

Significance Of The Old Testament Concept Of “The Sovereignty Of God” In National Elections

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God in relation to national elections. It identified the sovereignty of God which refers to God’s “absolute right to do all things according to His own good pleasure as a valid Biblical concept. On the other hand, the right to vote is inherent in the Biblical view of man’s freedom to choose and responsibility for the ensuing consequence. The concept of man being created in the image of God (imago Dei) gives him some attributes of God albeit like a shadow, including the ability to choose.

The discussions considered the views of several theologians including John Calvin, Karl Barth and Charles Spurgeon. It concluded that indeed God is Sovereign and man is free to choose his leaders through elections. However, the outcome of elections works together to fulfil the purpose and will of God in His creation. This is not to say there is divine approval for evil leaders because God will judge all human leaders.

The paper made recommendations to the Christian Church to teach the concepts to its members in order to guide their attitude and participation in national elections whilst submitting and praying for governmental authority that emerges from elections in spite of their personal preferences.

INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty refers to the “quality or state of being sovereign, or having supreme power, or authority”. In the Bible, the sovereignty of God refers to God’s “absolute right to do all things according to His own good pleasure”¹. The sovereignty of God has been an important topic in theological discussion over decades. Three words that are closely associated with God’s sovereignty are ‘foreknowledge’, ‘election’ and ‘predestination’². These concepts point to God’s knowledge of events before they occur (1 Peter 1:2; Romans 8:29) NKJV; His divine choice from among mankind for Himself and purposes; and His ability to bring to pass the things that He has determined beforehand (Ephesians 1:5) NKJV. The Sovereignty of God therefore points to the

idea that “all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God”³.

One question that emerges in light of the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God is the place of human responsibility. For example, in light of the truth of election and predestination, “how can salvation be solely a work of God (Ephesians 2:8-9) NKJV but a person be held responsible for believing or not believing? How can those two go together?”⁴. Another question that one may ask is when individuals vote to choose their leaders in an election, is the outcome a function of human choice or Divine Sovereignty? The latter is the focus of this paper – the significance of the sovereignty of God in national elections.

¹Dictionary.com. n.d. *Sovereignty*. Accessed April 27, 2016.

²Herbert Lockyer. *All the Doctrines of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964. pp 151-153.

³John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion - Book First - Of the Knowledge of God the Creator.” 1996

⁴John MacArthur, *Twin Truths: God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Responsibility*. 2013

NATIONAL ELECTIONS

National election is the process adopted by most nations of the world to select their leaders. The preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana states that:

“In the Name of the Almighty God, we the people of Ghana in exercise of our natural and inalienable right to establish a framework of government, which shall secure for ourselves, and posterity the blessings of liberty, equality of opportunity and prosperity; ... and in solemn declaration and affirmation of our commitment to; ... the Principle that all powers of Government spring from the Sovereign Will of the People; The Principle of Universal Adult Suffrage ...”⁵

Article 42 of the Constitution confers the right to vote on “every citizen of Ghana of eighteen years of age or above and of sound mind”. This point to an arrangement where citizens of the country take responsibility in choosing their own leaders. Does God play any role in this arrangement? Where there is bad governance and abuse of power by elected officials are not the people responsible for their choice?

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

The Bible teaches human responsibility and the freedom of choice of individuals. According to Genesis 1:26-27, man was made in the image of God (Imago Dei). According to Richard Middleton⁶, the Hebrew reference to the “Image” (tselem) and “Likeness” (d’mut) convey the idea of an object similar to, or the representation of something else or not identical to it. Furthermore, the word Image and Likeness are interchangeable. They contend that the New Testament word for Image (Eikōn) conveys virtually the same meaning as Hebrew. Both languages indicate that God created humans to be similar to himself but not identical to himself. Therefore, from Biblical

⁵Republic of Ghana. 1992. *THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA*

⁶Richard Middleton, *Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto)*,

perspectives, human beings are in some sense both like and unlike the God who made them.

Mention could be made of four theologians who have been especially significant in contributing to the doctrine of the Imago Dei. They are Irenaeus, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Karl Barth. Of these Karl Barth⁷ appears to have provided a more convincing explanation. Karl Barth challenged the biblical anthropology of scholars like Irenaeus, Calvin, and Aquinas. He did not hold that the Imago Dei was something that was in people, like the soul, as Calvin did, but it is something that people are. He reasoned that people were created as men and women whose purpose is to be in communion with one another as the Trinitarian Godhead is with each other. With such arguments, Christianity has been influenced by four definitions of the Imago Dei⁸:

- (1) The Image of God as Similarity: People's similarity with God, it is argued, is passed down from Adam.
- (2) The Image of God as Counterpart: The proponents emphasize that God primarily created people for fellowship.
- (3) The Image of God as Dominion: Ruling over creation is the essence of the Imago Dei to some who subscribe to this definition.
- (4) The Image of God as Representation: The term describes people as God's representatives on earth.

Selwyn Hughes has suggested that being made in the image of God means that the Almighty designed man in a way that something of God is reflected in man by way of the ability to relate, think, feel and choose.⁹ Man's freedom to choose is demonstrated in Adam's choice of names for animals (Genesis 2:19), choice of name for the

⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956, p.60

⁸David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*. London: Collins Press, 1973.

⁹Selwyn Hughes. *Christ Empowered Living*. Farnharm: CWR, 2002.

woman (Genesis 2:23) and freedom to choose obedience or disobedience to God (Genesis 2:16-17). Even though man has the freedom to choose, he does not have the freedom to choose the consequences of his choices¹⁰. When Adam and Eve chose to disobey, they faced the consequences set by God.

As far as national elections are concerned, man exercises his power to choose by way of selecting the candidate(s) to vote for. This is consistent with the biblical concept of human responsibility and the freedom to choose as an innate characteristic of man. This notwithstanding, the Bible clearly teaches how the volitional actions of man culminates in the fulfillment of the will and purposes of God demonstrating His Sovereignty in the affairs of men.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN THE AFFAIRS OF MAN

The story of Nebuchadnezzar clearly points to the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon declared thus upon his restoration to the throne after losing his senses and becoming like a wild beast of the earth for seven years:

“... I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?”¹¹”

Concerning the revelation of what was to come to the King, Daniel stated thus:

“This decision is by the decree of the watchers, And the sentence by the word of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives

it to whomever He will, And sets over it the lowest of men.”¹²

Another illustration is how the Lord caused the fulfilment of the prophecy that Jesus Christ would be born in Bethlehem of Judea (Micah 5:2) through the enactment of a decree by Augustus Caesar for a census. It was this decree by a secular monarch that compelled Joseph to take his pregnant wife, Mary from Galilee where they lived to Bethlehem in Judea where Jesus Christ was born according to the will of God (Luke 2:1-7). The Lord God is Sovereign and He steers the affairs of men to accomplish His own purposes.

The Sovereignty of God is revealed in His name. According to the ancient Semites, the common noun for god “el” was a shared name with lesser gods of their neighbours, but they used it in the impersonal sense of “Power”¹³. Thus their God was all powerful. As used in Prov. 3:27, “el” denotes both power and the prerogative to decide on when and how to use the power. A. W. Pink has remarked that “Divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as in name, that He is on the Throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things ‘after the counsel of His own will’ (Ephesians 1:11)¹⁴”.

There are many scriptures that relate to the Divine Sovereignty:

“I know you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted” Job 42:2

“...he does whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the ocean depths” Psalm 135: 6

“...certainly you must have heard! Long ago I worked it out, in ancient times I planned it and now I am bringing it to pass”. 2 Kings 19:25

“... remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and

¹²Daniel 4:17 (New King James Version)

¹³Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

¹⁴A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*. Swingel: Reiner Publications, 1968, p. 27

¹⁰Selwyn Hughes, *7 Laws of Spiritual Success*. Farhnharm: CWR, 2008.

¹¹Daniel 4:34–35 (New King James Version)

there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’.(Isaiah 46:9-10)NKJV

*‘I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?’*Isaiah 43:13

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS AND GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY

The Bible does not have examples of democratic elections as we have them today because of the monarchical nature of governmental authority at that period. However, it is replete with examples of the choice of leaders and the view Christians should hold towards established governments.

The Apostle Paul teaches that human government is instituted by God, and no government exists apart from His will.

‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.’ Romans 13:1-2¹⁵

It is helpful to note that Paul wrote this section on subjection to human government when the infamous Nero was Emperor. Those were dark days for Christians who suffered immense persecution. However, the persecution of the early church served the purpose of God in spreading the Christian faith rapidly around the world¹⁶.

The following scriptures relate to the Sovereignty of God in establishing governmental authority:

By me kings reign...— Proverbs 8:15

...he removes kings, and sets up kings...— Daniel 2:21

Then God removed Saul and made David their king...— Acts 13:22

No one... can exalt themselves. It is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.— Psalms 75:6-7

...the Most High has power over human kingdoms. He gives them to whomever he wishes.— Daniel 4:17

The Sovereignty of God in the establishment of governmental authority is clearly biblical. Further, the Bible teaches submission to governmental authority to the end that anyone who disobeys or rebels against the government is disobeying and rebelling against what God has ordained except if the government orders him to sin or to compromise his loyalty to Jesus Christ (Act 5:29). Our responsibility to honour and submit to the government of our country is not dependent on whether or not we voted for the leaders or like them. It is simply an institution created by God and it is God’s will that we obey authority.

The foregoing does not mean that God approves of all that human rulers do. He certainly does not approve of corruption, brutality, and tyranny. In fact, human rulers shall be judged by God (John 12:31). Kenneth Boa¹⁷ says that all human government is not inherently evil. This is rightly so if we refer to the explanation of the Imago Dei as discussed above. We realise that man was given dominion over all things and so represents God on earth. Furthermore, the structures of authority in any particular political system are not per se wicked as all human governmental authority ultimately emanates from God. Government is used for evil because people are sinful.

Some opponents of this Biblical view of the role of God in the establishment of governmental authority argue that all government is demonic, with reference to Luke 4:6, where we find that Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said;

‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.’

¹⁵Revised Standard Version (RSV)

¹⁶Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 1

¹⁷Kenneth Boa, *‘God, I Don't Understand: Answers to Difficult Questions of the Faith’*. Colorado: Springs, 2007

There have been stories of some politicians using fetish priests and all sorts of charms to seek the favour of the populace in elections. All these spring out of the sinful nature of man. Yet, we know there is no reason to trust what Satan says, just as Jesus said in John 8:44:

“There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Having established the Divine perspective on established governments and authority, we look at the human responsibility in the choice of leaders. In Deuteronomy 1:13, Moses said:

“Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.”

In Exodus 18:21, Jethro counselled Moses thus:

“Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens”.

John Calvin is quoted by Joel McDurmon¹⁸ to have commented on these verses:

“Hereby it is shown to us that when we have to elect men to hold public office, we must choose them with discretion and not take on the fly those who thrust themselves in first. Neither must they be taken for favour or for some vanity that appears good, but that God presides over the election and that such men may be selected as are known to be appropriate to exercise the estate to which they are called.”

Charles Spurgeon is quoted by McDurmon to have advised that:

“Let us whenever we shall have the opportunity of using the right of voting, use it as in the sight of Almighty God, knowing that for everything we shall be brought into

account, and for that amongst the rest, seeing that we are entrusted with it ... and that if at the next election we should choose wrong governors we shall have nobody to blame but ourselves, however wrongly they may afterwards act, unless we exercise all prudence and prayer to Almighty God to direct our hearts to a right choice in this matter”¹⁹

It is clear that there is human responsibility in elections and the Christian has to take care and prayerfully reflect upon the choices they make during elections. However, once the outcome has been determined, the Christian must submit him/herself to the government which emerges even if it is contrary to their choice because the Sovereignty of God is what determines the outcome of a national election.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussions clearly identify two biblical truths which together is mysterious in that, they appear to be contradictory: Divine Sovereignty and Human responsibility in national elections and the establishment of human responsibility. However, each of these concepts have been discussed and identified to be true. God is Sovereign and man is free to choose its leaders through elections. However, the outcome of elections works together to fulfil the purpose and will of God in His creation. This is not to say there is divine approval for evil leaders because God will judge all human leaders.

The conclusions drawn from this discussion culminated in recommendations for prayer for national leaders and those in authority. If God is not sovereign, there is no point in praying because He is unable to answer most prayers. And if men have no responsibility, there is no point in praying because nothing we ask or do will affect God’s plan in the least. Since human responsibility

¹⁸ Joel McDurmon, “Election Day advice for the Christian (from John Calvin)” Feb 2016

¹⁹ Joel McDurmon, “Charles Spurgeon on Elections and Voting” Oct 2012

relates to our role, we need to attend to it. The Church is also encouraged to teach the doctrines of Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility in the establishment of governmental authority to help its members exercise their constitutional right to vote bearing in mind the Biblical responsibilities placed on them.

How we live every day in relation to the government and our neighbours and our friends and our enemies is to be shaped and energized by the inescapable reality that Jesus has authority over them and over us.

To conclude no flagbearer of any political party is the Saviour of a nation. Irrespective of who is elected President in coming elections and in subsequent years God remains sovereign.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With a clear understanding of the significance of the Sovereignty of God in national elections and the establishment of governmental authority, we recommend that:

- I. The Church should continue to pray for national leaders at all times in compliance to Paul’s exhortation in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 “... that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.”

This is also embodied in the Methodist Church Liturgy for Divine Services and liturgists must be encouraged to lead the church to pray for the nation and its leaders persistently.

- II. The Church should inculcate the teaching of the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God as part of its Christian Education from the Youth Ministries, considering that a clear understanding of the doctrine helps the Christian to accept, respect and serve any government that comes to power no matter how insignificant we may find the flagbearer.

- III. The clergy should spearhead a vigorous education of the church and subsequently the populace on the subject. This would help reduce the wastage and rancour around the elections and keep the country united.
- IV. The church should continue to serve as the conscience of the state and so Christians need to make their voices heard on matters affecting society as sexual morality, dignity of life education, the environment, poverty, war and national defence, the principles of right and wrong that govern the economy, and marriage and family, to mention a few. The church’s job is to proclaim the gospel. To make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18) to be a light in the darkness. (Mat 5:14-16)
- V. The church should teach the concept of human responsibility with respect to national elections so that its members would be responsible in the exercise of their right to vote for leaders in the country.

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