

Counseling and the Sovereignty of God

by Jay E. Adams*

A fourteen-year-old girl is abducted by a married man, the father of three children, who carries her off to an unknown destination. During the horror of the uncertain days that follow, what can sustain her parents? What is the supreme fact to which the Christian counselor can appeal that will bring hope and some measure of relief?

A family of seven, barely scraping along on the meager salary of a blue-collar worker in this inflationary era, is suddenly plunged into disaster by the closing down of the plant at which he works and his inability to obtain other work. They face the problem of survival amidst the uncertainties of a volatile world economy poorly managed by greedy and godless men. On what basis do they try to go on? Is there any use? Is there any meaning to it all? Any hope? To help them understand and cope with this dilemma, what does their pastor tell them? To what bottom-line truth should he point?

There is but one—the sovereignty of God.

Knowing that God knows, that God cares, that God hears their prayers, and that God can and will act in His time and way to work even in this for good to His own ... *that*, and nothing less than that conviction, can carry them through. And what that hope may be reduced to is: a confident assurance that God is sovereign.

It has always been so.

When the problem of evil burned like an inextinguishable fire in his bones, and in the frustration of his situation he cried for a personal hearing before God in order to vindicate himself and discover why he had become the object of such pain and sorrow, Job received one answer, and one alone. From out of the whirlwind came the final unequivocal word to be spoken concerning human suffering:

I do in all the world according to my own good pleasure. *I* scattered the stars in the sky as *I* saw fit, and *I* created the beasts of the field and stream according to *my* desires. Job—where were you when all this took place? And who are you to question what I do with my own? I am sovereign.

* This lecture was delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary, October 10, 1975 on the occasion of Dr. Adams's inauguration as Professor of Practical Theology. It later became a chapter in *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (USA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976, pages 7–20).

In discussing the outcome of the remarkable course of history that through slavery and temptation and imprisonment at length raised him to the second highest political position in the world, Joseph assured his brothers: “You did not send me here but God did” (Genesis 45:8). And in a further affirmation, that was destined to become the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament, he declared: You planned evil against me, but God planned it for good (Genesis 50:20). His firm conviction of this truth, doubtless growing stronger throughout the span of those hard days, was what made it all endurable.

When Moses protested that he could not undertake the task to which God was calling because of his slowness of speech, God did not acquiesce, argue or plead. He simply asserted His sovereignty in powerful words by means of a stinging statement: “Who made man’s mouth?” (Exodus 4:11).

Under the most extreme sort of pressure to engage in idolatrous worship, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (according to the words of their unflinching testimony) rested solely upon the sovereignty of God: “Our God,” they said, “is able to deliver us” (Daniel 3:17). And true to their word, in what may have been a preincarnate Christophany, that God in sovereign loving care walked through the fire with them.

In addition to these, others, who endured taunts and blows, fetters and prison, who were stoned to death, tortured, sawed in two, run through with the sword—others, I say, in faith rested upon the promises of a sovereign God whose Word they believed to be true and whose promise they considered to be unfailing. Threat of death itself was not enough to shake their confidence in a *sovereign* God.

Yes, it has always been that way; the sovereignty of God is the ultimate truth that meets human need. That is why the pastoral counselor, above all men, must believe this truth and search out its implications for each and every counseling situation.

And ... that is why today, in the midst of the many modern crises that individuals and families undergo, the pastoral counselor who most assuredly affirms the sovereignty of God will bring the most significant help of all. Freudian fatalism, Rogerian humanism and Skinnerian evolutionary theory all fall woefully short of this help. Nothing less than this great truth can satisfy the longing heart or calm the troubled soul.

That is the way that it always has been, and this is the way that it always will be.

A counselor’s theology, and his use of it in counseling, then, is neither a matter of indifference nor a question of insignificance. Rather, it is an issue of the most profound importance. Truth and godliness, the reality of God and the welfare of His people are inseparable. The godly man, who copes with life, is always the one who has appropriated God’s truth for his life.

Take, for instance, the question on the lips of nearly every counselee—Why? Why did *this* have to happen? Why did it have to happen to *me*? Why did it have to happen *now*? Why? Why? Why?

Evolutionary explanations do not satisfy; they only aggravate. If man is no more than an animal, what hope is there? And of what significance is any attempt to change? The only value is the preservation of the herd.

Deistic determinism is no better. According to those who espouse such views, suffering merely follows as the inevitable consequence of the onward motion of impersonal law, in which the plight of the individual does not touch the heart of God since He has safely distanced Himself from His creation.

Existential embarrassment over the equivocation of a call to an authentic acknowledgment of the *absurd* can do no more than increase the pain.

Arminian answers that intimate that the problem may be a cause of frustration to God as well as to the counselee serve only to point the discouraged, defeated disciple to a pathway that leads ultimately to atheism.

The only explanation that can fully set to rest this insistent human inquiry into the ultimate reason for the existence of misery and death is that the all-powerful God who created and sustains this universe for His own good ends sovereignly has decreed it.

By this reply, simultaneously are swept aside all notions of man in the clutches of a blind, impersonal force, every concept of a weak and unworthy deity who is to be pitied along with the rest of us because He can control His runaway world no longer, and any lingering suspicion that the destiny of a human being is nothing more than a move in a cosmic chess game in which he is as ruthlessly dispensed with as if he were a pawn—heedless of the welfare of any other piece than the King. He *is* sovereign; all *does* exist for the King. But this kingly God of creation plays the game according to His own rules. He is altogether sovereign and, therefore, the Originator of the game as well—rules and all. And as He faultlessly makes each move across the board, His strategy for winning the game involves the blessing of His loyal subjects as well as His own glory. And each subject, whose every hair is numbered, moves as He moves in a responsible manner that He has sovereignly ordained.

So, you can see that a firm dependence upon the sovereignty of God is a dynamic concept in counseling—one that makes a difference, *the* difference—and, therefore, one that must undergird every effort at counseling. If, indeed, God is sovereign, ultimately all turns out well. All problems have solutions; every blighting effect of evil will be erased and all wrongs righted. The counselor who knows God as sovereign has found fertile ground in which to plant his pastoral ministry. He will soon send down a taproot through which he will draw the living waters of life for many thirsty souls. Rooted and grounded in this foundational doctrine, his standpoint allows him freedom to view and to evaluate both the grand sweep of things and the plight of a poor sinner agonizing in the throes of personal grief. The sovereignty of God is the ground of hope and order in all that he does in counseling. It is the basis for all assurance that God's scriptural promises hold true. It is the cornerstone of Christian counseling.

But, before going any further, let me warn against two distinct, but dangerous, tendencies of those who, while superficially holding the truth of the sovereignty of God, draw faulty implications from that great teaching. The biblical doctrine lends no support whatever either to those who, with near profanity, so glibly cry, "Praise the Lord, anyway" in all sorts of inappropriate situations, nor does it provide comfort for mechanistic fatalists who wish to discount the idea of personal responsibility before God.

Taking the first matter seriously, there are at least two things to be said. On the one hand, counselors must affirm clearly that sin exists, and—along with it—that "misery" of which the

catechisms so meaningfully speak. There can be no Christian Science-like denial of the stark tragedy of human existence since Adam. There can be no facile self-deception aimed at alleviating misery by attempting to conceal its true nature beneath a heap of pious expletives, symbolized in the phrase "Praise the Lord, anyway." This vain effort, in the end, only lets one down hard. The counselor must give full recognition to sin and its terrifying effects if he wishes to be a faithful minister of the Lord Christ. After all, the Man of *Sorrows*, who was acquainted with *grief*, also believed in the sovereignty of God. Yet, He wept.

On the other hand, with equal vigor, every counselor worthy of the name of Christ must impress upon his counselees the truth that the existence of a sovereign God is truly a cause for great joy and hope in the midst of tragedy and sorrow. For if God is sovereign, life is not absurd; it has design, meaning and purpose.

Unlike existentialists, who vainly try to find meaning in man himself, the Christian pastoral counselor will show that this misdirected humanistic viewpoint is what constitutes the unbearable *angst* of which they so powerfully speak. Instead, the counselor directs the counselee's attention from creatures who, in Adam, have done little better than to get themselves involved in a kind of global Watergate affair before God. It is to the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the universe, rather than to fallen creatures, that he bids the counselees to look for the final explanation that he seeks.

Apart from such a God, who knows the end from the beginning (because He ordained it), human beings cannot explain their existence because they have no eschatology; death ends all. But, in Him, there is a *denouement*. There will be an ultimate disclosure of the unrevealed particulars of His divine purpose. Those things that now so often seem to be but meaningless functions in the course of human activity will all come alive with significance. Each piece of the puzzle at last will be put in place—the dark purples of despair, the fiery reds of anger and affliction, the sickly yellows—and we shall be permitted to view the whole as it now exists in the plan of God alone. The comforting conviction that there is a beautiful, meaningful picture on the cover of life's puzzle box, to which each piece of distress and pain bears a faithful resemblance, belongs solely to those who affirm the sovereignty of God. Without such a conviction, there is no hope.

Likewise, one can escape the fear of a disorderly world, relentlessly rolling on like an avalanche that is out of control, only by an adherence to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Because of the certainty of order and control that the doctrine requires, even crazy and bizarre behavior in human beings is not inexplicable to the Christian counselor. Behind its baffling facade lies an etiology that can be traced immediately to personal rebellion against God and His laws, or (as a physiological consequence of Adam's sin) may extend all of the way back to Eden. Either way he knows that deviant human thought and action is not the result of mere chance. It is explicable in terms of a violated covenant and the judgment of a personal God.

Thus hope wells up in the heart of every man to whom God reveals Himself savingly, for there is One who came to pay the penalty for the broken law and to keep covenant with the Father. Because of His perfect fulfillment of all that God demands, men may be saved here and hereafter from the penalty and from the grip of sin. Ultimately, the evil consequences of sin will be removed altogether from the lives and from the environment of the redeemed. Indeed, so great will be the effects of salvation that those who were created lower than the angels will in Christ be raised far above by His grace. They will share with Him in His glory. So, you see, there is meaning in it all,

after all. Where sin abounded, grace more fully abounds. Even the absurd and the bizarre take on meaning as the foil against which the glory of God's grace may best be displayed.

And, lastly, there is hope also in the fact of God's sovereignty because His is a personal rule over His subjects. The atonement, by which the redeemed were reconciled to God, was no impersonal or abstract transaction, as if Christ dies for "mankind." He is a *personal* Savior, who loved particular individuals and shed His blood for them.

Cicero, in *De Natura Deorum* (2:66), wrote: "Magna dei curant, parva neglegunt." ("The gods are concerned with important things; trifles they ignore.") No such God is the sovereign God of our salvation. A sick child was of no consequence to Venus or Aphrodite. Larger questions—like some of the ongoing rivalries and disputes with the other gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheons—occupied their time and attention. Such gods brought no comfort or hope to men, because they were not sovereign. Much of creation slipped by beyond their purview.

But there is hope in the presence of the true Sovereign because He is in control of everything. Not a sparrow falls without Him. He is the God of trifles. Jesus taught us by His works and words what this sovereign God is like. The way that He put it was: "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

And, it is in that very Gospel of John in which these words are recorded that we are so pointedly shown Jesus' deep concern for individuals—Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the blind man, Lazarus, Mary and Martha.... It is in the same Gospel that we hear Him speak of His shepherdly concern; a concern that extends to the hundredth sheep and that calls each by name. The sovereign Shepherd of Israel is great enough to care about trifles—like us. He labors under none of the limitations of the classical gods. Nor does He stand at a deistic distance in disinterest. This sovereign God is the Father of a redeemed family over which He exercises total care and concern. There is plenty of hope for every Christian counselor in that.

Moving now along a continuum full of factors that might command our attention, I suggest that we pause for a moment to urge every pastoral counselor to remember the sobering fact that the existence of a God who is sovereign neither removes nor lessens, but (rather) *establishes* human responsibility to that God. If He who is sovereign over all men and over all their actions has determined that they shall be responsible to Him—then that settles it. That is how it is when a sovereign Creator speaks. It does not matter whether it is difficult to reconcile responsibility with sovereignty or not, because that is precisely what God decreed: Men shall be responsible to Him! And if He sovereignly determined to create man as a being fashioned in His image and governed by His moral law ... so be it! That is the prerogative of a sovereign God.

Shall the pot say to the potter, "Why have you made me thus?" When you stop to think about it, to whom could one be more responsible than to the One who created him and sustains his every breath? To put it another way—because God is sovereign, He is the *only* one who is not responsible to another. Did not the Lamb of God Himself, who according to the sovereign plan of God was "slain from the foundation of the world," nevertheless declare, "It is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness"?

That statement presupposes responsibility.

It should be eminently clear, then, that God's sovereignty neither encourages the utterance of pietistic platitudes like "Praise the Lord, anyway" as the solution to the problem of human suffering, nor does it leave us unaccountable. Indeed, it is this very truth that *demand*s of us nothing less than a realistic, eyes-wide-open response to the existential situations of life, for God will hold us answerable both as counselors and counselees.

All counseling that measures up to the biblical standard must fully acknowledge both the tragedy of sin and the fact of human responsibility; it must reckon with God's ultimate purpose to glorify Himself in His Son and in a people redeemed by His grace. While all things will turn out well, they do so, not apart from but precisely because of the responsible action of the Son of God who came and actually dies for those who from all eternity had been ordained to eternal life.

It should be obvious that I have not attempted to open up the many practical implications of the doctrine of God's sovereignty in any concrete way. The doctrine is so foundational that the number of such implications is large. I wish rather to invite others of you to join with me in extracting the ore from this virtually untouched mine.

The sovereignty of God has been taught and preached, largely in an abstract way—but little has been done to explore the applications of this doctrine for life, and (therefore) for counseling. Moreover, Christian counseling has failed to measure up to its name principally because its early theorists were unskilled in exegesis and theology. Largely, they came to counseling through a background of psychology. Yet as important as psychology (rightly conceived and practiced) may be, it can never be foundational to counseling, but only ancillary.

Counseling—as we shall see—has to do with the counselee's relationship to persons. God and all the others who people his horizon are its concern. Only incidentally does the counselor concern himself with other matters. Clearly love for God and one's neighbor is a prime interest of the minister of the Word.

That is why here at Westminster Theological Seminary over the past ten years the attempt has been made to teach pastoral counseling from the starting point of God's sovereignty. In everything that has been done and every word that has been written, it has been our goal to take that doctrine seriously, following its implications obediently, no matter where they might lead. Often the road has proven both difficult and unpopular; yet travel along it always has been satisfying. Temptations to veer to the right or to the left have been numerous. It has not always been easy to resist them. God alone knows how well we have succeeded in doing so.

"But," you inquire, "can you tell me more about the ways in which the doctrine of God's sovereignty has affected the theory and practice of the teaching of counseling at Westminster?" The basic answer to your question is this: Both theory and practice have been affected in *every* way.

But to become more concrete, let me mention what I consider to be the most significant influence the doctrine has exerted, an influence that has had marked effect upon both theory and practice. Early in the development of a counseling stance from which to teach, the question of encyclopedia arose. To what task does the pastoral counselor address himself? In counseling does he handle a very narrow band of "spiritual" or "ecclesiastical" problems, or is his field of legitimate activity substantially larger? Is his counseling activity bordered (and thereby limited) by others

from clearly distinct disciplines, namely psychologists and psychiatrists (whose titles, curiously enough, might be translated—not too freely—as “soul specialists” and “soul healers”)?

Over the years the question always has been kept in view. Gradually, the Scriptures have driven us to an answer; an answer that one hardly would have chosen by himself. The conviction has grown that it is God’s answer. And when God speaks by His inerrant Word, what He says is *sovereign*.

Because of the teaching of the Scriptures, one is forced to conclude that much of clinical and counseling psychology, as well as most of psychiatry, has been carried on without license from God and in autonomous rebellion against Him. This was inevitable because the Word of the sovereign God of creation has been ignored.

In that Word are “all things pertaining to life and godliness.” By it the man of God “may be fully equipped for every good work.” And it is that Word—and only that Word—that can tell a poor sinner how to love God with all of the heart, and mind, and soul, and how to love a neighbor with the same depth of concern that he exhibits toward himself. On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets. They are the very summation of God’s message to the world and to His redeemed people. And, as a consequence, it is the calling of the shepherds of God’s flock (par excellence) to guide the sheep into the pathways of loving righteousness for His Name’s sake. Putting it that way—that God’s Name is at stake—shows the importance of this task.

“All of that sounds quite biblical and ... it all sounds very innocuous,” you may say. “But,” you continue, “I don’t see where that puts psychologists and psychiatrists in conflict with God. You’d better explain that one more fully.” OK. Let me screw the two things together for you so that you can see the interconnection that leads to the conflict.

In assigning the pastor the task of helping sheep to learn how to love God and neighbor, God has spoken sovereignly. If this is the pastor’s task, clearly delineated in the Bible, then he must pursue it. This puts him in the counseling business. But, immediately, upon surveillance of the field, he discovers all sorts of other persons already out there trying to do similar things and saying that to them, not to him, belongs the task of counseling. There are competitors in the vicinity. Indeed, even a cursory investigation indicates that they are not merely in the vicinity but in the sheepfold itself. And, as a result, the true shepherd soon discovers that they are leading the sheep astray.

“But,” you ask, “is there no basic difference between the work done by psychologists and psychiatrists and that done by a pastor?” There is no way to distinguish between the work of the pastor as it is sovereignly ordered in the Scriptures and that which is attempted by others who lay claim to the field. Persons who come to counselors for help are persons who are having difficulty with persons. They don’t come complaining, “You see, I’ve got this problem with my carburetor.” That is why love for God (*the Person*) and for one’s neighbor are such vital factors in counseling. Nothing could be more central to a pastor’s concern. Yet, it is with this concern about persons that psychologists and psychiatrists also busy themselves. They want to change persons and the relationships between persons.

I contend, therefore, that it is not the pastor who is responsible for the overlap; it is the psychologist on the one side, who has moved his fence over on to the pastor’s territory, and the psychiatrist on the other, who also has encroached upon his property. Unfortunately, until recently

pastors have been all too willing to allow others to cut their grass. At long last, largely under the impetus of the Westminster emphasis, there has been a noticeable change in attitude by conservative pastors everywhere.

“Now, wait a minute. Are you saying that psychology and psychiatry are illegitimate disciplines? Do you think that they have no place at all?”

No, you misunderstand me. It is exactly not that. Remember, I said clearly that they live next door to the pastor. My problem with them is that they refuse to stay on their own property. I have been trying to get the pastor to mow his lawn to the very borders of this plot.

Psychology should be a legitimate and very useful neighbor to the pastor. Psychologists may make many helpful studies of man (e.g., on the effects of sleep loss). But psychologists—with neither warrant nor standard from God by which to do so—should get out of the business of trying to change persons. Psychology may be descriptive but transgresses its boundaries whenever it becomes prescriptive. It can tell us many things about what man does but not about what he should do.

Similarly, the neighbor who lives on the other side of the pastor’s lot could be a most welcome one with whom the pastor could live in real harmony were he satisfied to play croquet in his own yard. Psychiatrists, for the most part, are a tragic lot. I say this not only because among the professions psychiatrists have the highest suicide rate, but more fundamentally because they are persons highly trained in skills that they hardly use, and instead spend most of their time doing what they were never adequately trained to do. In the United States psychiatrists are physicians, who (for the most part) use their medical training to do little else than prescribe pills. Freud, himself, acknowledged that a background in medicine is not required for the practice of psychiatry. That is why in other parts of the world psychiatrists are not necessarily medical persons. And that is why clinical and counseling psychologists do the same things as psychiatrists without specialized training as physicians.

The pastor recognizes the effects of Adam’s sin upon the body; he, therefore, has no problem working side-by-side with a physician who treats the counselee’s body as he counsels him about its proper use. From the days of Paul and Luke, pastors have found kinship with medical personnel. Why, then, does the psychiatrist present a problem? Certainly it is not because of his medical background. The problem is that he will not stay in his own backyard. He keeps setting up his lawn chairs and moving his picnic table onto the pastor’s property.

If he were to use his medical training to find medical solutions to the truly organic difficulties that affect attitudes and behavior, the pastor would be excited about his work. But the difficulty arises as the psychiatrist—under the guise of medicine—attempts to change values and beliefs. That is not medicine. The pastor is disturbed at having residents from the adjoining lots digging up his backyard to plant corn and tomatoes. He does not object to—but rather encourages—all such activity in the yards next door.

So, in effect, the issue boils down to this: the Bible is the textbook for living before God and neighbor, and the pastor has been ordained to teach and guide God’s flock by it. When others take over the work and substitute other textbooks, conflict is inevitable. The most recent change has occurred because the pastor has taken a fresh look at his title deed and resurveyed the land. In the process he has discovered an incredible amount of usurpation by others. He dare not abandon the

tract to which God in the Scriptures has given him a clear title. The idea is not to destroy psychology or psychiatry; pastors simply want psychologists and psychiatrists to cultivate their own property.

In all of this the sovereignty of God has played the conspicuous role. So often, however, when thinking of His sovereignty, we restrict our concerns to the matter of the relation of regeneration to faith. But it is not only in regeneration that God is sovereign; He is sovereign in sanctification as well. If, in order to accomplish His purposes in the believer He has given His Word to be ministered by His church in the power of His Spirit, that is how these purposes must be accomplished; there can be no other way. And pastors, as key persons in all of this, must see to it that this is the way that things are done—whether it pleases others or not. The ministry of the Word to believers in counseling can be dispensed with no more readily than the ministry of the Word in preaching.

In conclusion, therefore, I wish to emphasize the fact that what has been going on in the Practical Theology Department at Westminster in the area of counseling has issued from a tight theological commitment. The position that has been developed and articulated is the direct result of Reformed thinking. Those who hold to other theological commitments, it might be noted, have viewed the problems in the field quite differently. Because of their failure to acknowledge the sovereignty of God at other points, they cannot hold the line against the defection of autonomous thought and action in counseling either. So, if there is anything that has been done here over the last decade that is worthy of mention, it is but the natural outcome of the faithful efforts of those who labored before. For it was they who, against unthinkable odds, held tenaciously to, and in clarity and with power delineated, the scriptural truth of the sovereignty of God in all things. The principles that they taught us we now are making every effort to apply to the task of Christian counseling.

We call upon you—whoever you are, and in whatever way you can—to join with us in this work. It has just begun. During the next ten years far more can be accomplished if you do. The needs are great, the opportunities are numerous; the human resources are few. We would stagger at the enormity of the undertaking but for one fact. It is a fact that brings hope and confidence; a fact that is the source of all humility and gratitude.

It is the fact that God is *Sovereign*.