

God's Sovereignty, Free Will, and Baseball

by Bill Moller (a sermon transcript)

Several years ago a Toyota engineer made a decision while designing the throttle system for the automobiles that would be sold around the world. In January members of congress decided whether to vote FOR or AGAINST the health care bill that was before them. Recently, in Afghanistan, a soldier looked through his rifle scope and decided whether the person running down the road was a Taliban Rebel carrying a weapon or a local farmer hauling firewood. Last week, at Baseball's Spring Training, a pitcher decided whether to hurl a fast ball past the batter or test out the slider he'd been working on all winter. Somewhere, possibly at this very moment, a child is deciding whether to eat Cocoa Puffs or Frosted Flakes. This morning YOU and I decided to get up and come to church rather than roll over and catch a few more ZZZ's.

Some decisions are life-changing. Others somewhat trivial. Some decisions are GOOD, and others... not so good. The question before us today is, "WHO made those decisions?" Was it the individual acting of his or her own free will, or was it God imposing divine sovereignty and making the decision for us?

I don't know about you, but it sure felt like it was me who decided to get out of bed this morning. Yet I know from my study of Scripture that God is sovereign over all. But, exactly what does that mean?

For our purposes today, when I refer to Sovereignty I'm speaking about God's ultimate authority and power over all creation, as well as the right of the Creator to do with creation whatever God pleases. A verse that might help here is Isaiah 45:9 where we are reminded that the clay doesn't tell the potter what to do. It is the potter who decides.

We're the clay, God is the potter. The usual terms used in this context are Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent. God is all knowing, all powerful and everywhere is within God's presence.

We get a sense of God's power and authority in this verse from Colossians:

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Col. 1:16-17 (NIV)

Okay!, you might say, "So I accept that God created everything and holds it all together, but what makes you think God controls me?" We don't want to go by our personal gut feeling, alone. There are many verses that address this issue. Here are just a couple more:

Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:16 (NIV)

In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. Prov 16:9 (NIV)

Those are undeniably clear. I can squirm pretty well, but I can't figure a way around those two verses. And they are not unique. Over and over Scripture reminds us that through God's Sovereignty our lives are planned and guided in some manner.

Many theologians and biblical scholars have developed opinions on this issue, and I don't presume to offer the ultimate explanation.

The Reformed Church in America uses a number of

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historical documents to help clarify their beliefs – including something called THE CANONS OF DORT where we read about TOTAL INABILITY.

...all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God...

It appears that in addition to having our lives planned out in advance, we are also unable to make decisions that would lead us to God, or even toward GOOD.

But, if I were to stop there, I'd only be showing you part of what Scripture and biblical history has to say about this topic. At this point it would be easy to draw an incomplete and inaccurate conclusion. That God is Sovereign, and Free Will doesn't exist.

However, THE CANONS OF DORT also refers to something called the INADEQUACY OF THE LIGHT OF NATURE.

There is... a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior.

And it is here that we see that there is a little spark of the image of God still present inside us, and we still have some ability to choose between good and bad decisions.

Now if we return to Scripture, in Joshua 24:15 we read:

But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (NIV)

This certainly seems to say that we can CHOOSE to serve the Lord. If I get to choose, how is it that my steps are already determined?

In Matthew 23:37 we read:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing..." (NIV)

and in John 5:39b-40 Jesus says:

These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (NIV)

It appears that we can also CHOOSE NOT to cooperate with the Lord.

So, we can see – based on these and the earlier verses - that in some way God controls our lives and actions, but we also see that we have some ability to choose

for ourselves.

Are we ROBOTS - simply following our preprogrammed lives, or are we HUMANS – making choices and acting independently?

What we have here is a PARADOX – two ideas that oppose one another. How do we reconcile GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY with FREE WILL? The two seem incompatible.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, of Shenango Presbytery, in western Pennsylvania, spent over 40 years in the

PARADOX

- × Two ideas which oppose one another
- × Two ideas which run parallel and cannot meet or separate - like train tracks

Sovereignty → 

Free Will →

BIBLICAL PARADOX

- × The Kingdom is here *Matthew 3:2*
- The Kingdom is yet to come *Matthew 6:10*
- × Signs of the end of the age *Matthew 24:6*
- No one knows the day or time *Matthew 24:36*
- × Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. *Luke 17:33*

Middle East studying the culture. He describes a PARADOX by asking us to imagine a set of train tracks – two parallel tracks – along which the two opposing ideas travel.

If a train travels along those tracks, in order to avoid a train wreck, those tracks must remain in perfect tension. If FREE WILL tries to trump GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY the train wrecks. If GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY is over-played, FREE WILL gets trampled, and the train wrecks as well. They must both exist in order for Scripture to make sense.

Is God’s Sovereignty the only Paradox in the Bible? No! When Scripture speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven, we read in MATTHEW 3 that... it is here – it is at hand. But we also pray in the Lord’s prayer... “Thy Kingdom come”. Implying that it isn’t here yet. The same is true where Jesus speaks about the End Times in MATTHEW 24. He says there will be signs..., but no one will know the day or the time. And what about this verse in LUKE 17 where we are told that we have to lose our life in order to preserve it. We live with PARADOX every day and think nothing of it. The classic ad campaign for Miller Lite is a comical example - tastes great, less filling - but there are others.

Which brings me to BASEBALL. Why is it called the FOUL POLE if it is in FAIR territory? Another PARADOX relates to the length of a baseball game. It’s supposed to be nine innings, right. But how do you explain the slide above. What controls the length of a game?

The OFFICIAL RULES OF MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL are the SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY for game length, and everything else related to the game of baseball.

The size of the field is set by the rule book. That sounds like the Colossians quote we read earlier

where God laid everything out - the heavens and the earth. The actions of the players are set by the rule book. That sounds like the Proverbs 19 verse – where God determines our steps. The progression of play is set by the rule book. That’s like Psalms 139 - where all of our days are written in God’s book? The OFFICIAL RULES even determines who wins and who loses. - the team with the most runs. That’s a little like knowing who will be saved and who suffers eternal separation from God. Those who believe in the Lord vs. those who don’t.

LENGTH OF A BASEBALL GAME

Longest Game by Innings			
NL	Brooklyn 1 vs. Boston 1	26 innings	05-01-1920
Longest Game by time played			
AL	Chicago 7 vs. Milwaukee 6	8hrs 6min	05-08-1984
Shortest Game by time played			
NL	New York 6 vs. Philadelphia 1	51min	09-28-1919

THE “WILL” OF GOD

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Decretive (Sovereign, or Hidden Will) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Nothing happens that is beyond God’s control × Preceptive (Revealed Will) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Written in Scripture and on our Heart × Permissive (Disposition, or Perfect Will) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + God’s Attitude - What is pleasing to God
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I hope I have your attention now, because things are about to get a little tricky. According to John Calvin, “nothing happens but what He has knowingly and willingly decreed.” This is the key to our PARADOX. It is the WILL OF GOD, that allows us to reconcile SOVEREIGNTY with FREE WILL. According to my research, God’s WILL falls into three categories:

- God’s DECRETIVE WILL.
- God’s PRECEPTIVE WILL.
- And God’s PERMISSIVE WILL.

These concepts are easier to understand than you might imagine.

God’s DECRETIVE WILL simply refers to what we said about SOVEREIGNTY earlier— God has ultimate authority and the right to do as God pleases. Nothing happens that is beyond God’s control. God spoke and the universe came into existence. However, we don’t fully know God’s DECRETIVE WILL.

This is where God’s PRECEPTIVE WILL comes into play. These are God’s PRECEPTS – God’s commands, God’s written word to us – the Bible. And we also include in that what God has written on our hearts. What the Holy Spirit whispers to us.

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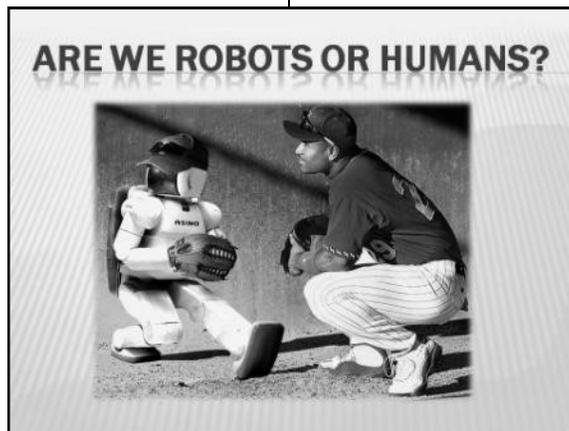
The last category is God's PERMISSIVE WILL which refers to God's "ATTITUDE" – what God allows to happen. This is where CHOICE comes into play. Some things may not be pleasing to God – even though they are not sinful. So, he allows them to occur. You might think of this as choosing between any number of good and acceptable options. God is willing to allow us to pick – it's not random, it's within his PERMISSIVE WILL.

If we go back to baseball, we know that a game should be nine innings long, but sometimes they go into extra innings. We don't like it, but the rule book allows it to happen – God allows us to do things that he doesn't like. The rule book is still in control. God is still in control.

A pitcher may know a fast-ball is the ideal pitch, but he chooses to throw a curve instead. No problem. The rule book allows it, and never loses CONTROL of the situation, even though the pitcher has made a different decision than expected.

A batter is out after three strikes, but I've watched games where the ball is fouled off numerous times and the batter isn't called out. Why? Because the rule book has already determined when a foul ball is a

strike and when it isn't counted. The rule book never loses control. God never loses control.



Is the baseball rule book sovereign over the game? Do the players get to choose what they are doing?

Let's ask ourselves the questions we started with. The ones about the Toyota engineer, or the soldier in Afghanistan, or you and I coming to church.

Who made those decisions. Are we all ROBOTS? Was it God or the individual? Was God imposing his Sovereignty, or were the individuals exerting their Free Will?

I believe the answers to those questions are all, YES! Just as the baseball rule book is always sovereignly in control even while the players make their choices, God is always in Sovereign control of his Creation – we can do nothing that he has not knowingly and willingly decreed – even when we make individual choices.

YES, God is sovereign, and YES we have free will.

Let us pray...

(This essay is a revisit of the topic addressed in the Summer 2003 edition of CogentNotion.)