

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN JOHN CALVIN AND BRIGHAM YOUNG RESPONSE

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I have been impressed by the care with which Mr. Bitton has dealt with both Brigham Young and John Calvin. He has obviously read the sources and quoted them correctly and well. For me, however, the problem does not lie in deciding whether or not Calvin and Brigham Young had similar ideas about providence but rather in understanding the term, "sovereignty of God" at all. We talk about the "sovereignty of God" in John Calvin, but I don't think that Calvin used those words. The ideas that are discussed by both Brigham Young and John Calvin may fit generally under that category but I wonder if that is the most helpful way of looking at them.

The term, "sovereignty of God" is not generally used in theology and then not until the seventeenth century. Too, it was probably not understood in the context of the Bible but rather in the context of the social and political times of that century. The seventeenth century was the age of absolutism politically, culturally, philosophically, and scientifically. While we usually think, for instance, about natural science in modern terms, it was a dogmatic enterprise in the seventeenth century. And when the Church opposed the scientists, they were right on theological grounds, they were wrong on scientific ones. There were germs of truth in this dogmatic science that were later validated, but the theory behind the science was all wrong.

It was this kind of sovereignty—that of absolute power and control like medieval lords—that both Calvin and Brigham Young tried to employ. What each did was to use the kind of language which most meaningfully described God at his particular juncture of history. At some junctures that takes on more deterministic categories; at other junctures it takes on more open categories. John Calvin lived in a world in which those open categories were not as prevalent as they were in Brigham Young's time. I would say that for Calvin God was creator and redeemer, and his understanding of what that meant included the concepts of providence and predestination. There is a deterministic motif which runs through both of these concepts. But the deterministic motif is not an essential of theology as much as it is a category that belongs to particular worldviews at certain times. For example, though all of us believe that some things are determined, we probably do not believe they are determined to the extent that either Brigham Young or John Calvin did. Today we are troubled by the concept of predestination. In the

ancient world and then through the Middle Ages being determined by God was meaningful as over against being determined by the dark powers of fate and fortune. That was emancipation. People didn't feel their freedom in the same way as we do in the modern world.

Brigham Young believed in the sovereignty of God which is total control but at the same time that the freedom of humanity was absolutely essential. And there were great difficulties in putting those two together. Therefore the crux of the issue becomes discerning the *intention* of a term at a specified point in time rather than fighting over the validity of a particular formulation. So while the general concept of sovereignty has come to be an important part of all religious understanding, we no longer live in the kind of world where that concept was so meaningful. Theology's problem is how to comprehend God's continual relationship to the world. We must demythologize terms as the environment of religious concepts changes.

There are so many marvelous motifs of Christian history evident in the instincts of Mormonism (though they are often combined in ways that seem strange to those of us who are not Mormons). You have a living residue of wisdom. But the question is: Can Mormonism find a way of utilizing that distinct wisdom in a new world and in new categories? Paradoxically, to be faithful to its heritage it may have to say things quite differently than it did in the past. History can never replicate itself because the context and thus the meaning changes. Those who repeat the past are ironically the most untrue to what happened. Sometimes to affirm the past we must do and say the opposite of those who went before.

That which is disclosed is always disclosed in the timebound categories of any generation, of any time. The things that fall from Heaven are still colored by earth. And the reason theology is an enterprise that will not go out of existence is simply that it is the theological task of every generation to ask the question: In faithfulness to God's witness to us and in faithfulness to God's witness out of the past, how can we and how must we now say what they also once said? For that is the continuity and witness of the saints throughout history.

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