallow phenomenon, nor something that can be mastered this side of the return of Christ. It is as rich, complex, painful and subtle as people are different. Thus both poles of the title require a little unpacking before we proceed.

### **Kingly sovereignty and metaphysical sovereignty**

Two aspects of ‘sovereignty’ should be borne in mind here – the kingly sovereignty of God (his legitimate rule as the sovereign Creator of the universe) and the metaphysical sovereignty of God (his determining power over all he has made). Between them, these two aspects encapsulate most of what is indicated by the doctrine. The former aspect is much less controversial among Christians, while the latter has been at the heart of tremendous theological debates since at least the time of Pelagius and Augustine in the 4th century. A ‘high’ metaphysical view of God’s sovereignty is near the heart of Reformed theology (indeed the word ‘Calvinism’ is often used to describe such a high view) and Reformed theologians have wrestled with the issues raised by the implications of the doctrine as well as with the diversity of biblical data related to God’s actions and determining powers over the created order.<sup>2</sup> In order to reconcile the difficult texts they have often spoken of two wills in God, the revealed will and the hidden will.<sup>3</sup> The revealed will of God is a function of

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<sup>1</sup> Scriptural references in this essay will be taken from the ESV.

<sup>2</sup> A good recent attempt is Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, while an older, sterner classic is A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*. Perhaps the most thorough defences and expositions of the doctrine are found in the writings of Jonathan Edwards.

<sup>3</sup> Other distinctions or ways of describing the distinction have been used: for example decretive/perceptive, efficient/permissive and sovereign/moral. See Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 315.

what I have called his kingly sovereignty; he proclaims to his subjects, rebellious though they are, that he alone is God and that obedience to his law brings life (Psalms 1 and 2, read back to back, express this so clearly). The reach of the hidden will of God, the extent of what I have called metaphysical sovereignty, is a subject of much debate, as noted above, but for the purposes of this essay I will be assuming an extremely 'high' doctrine. I believe that this is established by the biblical witness in places such as Matthew 10 (above), John 6 and Ephesians 1, and that difficult texts have been sufficiently dealt with by Calvinists.<sup>4</sup>

### **Pastoral care and body care**

Pastoral care is often used in a weak or clerical sense to refer to the work of comforting the bereaved, depressed or anxious by the 'pastor' or 'pastoral assistant' or 'women's worker' of the church. Notwithstanding the importance of recognising each Christian's gifts and not-gifts, and being mindful of the need for sensitivity in some situations that many of us lack, this traditional sense of pastoral care is problematic for several reasons. First, it is mis-named. The pastoral role or office in Scripture is not primarily one of counsel, emotional support or friendship. The shepherds of God's people were the kings and leaders of the community (2 Samuel 5:2, 7:7; 1 Chronicles 11:2, 17:6) whose job it was to protect the sheep from scarcity, abuse and false teaching.<sup>5</sup> The way that the New Testament picks up this imagery puts the focus onto Christ as the shepherd-king of God's people.<sup>6</sup> In two places where shepherd imagery is applied to believers it is in the context of leadership (1 Peter 5:2-3, *oversight... not domineering but being examples to the flock*) and teaching (Ephesians 4:12, *shepherds and teachers*, who many commentators believe to be one group, the *pastor-teachers*) not in the context of personal crisis management or emotional support.

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Second, the kind of care for fellow Christians that naturally comes to mind when we hear the phrase 'pastoral care' is actually something that each believer should be eager to offer to others in the body of Christ. Every member has ministry to perform and while each member will have different gifts, listening skills, ability to apply Scripture incisively or provide

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<sup>4</sup> Not in the sense that everything there is to be said has been said, nor that our formulations of doctrine are sewn up, but in the sense that the Calvinist position is broadly correct and the alternatives are certainly unsatisfactory and tend towards being man-centred or importing unbiblical concepts of freedom, will and so on.

<sup>5</sup> Witness their condemnation in Ezekiel 34 and the promise there of a new shepherd (also in Ezekiel 37:24). Notice how in those passages the word 'shepherd' is coupled with the people being led or ruled (also Psalm 49:14) rather than emotionally supported. Amos 3, Micah 7 and Zechariah 11 focus on protection from attack, Psalm 28's shepherd imagery is slightly broader, and only in Psalm 23 do we approach anything sentimental in 'pastoral' care.

<sup>6</sup> The Synoptics are straightforwardly regal and leader-focussed (Matthew 2:6; 9:36; 25:32; 26:31 plus parallels in Mark, but nothing in Luke) while John gives a slightly more rounded shepherd who lays down his life but is nonetheless the master of the sheep.

comfort, the passages about care for others in the Body rarely have a restricted focus. They certainly do not have a clerical focus.<sup>7</sup> With that in mind I will call this every-member ministry ‘body care’, rather than ‘pastoral care’, and will try to avoid assuming that those offering this care are officers or employees of the church.

### **Undiluted sovereignty**

Having set the conceptual scene I will now turn to temptations to water down the sovereignty of God. This is necessary because these dangers reveal some of the heart issues that are bound up with our ongoing need for body care in a fallen world. I will then examine the use of the doctrine in body care in non-crisis situations before considering some of the thorny issues envisaged by traditional ‘pastoral care’.

Both sides to the Bible’s presentation of the sovereignty of God come under fire in the writings of theologians and in the whispers of Satan in our hearts. We are tempted to water down the kingly sovereignty of God in order to justify sin or because we are embarrassed by exclusivism. Whether in the writings of Christian advocates for ‘gay rights’ or in what we tell ourselves when we slip into sins (‘did God really say?’) it is all too easy to question God’s rule. This can happen at a high level in structures of pluralistic thought (salvation can be found outside Christ) or antinomian ethics and it can happen at a day-to-day level as we seek to justify sinful behaviour by undermining God’s rule over all aspects of all our lives. Alongside this we are tempted to water down the metaphysical sovereignty of God because we perceive its tension with our understanding and experience of freedom, and because the Calvinist view raises the question of theodicy in a stark fashion – how can God be just if he ordains everything, including our sinning?

At an intellectual level we see this happening in open theism and at a practical level we see it happening in habits of thought and conversation that permeate church life and culture. Many Christian books and conversations proceed along functionally Arminian or even Pelagian lines. The more legitimate reason for this is that we are dimly aware of the tension in Scripture; the less legitimate reason is our resistance to acknowledging God’s sovereignty as we struggle to be ‘free’. Both strands exemplify attempts, sometimes unconscious, to exalt the dignity of humanity at the expense of the dignity of God. We often want to assert human freedom in order to bolster self-esteem or species-esteem. Alas, that problematic tendency is by no means limited to aggressive humanists. The idol of human autonomy is magnetic. Perhaps particularly so in scenarios of trying to help people with problems or challenges, in situations where it is easy to proceed by ignoring the metaphysical sovereignty of God and unwittingly work with a model that proposes that we really can solve these problems with the right interventions.<sup>8</sup> For eager, well-meaning people who like to get to the answer or feel like they’ve achieved something, it can be all too easy (as I know from personal experience) to jump to ‘the solution’ and the critical pathway for dealing with other people’s problems without remembering the sovereignty of God.

Furthermore, since the sovereignty of God is not just for Christmas – by its very nature and subject matter it is comprehensive – and since the

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<sup>7</sup> In support of this position is Paul Stevens’ excellent *The Abolition of the Laity*, especially the opening chapters. Not to mention careful reading of the following passages (and their context) about body care in the context of church relationships: Galatians 6:1-2, 10; Romans 12:10, 16; Romans 15:14-16; Ephesians 4:2, 32; James 2:14-20; Philippians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14; Hebrews 10:24-5; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 John 4:11-12.

<sup>8</sup> That is the idol at the heart of all humanistic and statist solutions to sin and broken lives and communities. More education, more money for NHS drug programmes, more laws, more houses built by the government, more registers of sex offenders, more immigrants, fewer immigrants...

life of the Body is continuously relevant, we need to plug our ongoing body care into the doctrine.

### **Prayer**

First, in our prayers we pray for one another knowing that in prayer we come into the throne room of the heavenly King, who is more than able to do whatever we ask, and indeed promises to do more than we ask or even imagine (Ephesians 3:10). Our prayers are not in vain, but in confidence. We do not believe in the well-meaning but impotent God of open theism.<sup>9</sup> So we can pray in confidence, tell others that we are praying, model confident prayer (confidence in our sovereign God not in our ability to wrap him round the little finger of the moment!) and thereby build one another up as we care for one another. The sovereignty of God simultaneously and constantly reminds us of our not-sovereignty:

Don't you see that we are all weak, although there are differences among us as to physical health, intellectual abilities, and spiritual understanding? If one is stronger than another in one way or another, it is not to be a source of pride, but to be used to help the weaker person in that one's failings. However, in the very helping of another person, as well as in our own times of sorrow and trouble, we have Someone to call upon for help.<sup>10</sup>

### **Sanctification**

Second, in our struggles with sin, both our own and in helping others to resist, we take heart from the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. 'The desires of the heart are not unchangeable. Your cravings are not a given'.<sup>11</sup> The Holy Spirit can and will work a continuous miracle even in my hard heart because not even Satan can resist his will.

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### **Service**

Third, in our service for one another, the often 'small' ways we express love and encouragement to one another, we are liberated by the sovereignty of God. His kingly sovereignty gives us a context for our action and grounds the value of what we do simply as obedience, and his metaphysical sovereignty is the fabric of the actions and their consequences: *therefore my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain* (1 Corinthians 15:58). Our labour is not in vain, because God rewards those who earnestly seek him, and he considers acts of kindness to fellow Christians as though we were directly ministering to Christ himself (Matthew 25:35-40). God's purposes to bless people in Christ are furthered by the ongoing service of his people to one another – guaranteed. We act, following the cross-shaped, Christ-shaped life of service in complete trust that God will not be frustrated, even if what he ordains does not look like what we expected. Thus Romans 8:28 undergirds all that we do if and only if God is sovereign... and he is!

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Strimple's essay in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (see in particular page 144), critiques this doctrine of 'god' for the contradictions and muddles of its metaphysics and for its lack of practical value to the praying Christian.

<sup>10</sup> Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Powlison, 'How then shall we cure troubled souls?', 221.

Having considered some general principles of body care, I will now turn to a selection of the many thorny issues that confront believers: guidance, suffering, bereavement, anxiety and depression, assurance, delivering and handling rebukes, and church discipline.

### **Guidance**

What should I do now? Who should I marry? Where should I move? Should I take this job or that job? Should I serve in this capacity at church, or that? These questions confront us in the Western world today with greater intensity and assail us with greater frequency than they have any other people in history. It is a measure of how weak our trust in God sometimes is that in conversations, even at my 'Calvinist' church and in my 'Calvinist' life (!), the questions are framed as problems. They often cost us a lot of mental energy and anxiety to sort out. But whether the decision is big or small, an essential piece of the framework for making it is the sovereignty of God. His kingly sovereignty limits our choices (should I go out with this non-Christian? should I work for this publisher of pornographic magazines?) and his metaphysical sovereignty frees us up to

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act in confidence. We cannot 'miss God's will' in the sense that the phrase is often meant (though through sinfulness and attachment to idols we *can* continue to fall short of his glory, a.k.a. obedience to his kingly sovereignty) and so we should not worry.<sup>12</sup> Jesus gives clear and focussed teaching on this in Matthew 10 and Luke 12 while James 4:13-17 warns against the hubris that may spring from certain types of human confidence about the future. So, in an ongoing way, body care will involve modelling wise decision-making and at crunch points it will involve helping people to think through what it means for God to be truly (metaphysically) sovereign over their lives and their decisions. We can encourage one another to take risks (in a mature fashion) because we know that faithfulness to God's revealed

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will is what counts and that God will take care of tomorrow. That can be *so* liberating, as my wife and I gradually discovered in the course of university life and a subsequent period of real uncertainty and change. It is easier said than done, because we are confronted with fresh uncertainty all the time and so body care will mean reaffirming Christian freedom and joyful service in the light of God's sovereign plans which cannot be thwarted or missed. We can encourage our brothers and sisters who are concerned about guidance with a smile on our faces. We can stop second-guessing God and get on with obeying him in faith.

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<sup>12</sup> Jenson and Payne's *The Last Word on Guidance* provides a brief and thorough exposition of this view, helpful for all Christians to read.

## Suffering

I do not propose to solve the problem of suffering in a few lines about God's sovereignty, but there are a few clear things to lay down ready for (in the midst of!) a lifetime of undergoing suffering and trying to comfort the afflicted.

First, suffering is real and not to be made light of by a leap to a neat bit of theology or a proof-text.

Second, suffering is part of God's will for us. So, as we experience suffering we should neither be surprised nor cast into psychic disarray, fretting that we are afflicted because of particular sins or ways in which we've 'missed God's will' for us.<sup>13</sup>

Third, we are not suffering because God is unable to prevent it, but because (often mysteriously) the road to glory is a road of affliction and suffering.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4)

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7).

The purpose behind particular suffering is sometimes susceptible of detailed elucidation, and we may slowly come to such an understanding: certain trials come to us, God uses them to make us more patient, and we recognise that at the time or afterwards. In many cases, however, afflictions are not reducible to explanations in that way. That was certainly the case for Job, and indeed the book of Job refuses to give easy answers to the problem of pain. Christopher Ash suggests that in fact there is a special kind of problem that comes to a believer with a high view of God's metaphysical sovereignty – 'a unique pain' that comes because God is both loving and in control of our suffering. Ash also notes that 'a passionate longing' for God accompanies that pain in the life of the believer: because we know that God *is* just and sovereign we have reason to cry out to him.<sup>14</sup>

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Fourth, admitting the existence of the problem of pain being *there*, it is necessary to say that alternative understandings of God's sovereignty give no comfort whatsoever to the afflicted. If God is not sovereign, then there is no guarantee of an end to our suffering and there is no guarantee of a purpose to our suffering. All those fine-sounding New Testament quotes about trials are just aspirations or wishful thinking. The god of liberal Christianity, the Socinian god and even the Arminian god seem loath to do anything that will guarantee us hope and a future, whereas the sovereign God of the Bible has done and will do all that is necessary (and more!) for our blessing. The keeping power of God in the midst of our suffering is a great encouragement, the ground of our hope when we know that the affliction *is* too much for us to bear.

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<sup>13</sup> See above on guidance, and also Schaeffer, *Affliction*, 94-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ash, *Out of the Storm*, pp.52-7.

Fifth, we are thereby liberated to grieve, to call out in confusion and in pain, to express our emotional turmoil honestly to God.<sup>15</sup> That is modelled for us in the lives of people in Scripture. God promises to hear us, promises an end to our suffering, and He has not made these promises conditional on how stoical we are in the face of trials. We can trust God to uphold us; we do not have to prove our own capacity to stand up to suffering by biting back our tears.

### **Bereavement**

A special case of suffering needs to be examined, the case of bereavement. Death is the ultimate enemy, the ultimate insult, as it were, to life, to hope, to the image of God. Little wonder that it causes us so much pain, that the loss it brings us seems so final. As we try to comfort the bereaved we should not pretend that death is okay. But we know that death is not the end. Encouraging others and ourselves with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead is meaningful because God is sovereign over death. In the final analysis we do not have a tidy answer to the problems of evil, suffering and death, but God's sovereignty (kingly and metaphysical) extends over Satan, too. 'Satan, Leviathan, is a horrible monster. But he cannot go one millimetre beyond the leash on which the Lord keeps him.' This does something deeper than giving us a tidy philosophical schema, 'it opens our eyes to who God is'.<sup>16</sup> The ultimate answer to Job's extreme suffering and even to death is found in a sovereign God. He has raised Jesus from the dead and Jesus is the firstfruits of what is to come for the whole creation. God's power was not used up in the resurrection of Christ, nor was it a mere intervention from the outside, a breaking-in to an otherwise closed system over which God has no control. On the contrary, not even a sparrow falls to the ground without our father (Matthew 10:29). Right now, God sovereignly upholds everything and is the metaphysical and ontological source of our life. Kathryn Tanner neatly expresses this: 'The idea of eternal life is simply a way of continuing the affirmation of God's loving and steadfast faithfulness across the fact of death'.<sup>17</sup> She might well have added 'sovereign' to her adjectives for divine faithfulness. Thus we can have confidence that the one who can keep us through death can most certainly uphold us now as we face the deaths of loved ones.

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### **Anxiety and depression**

Anxiety and depression are things that I have more experience of than bereavement and my wife and I have felt their effects much more keenly than either of us has felt the effect of the few bereavements we have suffered. Thus I know that in the midst of the deepest melancholy, when

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<sup>15</sup> See Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 221 and *passim*; and Schaeffer, *Affliction*, 21 and *passim* for eloquent and moving discussions of believers' grief.

<sup>16</sup> Ash, *Out of the Storm*, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Tanner, quoted in Alister McGrath, *A Christian Theology Reader*, 681.

all motivation has vanished and a cold fear physically grips the chest – or in the midst of the anxiety when the head knows what the heart refuses to rest content in – that ‘doctrines’ and clear, logical conversations are not much comfort. On the other hand, what helps us to pull through the troughs if not the underlying conviction that God is in control (after all, it is at those times that we certainly know and agree that we are not)? When emotions are intense, simple affirmations of truth along with expressions of sympathy can mean a lot, and when the emotions are calmer discussing those truths is essential, not least for preparing us to go through the periods of depression and anxiety. I want to remind us again that the doctrine of God’s sovereignty is not just something we pull out when we are in a fix. We must also remember that God’s sovereignty is always partnered by his steadfast love, and his pleasure in ‘doing good to all who hope in him’.<sup>18</sup> Pure sovereignty in the absence of covenant love (or even general benevolence) is not such a comfort, as many Muslims know. So in our body care, especially to those who are in emotional turmoil, we cannot expect metaphysical sovereignty to provide comfort if it is not part of a wider affirmation of the goodness of God’s whole character.

Again, God’s sovereignty is essential as a ground to our prayers, even to our most halting, stumbling, anguished or ‘incompetent’ prayers, even for our ill-informed, partial prayers for struggling brother and sisters. The alternative inexorably becomes the ‘god’ of open theism, in whom one can have no confidence in the pit of depression, which must seriously emaciate the prayer lives of those who embrace this false teaching. Strimple quotes one theologian who writes that he is even reluctant to pray for God to do anything in the lives of other people!<sup>19</sup> What is he afraid of? That God will actually answer the prayer, thereby offending his sense of decency and the autonomy of man? By contrast, a robust doctrine of sovereignty means that we can pray honestly, knowing that we might be asking for things that are less than perfectly wise (and not what God purposes to do) but that God will do what is right and best and will not be thwarted either by our foolishness or others’ stubbornness.

The bottom line is that we do not need to fear, we have no real grounds for ultimate fear, even though when depressed we might experience fear and anxiety regarding the future.<sup>20</sup> The kinds of things that often contribute to anxiety and depression are the bewildering pressures of modern living, the expectations of others and the constant need to prove ourselves. To this we must reply that God is in control and he alone is worthy of worship. The idols of man-pleasing or self-satisfaction are false gods. Thus a robust understanding of God’s sovereignty is a check on our busyness.<sup>21</sup> Anxiety is often fuelled by material circumstances or the risk of future lack (whether of wealth, good looks, security, career, whatever). In response to this, David Powlison reminds us that God promises himself, and he is God.<sup>22</sup> He *will* deliver on his promises because he is sovereign – so magnify him and faith will grow. Minimise us and our achievements; they are not what we should treasure. God is who we should treasure, and along the journey it is the case whether we are aware of it or not that *the heart of man plans his way but the LORD establishes his steps* (Proverbs 16:9).

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<sup>18</sup> Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 179-202.

<sup>19</sup> Strimple, ‘What Does God Know?’, 144.

<sup>20</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 93-105 looks at the importance of trusting in God while miserable, though he does not focus on sovereignty as such. Psalm 42 is a big text for him.

<sup>21</sup> See Tim Chester, *The Busy Christian’s Guide to Busyness*, 101ff.

<sup>22</sup> David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 119-21. The subsequent pages are an excellent antidote to these idolatries – practise the same generosity that God displays thereby unloading your mental and spiritual attachments to possessions and earthly securities!

## Assurance

Anxiety and depression occasioned by a lack of assurance of salvation (and vice versa) constitute another special case. ‘It’s all very well knowing that God is sovereign and good, but what if he has not elected me to salvation?’ Over a period of more than two years I had the long version of that conversation with a very close friend repeatedly with variations and permutations. There is much to be said on this subject, but God’s sovereignty comes into play at several key junctures. First, one basic problem with doubts over assurance is that they are inward-looking rather than Godward. When things are teased out it is rare that the person struggling with assurance actually believes God to be bad and thus against them; it is something subjective that they lack. Even to come to the point of diagnosing the lack of assurance in oneself is something of an inward process. To meditate on the sovereignty (and love, and so on) of God is part of the outward look that is necessary for rescue from that amazing and apparently inescapable labyrinth of confusion and anxiety. Looking inwards for some sparks of life or veracity is not the best method: looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (he does both, guaranteed!) is the stance we should adopt.<sup>23</sup>

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Second, it is the sovereign power of God that keeps a believer through periods of doubt, not the calculation they perform on the apparent strength of their faith – this needs constantly bringing home to those lacking assurance. William Bridges’ seventeenth century classic *A Lifting up for the Downcast* is permeated with a high view of God’s sovereignty (both kingly and metaphysical sovereignty). In the excellent, wise and practical chapter IV (‘A lifting up in the case of lack of assurance’) the doctrine is not explicitly discussed, though it is assumed, but in chapter IX (on secondary discouragements caused by spiritual depression) he argues at length how the doctrine of particular redemption (the third of the five points of Calvinism and a logically and Scripturally necessary aspect of how we understand the sovereignty of God in redemption) is essential in the care of the downcast. The alternative, universal redemption, offers no real comfort because it (1) ‘makes void the satisfaction of Christ for actual sins’ that especially trouble ‘a poor, doubting, and afflicted soul’, (2) pulls apart Christ’s death and his intercession, the ‘great pillar of Christian comfort, which stands in the conjunction’ of the two, (3) ‘is contrary or repugnant to the free grace of God’ by making the determining factor in salvation the will of man – a terrible burden to lay on the downcast! (4) ‘destroys assurance’ by teaching that ‘a man may fall from grace as long as he lives’ instead of acknowledging the great comfort to be found in God’s sovereignty over the saints’ perseverance, (5) makes divine mercy more and

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<sup>23</sup> In their thorough and very modern ‘Calvinist’ discussion of perseverance and assurance, *The Race Set Before Us*, 23-40, Schreiner and Caneday outline in amusing diagrams what the different attitudes to Scripture’s warning passages (which trouble many who struggle with assurance) lead to.

more contingent on our performance.<sup>24</sup> Bridges navigates the psychological and theological nooks and crannies of the (almost wilful, it seems) mind and conversation of the doubting soul, undergirded by his faith in a sovereign God whose promises can be trusted.<sup>25</sup>

### **Rebuke**

The church needs protecting from false Christians and from genuine Christians; genuine Christians need protecting from themselves. Bringing a biblical rebuke to false teachers or to believers who are going astray is commanded. In this regard, ‘pastoral care’ *is* still lurking in the larger

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category of body care, since there is a presumption in Scripture that the leaders of the church will do this more than others will (though some verses assume that any believer is mandated to protect the church in this way), and that they have a ‘shepherd-like’ responsibility (1 Peter) for the protection of the flock. The kingly sovereignty of God is crucial to this because any rebuke that is given must be grounded in God’s revealed will, drawn from *his* words. If it is not, then we are just setting ourselves up as kings and lawgivers. Depending on the situation, the rebuke may have to include the fact that God’s judgement against sin is certain, an affirmation that depends on his metaphysical sovereignty. False teachers will scoff at the certainty of his coming in judgement (2 Peter 2), ironically cutting themselves off from the certainty of his coming to complete the salvation of his people (just as those who decry the ‘unfairness’ of original sin also turn away from the ‘unfairness’ of justification in Christ). While our concern for others must make us patient as we try to correct and train for righteousness, a high view of God’s sovereignty frees us from the burden of final persuasion. We have a debt of love to those within the church who may need a serious conversation or two, but we don’t need to flog dead arguments. The results are certainly God’s; not ours to achieve by force of will or psychological manipulation or power games. In the extreme case of excommunication these things are magnified. The church must aim to please God and not man, because God alone is king and because God really *is* in control.

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*The kingly sovereignty of God flows through church discipline and is a legitimate part of the very minds and corporate decisions of the leaders who have to excommunicate someone. The metaphysical sovereignty of God cannot in any way be arrogated to the church but instead grounds the confidence of church leaders that God will deal justly with the excommunicant, bringing them to repentance or protecting the church from their malign influence.*

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<sup>24</sup> Bridges, *A Lifting Up*, 251-59.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 272ff for a wonderful description of faith.

An interesting possibility to consider relates to the intellectual structure of church discipline. God's kingly sovereignty has in a sense been given to Christ, his true Son (Matthew 28:18, Psalm 2, Psalm 110, Colossians 1). The church as Christ's body on earth participates in some way in this authority via the apostles.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19).

You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28-30).

Thus the kingly sovereignty of God flows through church discipline and is a legitimate part of the very minds and corporate decisions of the leaders who have to excommunicate someone. The metaphysical sovereignty of God cannot in any way be arrogated to the church but instead grounds the confidence of church leaders that God will deal justly with the excommunicant, bringing them to repentance or protecting the church from their malign influence.

## Conclusion

Every day of our lives God's sovereign power sustains us. Knowledge of that and reflection on that liberates and inspires us in our prayers, our rebukes, our acts of love and in moments or years of depression and anxiety. In everything from salvation to putting food on the table we are liberated from the need to try to guarantee results. We do not need to be frozen in indecision or in fear that it might go wrong or that we might not get what we wanted. While that might be true that things will go wrong from our perspective for a limited time, we trust in a sovereign God who is guaranteed to do the best for his people and for his name. He alone is God!

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