

The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: The Sovereignty of God vs. The Sovereignty of Man

Isaiah 42:5

By [Tom Elkin](#)

June 10, 2009

Tonight we're going to begin a series on *The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology*. Yes, I'm playing psychologist a little bit here, so please indulge me. I'm going to be using some of my stuff and my words, my things, but at the same time I hope that you understand the preacher part in me is going to come out, too, all right? So we're going to look at and try to understand what is it that makes our time a bit unique. Human beings are human. They haven't changed that much down through the years, and I think we'll end up by seeing that very fact. What we face today isn't a whole lot different from the Garden of Eden.

But we're going to start out tonight...I'm just going to read one verse of Scripture here, and then we'll have a word of prayer. From Isaiah 42:5, this is what God the Lord says:

"He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it...."

Let's pray.

Father, direct our thinking. May we understand You and be as You'd have us be. May we understand each other also, and may we understand this world in which we live. You are the God, the creator of all. Sustain us and use us to Your glory. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

The question of sovereignty: We all sort of know what that means. The sovereign doesn't have to bow down to anybody. Of course we're all a little bit bothered that our President bent down a little bit, aren't we? He wasn't supposed to do that kind of thing — as a matter of fact, he says he didn't. But we understand what sovereignty is. *Sovereign* means *nobody over you*. You're the head honcho, the No. 1, the top, it; nobody else. The question then is the sovereignty of God or the sovereignty of man. And I personally believe that the sovereignty of man is

permeating everything in our society today. I think we have to fight against it and we have to understand and know what's happening there.

Now, to even talk about it begs the question of is there a God. In this group, I don't wish to take any time trying to establish the reality of God because I think we all believe in God. That's not the point. I am, rather going to be looking at how people react to this whole question of the sovereignty of God.

Now I want to paint a picture here. Imagine you're looking at a little bit of a map, and to your left [my right] imagine over here we have a group of individuals. We have a line that represents the population of the United States — all of us. Over here we have a group. It's the left-hand group, the far left; only this far left is made up of three groups of individuals — atheists, agnostics, and non-believers. The latest surveys say that this group is anywhere from 9 to 12 to 15 percent of our population. They supposedly are growing a little bit in numbers. As a matter of fact, the younger folk (those 18-25)...the latest numbers say as many as 20 percent of those 18-25 fall into this group over here, not necessarily claiming to be atheists, but say they have no belief system. Okay, that's 10, 15...the numbers don't all add up, by the way, because different polls with different numbers. But 10-15 percent over here.

Then we cross over that line going up our religious line here. We have anywhere from 10-11 percent of our population that believe in some other god — Muslims, Hindus, whatever. So we've got 15-ish, 10-ish, and then we've got 75 percent over here. Now the bulk of these in here are continuum. We'll look at it in just a second. All the way over here on your right end would be Reformed theology, and in case we get the big-head that we dominate things, one estimate is that evangelicals (and they are not all Reformed, by the way...as a matter of fact, *evangelical* is falling into a bad category in our world today)...but even the evangelicals make up like 7 percent of the population. Sixty-ish, 65-ish — who knows how many are in the middle, in this middle group? Over here on the right, evangelicals; way out there on the right end are the “Reformed” people. I mean, they're the *frozen chosen!* They're the ones who nobody really wants to pay attention to. They're the ones who are rigid, judgmental, harsh, hostile, mean, bad people who have this God who lets all sorts of bad things happen. Well, you know that's where I am, and you are too. We're over here. We're out here on this edge.

Now as we look at our little continuum here, we have groups that go along as you cross the line from these non-Christians and get into these religious Christians just a little bit. As you get into that group, you get what I call those who use an internal mechanism to define God: “God is who I wish Him to be; I define God. God is my granddaddy. God is the benevolent God of...He's up there, but He's busy and we can't get His attention, because I prayed and nothing happened. But I believe He's there but He just wasn't paying attention.” Internally these folk define who God is. That's a segment of those. They call themselves believers of

God; i.e., the general Christian God, but they're right in there.

Take a step beyond that group and you have another group. These are ones that the situation determines their definition of God. We've all heard the expression, "There are no atheists in foxholes." That's where the situation determines belief in God and definition of God. "I believe that He will keep that bullet from getting me, and I pray earnestly that He will. But the situation helps define this perception of God that I have."

Step on from that. Now we have "something external happens that defines my view of God." I had a wonderful experience about a week or so ago. Nobody was around, and all by my lonesome self I got to watch the movie *Sergeant York* all by myself. [Some of you guys will appreciate that movie. I know very few gals who sit and watch that a second time, but guys do! *[laughter]*...and I've watched it fourteen times! I don't know...if it comes on this weekend, I'll watch it again!] But remember in that movie? If you've ever seen *Sergeant York*, Alvin is mad because the guy sold that bottom land, and he promised it to him. He won that shoot and he got it, but he sold it. So he's on his mule in a pouring down rain riding over to that farmer's house because he's sold the land out from under him. And you remember what happened? Boom! Lightning flashes, knocks him off his mule. And Alvin lies there. (Gary Cooper does a fantastic job; I wish I could act like he does, but anyway...) He looks up and he looks at the mule, and the mule is starting to get up. The mule wasn't killed! He looks at himself, and he's okay! And he looks at his rifle that he was going to shoot the guy with, so we understand, and lightning hit the barrel and blew it wide open. And what did Alvin do in the movie? (And in real life he had something like that happen, okay?) He heard a church choir singing, a congregation singing. And in the pouring rain, dripping wet, he goes over to the church and goes in, and they pray for him and lay hands on him and he's saved. Something external happened so that an Apostle Paul (or shall we say Saul) experience took place. Whoom! He's overwhelmed! There are folks that that's happened to. I daresay that if we went around in here tonight, somebody in this room could give us a rather dramatic recounting of something that happened that externally overwhelmed you and you have no question it was God. (That doesn't mean you're going to be Reformed, by the way! It means that you're overwhelmed by God.) Okay, external.

Now we go on to some who will begin to use Scripture to define God, plus their experiences and what's happened to them. See? I'm using the Bible, I'm using what it says, but I sort of mix it together with what's happened to me.

Then we take another step further and we get to those who say, "Nope. God is defined by what the Scripture says. Scripture alone defines God." And we've made a big transition. We've gone all the way down from down here where whatever I feel like...and to No, I'm going to believe an external, alive source, the word of God. That's different. We've shifted into a different gear now. But guess what? Us Reformed people do something else. We don't add to the Scripture, but

we believe that Scripture can be harmonized and put together into an understandable form, and we can even write a Confession about it and put together all that it says about God, and have a concise understanding. We don't improve on the word of God, but we do harmonize so that our little brains can get around it better. We have a Confession of Faith.

Some evangelicals don't like confessions of faith. We know that that's an appropriate thing to do, because for a Christian to seek to harmonize Scripture is one of the life goals that we have: I wish my life to be in harmony with everything that God says.

Okay. Now this is a panorama of the world, and over here we have the atheists, agnostics and unbelievers; and over here we've got the Reformed people; and the natural man is all in here in lots of different places. Now God can reach down and pick someone up from anywhere; i.e., He picked up Saul. God can reach down and touch anytime, anywhere. He's that powerful and He can do it. But we need to understand the process by which things are laid out so that we can perhaps feel better, look better, act better, understand, be, do, honor Him as much as we possibly can.

Now these human beings out here in the middle — we're all a part of this, by the way — all these out here in the middle, they tend to react to Scripture and to the sovereignty of God from certain position points, and these are the ones that I have defined. The No. 1 position point that they use to react to God tends to revolve around how powerful human beings are feeling in the moment. If I am feeling powerful and in control, there's a sense in which I don't really need God right now (which is why it's hard to get a 21-year-old to really appreciate the necessity of the Lord in his life. A 91-year-old — ooh! He's aware! He's aware! We're going to check in pretty soon; I've got to do business here. But a 21-year-old? He's feeling powerful). We live in a world today where human beings feel very, very powerful. We're fighting cancer, we have surgeries, we have hip replacements, knee replacements, and joint replacements. My mother, bless her heart, had two knees replaced at one time. Good grief! We're engineering the body now, aren't we? A lot of things are happening that give us this sense of power. You know, in these *Ten Things That Are Shaping the Modern World*, one of the things is we no longer wish to believe that we have to die. We are close to the point where we can so engineer a life that we can extend life. You do understand, in the Middle Ages the life expectancy of the average human being was about 46 years. Look where we are today. I wonder where we'll be in twenty years. I don't know. But we feel powerful today. The more powerful we feel, the less we need a sovereign God, okay?

Secondly, our view of God is determined by how guilty we feel. I'm playing psychologist now. I'm talking about the emotions that motivate and drive human beings. Guilt drives human beings. If we feel really guilty, we need a sovereign God. If our guilt level is real low, we don't need a sovereign God.

Thirdly, how needy we are. “Oh, gracious! Everything's going bad. What am I going to do? Oh, Lord, please! You control everything. Please help me, because I believe you can.” See? I'm real needy. Now if I'm that young man in Wyoming and I just got that 88 or whatever it was million dollars in the lottery after taxes — and he's in his twenties — I wonder how needy he feels right now? Just talking about the human part of us, okay? And I'm sure right now he is riding high. But see? Aren't we riding high in general in the world today? How needy.

Fourthly, how fearful we are. One of the best motivators going is to generate fear. If I can get you afraid, I can get you to do anything. “This building is on fire; let's get out of here right now!” You don't believe me, do you? But if flames start coming through the door, I'll bet you will make a mad dash. Fear goes up.

We have the sense of power, we have guilt, we have need, and we also have fear — the primary motivators of getting people to do what you want them to do, and on their view of God. Now with that in mind, down through the years the church has utilized those. The first Great Awakening was a guy reading a sermon. How'd y'all like to have Ligon stand up and read his sermon? And supposedly Edwards did a lot of that. Boy, if I stood here like this and the whole time read a sermon like this, I don't know that you'd really want to come back! That was a true awakening. The second Great Awakening, we discovered fear. We discovered fourteen verses of *Just as I Am!* [No, I'm not being literal; I'm being figurative, okay?] [*Laughter.*] We discovered “the bench,” you know? We discovered getting people to feel really, really guilty and really, really needy, and really, really fearful. And it's amazing what can be done. The second Great Awakening.

And now we live in a world where you have a hard time generating fear, need, or guilt in people. As a matter of fact, I've said this most everywhere I go: We live in a world where the sense of sin no longer permeates our society. I don't worry that I have sinned so that consequences are going to fall upon me. By the way, there's no difference in sin in God's sight. We all know that. But humanly speaking there is a significant difference in the consequences of sin. It is one thing for me to hate you. I don't go to jail for that. It's something else for me to shoot at you. I do go to jail for that. So the difference in sin is in the consequences that we face on this earth.

Now. All of these play into why these people look at God a certain way and how they look at Him. We don't have the sense of need, the sense of fear, the sense of guilt, and we have a tremendously strong sense of power. We — I'm talking about human beings, not this congregation...I'm talking about human beings have this sense of power and don't have the other three.

Now, when you have those things going on it tends to generate another factor that stirs into the natural man. You tend to have a sense of anxiety. And that

sense of anxiety can permeate what's taking place in my world and in my life. Anxiety comes. I'm worried. I don't know what's going to happen. By the way, we get the most problem with anxiety not from the known, but from the unknown. If I know that...there's a cliché that I use with people sometimes: I know you would rather experience known pain than to experience unknown pain. Think about that just a minute. If I know what it's going to take and what's going to happen, I know how to gear up and how to handle it. But if I don't have any idea what's going to be involved, that worries me. Known pain is better than unknown pain.

Now, anxiety comes. The days have come and gone where the anxious bench could be used in our culture. It can't. It's interesting that the church is growing so strongly in Africa and the south of the equator countries because they do still have some sense of fear and anxiety, and they have a sense of uncertainty, and they need a God and they trust a God. We are very complacent in the way we look at God in our culture, so we have the freedom to shake the old fist at God.

Now let's add to that one other thing. We all know if you give the catechism answer to "What is the chief end of man?" — we all know what one... "Glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Oh, and the Greek philosophers — when they came along, they raised another issue a long time ago and it has become fairly popular in psychological circles as an explanation for human beings. Human beings...one psychologist, writing about 1920, said that human beings have an innate drive in them to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure with the least amount of pain. I think they're right on. As a matter of fact, I say that is the credo of the old nature. The old nature in me wants the greatest amount of pleasure for the least amount of pain. Now in theory there's nothing wrong with that if it's under and subservient to "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." But if it stands on its own, it is pure, unadulterated, self-centered sin. The greatest amount of pleasure for the least amount of pain.

Now this has a lot of ramifications. One of the ramifications is that our culture says the most successful person is the one who makes enough money not to have to work anymore. So if you've made enough money not to have to work anymore, you've been successful. So we work ourselves out of a job. I don't believe that. I happen to believe that you do what you do because God has called you to do it, and not because you need to eat. Yes, we do need to eat, but we need to have a sense of God's calling us to do what we do.

Now if I'm right, if I'm saying that these different groups up here define God personally, internally, externally, by factors, by Scripture, by a harmonized understanding of Scripture...if this is true (it is true, by the way)... if that's true, and if we have these four forces work — how powerful I feel, how needy I feel, how guilty I feel, how fearful I feel — and if I have this drive for the greatest amount of pleasure for the least amount of pain, what the natural man is doing is he is searching for a God to deal with those issues, and he's not going to accept a God who doesn't deal with those issues. He's going to reject a God who

doesn't deal with those issues.

Now from this, by the way, we then get different personality patterns emerging. We deal with that anxiety by a sense of control. We deal with that anxiety by getting depressed. We deal with that anxiety in different ways, because we're always trying to work it out and make it okay. That's what we're trying to do.

Now this is a chasm out here. The natural man lives in that chasm. We get used to being over here in this Reformed theology enclave — and hallelujah, thank the Lord for it! — I am not talking it down at all. I love it. But there's a whole mass of folk out there who do not share what we share. That chasm is there, and it is permeated by swirling around guilt, need, fear, anxiety, pattern of coping, trying to get it going, trying to be who I can be. So as this goes on, I then try to reach out to that person and I hold up a sovereign God. Humanly speaking, that person says What has He done for you lately? Is He effective? What has He done to change your life? That then leads us into something else. We have an awful lot of churches in today's world that preach what I call a feel-good gospel. And the church is not so much interested in proclaiming what Scripture says about who God is and how God is as much as it is in having a support group for left-handed people who get hangnails. And there's a support group for everybody within that body, so that people with common problems can come together and share their problems and we leave feeling so good. Please! I'm for support groups; I think one of the most effective things to deal with alcoholism still, until we know something better, is AA. I still think that's a good thing for people to do. I don't like that they're taking that "higher power" and making all sorts of things out of it, but I still think it's an effective...the most effective...thing we know.

But there's a problem here. Feel-good Christianity permeates our society. I've used that word about four times now because I think it's everywhere. Reformed theology sits over here as a lighthouse on a rock on the edge of a storm-tossed sea, and that's where we are — over here.

Now the growing churches in today's world are of three types. There's a lot of research that backs this up. The charismatic churches are growing. People love the fact that they can "experience God." Okay? The second kind of church that's growing are those that put demands on people. People have lived in a rudderless society long enough to where they like anything that gives concrete directions. And I say there's a third kind of church that's growing. These are the churches who focus on the human needs to the exclusion of God's expectations. Those three churches by and large across this country are growing. I know one that went from 120 starting members to...I think it's 7,000 now. And that kind of explosion does take place.

Now that's the picture being painted. Now let me say this: I'm reading to you from our *Confession of Faith*:

God hath all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness in and of himself, and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them to do by them, for them or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. In His sight all things are open and manifest. His knowledge is infinite, infallible and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent or uncertain. He is most holy in all His counsels, in all His works, in all His commands. To Him is due from angels and men and every other creature whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them.

That's our view of God. That's the Reformed view of God. Now if you've got the person out there shaking with fear and need and anxiety, that's not a real comforting word, is it? Except it's the truth. And it is comforting if it is the truth.

“Blessed be Your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all the starry host and all the earth, and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them; You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship You.”

I could go on reading other passages. Reformed theology presents a sovereign God who owes nothing to humans. He can and does act independently with and upon humans as He pleases. This is the very nature of what is meant by being sovereign. You're not going to get a lot of takers in terms of popularity if that's what you're preaching, but it's the truth.

Now this leads us to something else very important. The natural man then wants two things to cope with this world: he wants power, and he wants control. If he has power and control, he can be and do what he wishes to be and do. If you're going down the interstate in your car, the gas tank is full, you're on the way to New Orleans, you're driving 70 miles an hour, you've got cruise control on and the music is on the stereo and you're just having a good time — you're feeling pretty good, aren't you? Now suppose it's eleven o'clock and the gas gauge is bumping “E” and you don't know where in the world you are. You don't feel the same, do you? Because you don't know where you can fill up again. And suppose your buddy is dead drunk...and he's driving! Suddenly the world has shifted gears. The natural man, as all of us, wants power and control. That's the way we cope with anxiety, that's the way we cope with the whole package. The natural man will pursue anything that gives him power and control, especially over his anxiety. So, we'll do drugs, we'll get into materialism, we'll get into anything that helps us with that. And by the way, that isn't just the natural man, that's the natural man in me too. That is my whole nature at work and wishing to do.

Plus, the natural man is attracted to religion which helps him in his pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and thus reduces anxiety. Reformed theology, as it understands the God of the Bible, does not present the feel-good God. It does not promise that when you become a Christian you'll win the lottery, you'll have the good job, you'll never have difficulty. It promises none of those things.

Now. Is the essence of the natural man to be as Adam and Eve were in the garden? I want to ask you a question. I've sort of teased a few people with this. What do you think the core sin is in abortion? That's an inflammatory topic, I understand. But if you had to define the core sin in abortion, what would you say?

Most people will say that you murder an innocent human being. Okay. (Well, we don't think the human being is innocent, to start off with. Okay?) I want to submit to you that the core sin of abortion is not murder. I wish to submit to you that the core sin of abortion is that one or more human beings plays God and claims to have the right to decide whether this human being lives or not. It is a question of the garden. It's a question of being God, knowing what God knows, acting as God acts. It is the sin of wishing to replace the sovereign God with the sovereignty of the human being. "I can choose." I don't wish anybody to be shot and murdered, but that guy was doing abortions in the ninth month of pregnancy in the most gruesome, horrible way. I would never condone what happened — never, never, never, never! But I shudder to think what he's done. I shudder. Because, you see, the way I look at it, of course it's horrible; but the real thing is he was playing God! That's the same sin, core sin, of suicide. The individual is playing God. Ready or not, here I come. And I do believe that Christian people sometimes commit suicide. I really do. Christian people commit just about every sin going, okay? So we're not immune from sin, but let's understand what's going on here. The cardinal sin of racism is claiming to know who is good and who is not good, who is above and who is below. It's playing God. The core sin of sin is playing God. Now that is not a good place to be.

Conclusion: Make these statements:

A sovereign God requires submission. That's not a real popular term in today's world.

A sovereign God is not obligated. That's not a real popular concept.

There can be no sovereignty for humans if God is sovereign. No sovereignty of humans.

A sense of sin...as the sense of sin goes down, the willingness for God to be sovereign goes down. As the sense of sin goes up, the willingness for God to be

sovereign goes up.

As the pleasure or pain goal is legitimized, the willingness for God to be sovereign goes down. As the pleasure/pain goal is accepted by churches, the churches tend to cater to it.

As the pleasure/pain goal is accepted anxiety becomes more of the enemy, not sin, so the church begins to fight against anxiety as opposed to trying to fight against sin. All this tends for the church to become more and more accommodating to the natural man's desires.

Now whether I'm right or not, feel free to vote. But I'll tell you this: power and control are big issues; pleasure and no pain drives our society; and we all feel a sense of entitlement because in our society it flows over and oozes over us. We still struggle with the fact that anyone should suffer or have pain, and the closer they are to me the more I am bothered by their pain. That's why it is so good to pray for the people who are having pain and commit it to God that they're having the pain, as opposed to our fighting the pain battle. Of course I want medical research; of course I want to have knee replacements so that my mother can have two new ones. I want everything that can be done to be done, but I don't want it to happen outside of the context of the sovereignty of God, who owes us nothing, who chose in His loving mercy to create this world and to create human beings so that He would have those to love, and in His sovereignty He predestined some. And in His love, He holds us in the palm of His hand, and even provided for our sin through Christ.

That is what we believe, and we need to hold to it. And we need not to compromise it when the natural man says Give me a God not quite so harsh and I'll listen to you; give me a God who will help me with my business and my finances and I'll listen to you; give me a God who will help me feel better, and I'll honor Him.

Let's pray.

Father, we're thankful for Your lovingkindness to us. We're thankful for Your sovereignty. We're thankful that You are God. We're thankful that You have chosen to send Christ to die for sin. We're thankful that You've given us Your word so that we have a roadmap, a guide for life itself. And we're thankful that You have given us understanding, that You've given us minds, that we can truly seek to know You better, to understand and to be Your people. Encourage us as we live in the midst of this world. We're not discouraged by what's happening in the world, Lord, because we know You're in charge; but we also feel a deep sense of need to understand better so that we can, with Your leading, direction, and power, honor You with all that we are. Forgive us of our sins. Let us be Your people. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

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