

## Who am I? The Sovereign self

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Today we start a short series, entitled "Who am I?" looking at "the self", and what the Bible has to say about this. That might seem odd in view of the infamous statement of the German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. 145 years after his pronouncement that God is dead why would anybody still be reading the Word of God, let alone acknowledging its authority? In this talk we will consider where human thinking is today under the title "The sovereign self." I apologise in advance that this is going to be a rather negative experience, but unless we recognise there is a problem, we are unlikely to find a solution. Next week we will consider "The certain self" and see that the Bible really does give answers as to how we should view ourselves positively. We will then consider "The sacrificed self" and discover the Christian calling to deny ourselves in the service of our wonderful Saviour and Lord. Finally, we shall consider "The sanctified self" and see what the Bible teaches about the important subject of sanctification.

The German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125).

Nietzsche recognized the crisis that this "Death of God" represented for existing moral assumptions in Europe as they existed within the context of traditional Christian belief:

"When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident [...] By breaking one main concept out of Christianity, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands." (*Twilight of the Idols*, *Expeditions of an Untimely Man*, sect. 5).

Recently at work, our database became corrupted. There was no good in trying to write a code that would get us round the problem. What we had to do was recognise that there was a problem and then go back to the last working backup of the database that was not corrupted. Having done that, we could then input missing data to get us back to where we should be. Hopefully, this series will be like that process. It is clear, from just the briefest glance at the newspapers or society itself, that our thinking has become corrupted. What we cannot do is just paper over the problem or try to write a few rules to try to mitigate the damage. We need to recognise that the way that we think

about ourselves is fundamentally faulty and then go back to a right “working copy.” Nietzsche himself recognised the implications of his “God is dead” statement. How we think about things really matters. If God were dead, then the whole of Christian morality would be nothing more than a mirage and the way that society thinks about itself – how I think about myself – must inevitably have to change.

What did Nietzsche actually mean when he claimed that God is dead? As an atheist he did not believe in God and so it was not that God had existed in the past but was now dead. Rather it was that mankind may have felt a need for Him in the past but now “the enlightenment” had made a belief in God untenable. Science had falsely claimed that there was no need for a God to explain our being. We no longer needed to look to a higher being to explain our part in the universe, or to find an ethical basis for our morality. Did this worldview of life bring individual fulfilment? His last reported words: “Mother, I am stupid!” suggest not, but hint at a lifetime of regret. 145 years of absorbing this philosophy has not led us to a brighter, happier existence.

Before, we continue to look at some of the consequences of this faulty worldview it is important to recognise that this is a problem that affects us all. Of course, as a Christian, I utterly reject the premise that God is dead – I was just speaking to Him earlier and He was very much alive then! I have personal experience of His working in my life to suggest He is still very much continuing His eternal working in the lives of those who, by faith, accept Him. However, the mindset of society, that still pervades all advertising, politics, etc., inevitably influences each one of us. We cannot walk through a mud pit and expect to come out clean, just because we do not like muddiness.

As important, we need to recognise the danger that this kind of thinking presents to our children and our grandchildren – whether biological or spiritual. Their young and formative minds need protecting, and it is only the Word of God, clearly and meaningfully taught in a way that is relevant and engaging to these generations that can keep them from the world. Young people need to know that they are unconditionally loved by God, and by us, and they need to see the reality of this in our actions. They need to see that we are serious and real about our faith – that it is a full time 100% reality in our lives. If they do not then they will fall victim to how this world is thinking, and that is, and will be, catastrophic for them.

In Mark 7:20 – 23, Jesus said:

“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”

As the Creator of man, He clearly understood how we work. Our circumstances may shape us, but they do not define us. It is what we are on the inside – the way that we think – that matters. If the way that we think is corrupted, then what we do will inevitably be corrupted. So, if we have removed the need for God is this a merely philosophical notion? Something to be debated at a university debating society but of little real relevance to the real world? If only!

Let us just consider a few examples that readily show how vital this is to everyday life and how pervasive our faulty thinking has become. If God is dead, then governments of any colour do not exercise their power as given to them by God. Rather they owe their legitimacy to the consent of the people or some greater physical force e.g. the army. This immediately lowers the standard. Because our Prime Ministers no longer believe that they must give an account of how they exercised power to Almighty God (which they must), then all they must do is remain popular enough to win the next vote. This leads to short term decisions based on their own well-being.

Why take an unpopular decision that will see them removed from office but will in 100 years' time prove to have been beneficial for the country? Because our politicians do not believe that they exercise their power on behalf of God, then why does it matter how they behave, so long as they do not upset too many people. We cannot in good faith expect our rulers to behave in a much better way than we are prepared to do. That is hypocrisy. But if they are only to behave to societal average then that is a far lower standard than behaving in a way that God would behave. If God is dead, then I do not exist on planet earth as a steward. God is the Creator. This planet, along with the Universe of which it is an infinitesimally small part belongs to Him. When God created Adam, he made mankind to act as stewards of the earth:

“Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so” (Genesis 1:26 – 30).

When I realise that I will have to give an account to God for how I have used this planet's resources then it might make me think twice before making a long car journey just for my enjoyment of a day out. It might make me take responsibility for turning the lights off in unused rooms. It might make me think twice before I carelessly drop litter. How will the conversation go about how much of the planet's finite resources I have used in my rampant consumerism? Of course, if God is dead then I am excused this rather awkward conversation – what a relief! John put it very eloquently in his Gospel in chapter 1:

“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him”;

or in the words of the parable in Luke 20:14:

“But when the vinedressers saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.’”

Is it mere coincidence that global warming and environmental degradation has occurred at the same time that we have overthrown our responsibility to God? You see, to my mind it is a big ask to say that I must beggar my existence for the benefit of my great, great, grandchildren, who are nothing more than a feint possibility. And besides science may well have come up with a clever solution, so all my sacrifice would have been in vain, and I can't get my one shot at existence back again. This is the inevitable logic of a loss of responsibility to a higher Power. The way that we think – call it our worldview if you like - really matters. But you might be thinking that this is all very serious but hardly my issue. What can I do about the way politics is conducted? Would my actions really make much of a difference to the planet? Even if everyone in the UK did the right thing, wouldn't that just beggar ourselves, and pollution from other nations still lead to global warming? Perhaps at its most lethal, most invidious, is the effect that this corrupted thinking has had on the individual. When Nietzsche wrote that “God is dead and we have killed Him” he was not lamenting

this action. This was not an oops, what have we done? moment. He was very much questioning what the implications of this new-found freedom (so called) were.

Christianity had taught the world that we were made in God's image, as we have already read in Genesis 1. As such we are responsible to Him to bear His image. If a Martian were to visit me or you, it is our responsibility to ensure that they would get a clear understanding of who God is! Just to put it like that makes me realise how far short I have fallen. As an image bearer of God, any behaviour that does not imitate God's behaviour is fraud on a divine scale. In removing the need to depend on a higher authority in life, in getting rid of our responsibility to God, who might take His place? Nature abhors a vacuum after all. Self has filled this gap, and so we now live in a world where self is sovereign. Of course, if your view of self is supported by greater physical, emotional or material power, then you can impose that version on others. We see this in Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. His view of self is that Ukraine is really a part of a greater Russia, that people there want to be free of foreign and Western influence. In his version of self, his actions make perfect sense and are fully justified. Of course, Volodymyr Zelensky would very strongly oppose his view and paint this as a struggle for freedom where a stronger force has invaded a peaceful neighbour, who had no desire to be considered Russian.

On the day-to day level there is no higher authority to tell me who I am or what I must do. I am free to decide this and you have no right to tell me otherwise. More than that, you must acknowledge that who I say that I am is right and you have no right to question that. I utterly fail to see the irony in the thinking that in doing so, I am completely denying you the right to let you yourself determine who you are! It is Russia vs. Ukraine in 8 billion little conflicts. Naturally, I will then tend to associate with those who affirm my view of self it must be right. If it challenges my view of self it must be wrong. In this way absolute, objective truth is rejected and we end up with subjective truth. If I perceive that something is true then it is, even if you cannot see this. So rather than people apologising for what they have done these days, we get apologies if you have reacted badly to what I have done, for example.

In getting rid of an absolute God, who has built absolute truth into His creation, we have inherited a world where there is no reasonable arbiter, where anything goes because to even come to a judgement is to infringe the rights of somebody's self to be themselves. Encouragement is given to go on a journey of self-discovery so that we can be the best version of ourselves. Now wanting to be better is a wholly laudable aim, and if this is combined with living out the instructions of the Bible it is indeed beneficial. But if it is merely an encouragement to live out whatever I want to be then this is the worst form of hedonism imaginable. For example, scammers can become very rich and enjoy wonderful luxuries – that is a great version of self for them. But the cost to the thousands of ruined lives they leave in their wake is wholly unacceptable.

A journey of self-discovery is destined to failure and won't end well. In Romans 7:18, Paul wrote:

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells.”

Paul, humanly speaking, was well-educated, well-connected, rich, and influential. To the casual observer, he would have been hailed as a successful man. Yet he has to confess that there is nothing in his natural life of which to boast. The more we look at ourselves and become introverted, the more we will become disillusioned and depressed. In and of ourselves we are completely unable to meet God's standards by ourselves. It is not until we look outside of ourselves that we can experience freedom and confidence in who we really are.

The other big danger in the sovereign self attitude is that of pride. Once I have become the best version of myself, whatever that is, it is a subtle but short step to thinking that you also should be like this. Because you are not, then I am better than you. In Philippians 2:3–5 Paul wrote:

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”

The reason why I have such a big problem with considering that you are better than me is because I do not believe it to be true. My self has told me that I am sovereign and that means that you cannot be. I rejoice in my achievements, as if I am solely responsible for them. I look down on the failings of others and excuse my own. We blame society for a lack of personal responsibility – it is never my fault!

What a difference it would make if I genuinely considered that everyone in my local church was better than I am. How radical it would be if I thought that the only thing that really mattered was their welfare. But the ethos of our society is so diametrically opposed to this that even to suggest this is to feel like I am talking nonsense. I fear that if I displace myself as sovereign and install you, for Christ’s sake, then I am opening myself up to a whole load of abuse and being taken advantage of. But God would never ask me to do something that is not for my good, so it comes down to trust. Do I trust God less than I trust my sovereign self?

You may be thinking that I am railing against the world system and society as it is but I am not. Those that are spiritually dead have no life or strength to change. What they need is new life in Jesus. However, the ethos that our society lauds today – the sovereign self - is a real problem for us in the church and we are going to close with some examples of how this kind of thinking has infiltrated the church today.

First, the sovereign self casts doubt on the authority of His word. Of course, this is nothing new. Satan tried it in the garden of Eden with those words, “Has God said?” But we have taken this questioning to a whole new level. Because we have made self sovereign, we do not think that Paul, or for that matter any of the Bible writers, has the right to tell me how I ought to behave now. Of course, we are not quite so bold as to put it like that, so we explain things away in terms of differences in culture or weaknesses in the prejudices of the writers. God has no time for such things. The authority of His word is absolute. For sure, we need to employ our abilities to understand it correctly. For example, we recognise that poetry must be read differently from prose. But it is not acceptable to assign the authority of God to the human writer, and therefore reject what has been written.

Second, the sovereign self expects church to work for my benefit. Too often I go to church expecting to be entertained or to feel part of a like-minded crowd. I expect things to be for my benefit. I am not prepared to entertain change because I like things the way they are. It doesn’t matter if you don’t because my self is sovereign. It seems to me that we have almost entirely lost the sense of giving in our corporate church life. Instead of asking myself, “What am I getting out of a meeting of believers?” I should be asking, “What am I giving to that meeting of believers?” It should be my desire that the corporate life of my church is enhanced by me and by my presence. As I make this my goal, I am sure that the Lord will ensure that I am also spiritually blessed by being present.

This is a challenge to me. I need to prepare in advance. I need to attend with something to give. I need to have had a fresh experience of blessing from the Lord to share with others for their good. What I found helpful a year ago may be a little stale by now! These things can only come from a living daily relationship with the Lord throughout the week. It just will not do to turn up (late) on a Sunday and hurriedly rehash something I heard long ago and expect others to be blessed and fed by such an attitude.

Third, the sovereign self is likely to choose a church that suits me. If I do not like the decisions that are made or the direction that it is going in, then I just leave. Now there may be circumstances

where this is the correct thing to do but too often divisions arise over petty issues of personality. Sometimes, churches are formed based solely on ethnicity or socioeconomics. Each Sunday I drive past a sign that advertises church meetings for one particular national group. I feel excluded because I am not of that country. Churches should not be like this. They should be inclusive and welcoming to all irrespective of human distinctions. Every individual should be welcome to attend and a spiritual home made for them. This is not to say, however, that “anything goes” and that right doctrine and behaviour do not matter – they clearly do!

In finishing, I just want to close with a couple of Scriptures – an antidote to the hard truths we have considered here.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20 – 21).

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Saviour, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24,25).

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk in the series “Who am I? – the sovereign self” talk number T1338

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