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The Sovereignty of God

by A. W. Pink
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THE BOOK'S PURPOSE

- Expound upon the doctrine of God's sovereignty
- Demonstrate the extent of man's depravity
- Comfort the saints with the assurance of God's supremacy
- Address questions most frequently raised about God's sovereignty

THE BOOK'S MESSAGE

God is absolutely sovereign over every event and thing in the universe. His purposes will come to pass at the appointed times, and nothing can thwart His will. He decrees everything that happens, including the fall of Adam and Eve and the consequences of sin in this world. He determines not only the ends but the means. He has not ceded any aspect of His sovereignty to any creature or creatures. In fact, He cannot do so because if God is not sovereign, He is not God.

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God's Sovereignty Defined

The doctrine of divine sovereignty is practically unknown in the Christian church today. The God of modern Christians is a weak, helpless spectator of human events:

“To assert that the Creator’s original plan has been sidetracked by sin is to dethrone God. To suggest that God was caught by surprise in the Garden of Eden and that now He is attempting to fix an unforeseen mishap is to disgrace the Most High and put Him on the level of a finite, mistake-prone mortal. To argue that man is a free moral agent and the maker of his own destiny with the power to checkmate his maker, is to strip God of His omnipotence.”

God is King, the absolute monarch over all creation. He wields His power over every part of the universe. ***“No one can defeat His plans, prevent His purpose, or resist His will.”*** He has the right to rule the universe as He pleases, and He answers to no one in the exercise of His power. ***“His right is the right of the potter over the clay to mold that clay into whatever form He chooses.”***

He is sovereign in the use of His power, and He is completely free to use that power as He wills. He chooses to use it for the benefit of some people and the detriment of others. He miraculously delivered His people from the pharaoh in the Red Sea (Exodus 13–14), but some of the Amalekites were spared to fight again (Exodus 17). Daniel was delivered from the lions, and the three Hebrews from the fiery furnace, but Hebrews 11 tells us that

many saints suffered cruel deaths for their faith. Peter was miraculously freed from prison, but Stephen was stoned. God alone determines how He will wield His power.

He sovereignly bestows mercy on those He chooses and withholds mercy from others. He sovereignly selects certain people to be the recipients of His mercy. Moses was told that he would die without entering the Promised Land; Hezekiah was told that he would die of his illness. Both men prayed for God to relent. God denied the request of Moses but granted the request of Hezekiah. Nothing in each of the men determined God’s action; God exercised mercy freely.

God is sovereign in His love. Ephesians 1 says that God predestined the elect “in love”; the elect are loved by God. But not everyone is among the elect. No human being is deserving of His love, so the reasons for His love must reside in Him and depend on His will.

He is sovereign in the granting of His grace. By definition, grace is unmerited favor; therefore, the reason for God’s exercise of grace cannot be found in human nature or action or decision, but only in God’s sovereign purposes. God chose Israel and not the Gentile nations. He chose Jacob and not Esau. He announced the birth of His Son to humble shepherds and to wise men from Gentile countries but not to the scribes and Pharisees.



The Sovereignty of God in Creation

Before Genesis 1:1, before anything was created, when creation was only an idea in His mind, God was alone in His sovereign splendor. There were no angels, no stars and planets, no land or sea, no trees or flowers, no animals, no human beings. God was under no obligation to create anything, and creation adds nothing to Him. He created the universe for His own pleasure, for His own reasons, and according to His own design. Creation demonstrates His sovereign freedom to do as He wills

He could have created something quite different, yet He chose to create this universe. We are staggered by the sheer size of the universe and by the number of stars and galaxies it contains. Our planet is the perfect distance from the sun to prevent it from burning or freezing. Water and air and soil

provide what is needed for life.

We are astonished at the immense variety of living things He has created. There are thousands of species of plants and animals, but each species is different, and each individual within a species is unique. Some plants are good to eat; others are poisonous. Some are smooth to the touch; others have spines or thorns. Some animals can be tamed to serve human beings; others are untamable predators. Some are harmless; others are venomous. Elephants and whales are massive; mice and mites are tiny.

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The Sovereignty of God In Creation

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“Look at the animal kingdom and note the wondrous variety. What comparison is possible between the lion and the lamb, the bear and the kid, the elephant and the mouse? Some are of use to man, others appear to be quite valueless; some live for centuries, others a few months at most; some are tame, others fierce.”

The angelic realm also shows great variety. The Scriptures mention archangels, cherubim, and seraphim, along with “powers” and “rulers” in the heavens. The devil and a great numbers of angels rebelled against God; others are called the “elect angels” (1 Timothy 5:21).

And, of course, consider the great diversity among human beings. In addition to their different physical characteristics, people differ in language, intelligence, temperament, character, and so on. God in His sovereignty has decreed this great variety, and He did so for His own pleasure and for His own purposes.

And everything He has created—from the vastness of the universe to the smallest atom, orderly laws and endless diversity, our life-sustaining planet and the hostile environments of outer space—results in glory to Him. And He did not simply create it all and leave it to fend for itself; He actively governs every creature.

CBS

The Sovereignty of God in Administration

What would happen to this world if it were left on its own? Though the laws of nature provide a certain amount of consistency, there is a lot of variation. No two seasons are exactly alike. Weather can be unpredictable. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, fires, and other events can cause great upheaval. If there is no ultimate control, if nature is free to act without restraint, where can we find any sense of security? Would we not be forced to adopt a fatalistic view of life?

If we apply the same reasoning to human behavior, what are the possibilities? If people are absolutely free and if God does not restrain human activity, what future do we have? What if the majority of people chose evil over good? What if one group imposed its will on the whole world through violence? What if there were no rule of law? What is to prevent worldwide anarchy and chaos?

Christians, with Spirit-anointed eyes, see God’s sovereignty at work everywhere. Though disaster strikes, it is not as extensive as it could be. Though evil tyrants come to power, they are not able to achieve complete control. Even in the midst of chaos and turmoil, God is at work. God governs every segment of creation.

- First, God exercises His sovereignty over inanimate matter. In Genesis, He commanded the earth to bring forth plants and the plants to produce fruit. He commanded the animals to reproduce. He flooded the entire earth with water in the days of Noah. He summoned the forces of nature in the

days of Noah. He summoned the forces of nature in the plagues on Egypt. He parted the Red Sea for the Israelites, then drowned the Egyptian army in the same sea. He rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. The superheated flames of Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace did no harm to the three Hebrews, but the heat killed the guards who threw them into it. Jesus stilled the tempest and withered the fig tree. In short, the Scriptures unambiguously proclaim that God has absolute power over natural events, weather, and the heavenly bodies. His government can be seen in natural laws and in the structure of matter. **“When we complain about the weather, therefore, we are, in reality, murmuring against God.”**

- Second, God is sovereign over animals. The Scriptures abound with examples. God brought the animals to Adam to be named. The animals came to Noah’s ark. Several of the plagues in Egypt involved animal life; God not only produce the plagues, but He limited their extent (for example, the plague on livestock spared the cattle of the Israelites). He sent ravens to feed Elijah, He spared Daniel from the lions, and He sent a fish to swallow Jonah. Jesus commands a fish to provide a coin for Peter; He also produces a huge number of fish for Peter’s net. He tells His followers that He feeds the birds and clothes the lilies of the field.

- Third, God governs in human affairs. No one is outside of God’s rule.

“Every action of even the most lawless person is entirely under God’s control, and every action is, although not known to the one doing it, carrying out the secret decrees of the Most High.”

The Sovereignty of God In Administration

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In Acts 17, Paul told the Athenians that in God we live, move, and have our being. In Proverbs, we are told that though a person may make plans, it is God who carries out those plans. The parable of the rich fool teaches that God determines the day of one's death. Judas carried out God's will and fulfilled prophecy. God frustrated the efforts of those building the tower of Babel. He protected Jacob from Esau, and Joseph from his brothers. He destroyed Haman and elevated Mordecai. He moved Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. People may attempt to defy God's will, but Psalm 2 assures us that God laughs at their boasting.

● Fourth, the angels are under God's control. Angels are God's messengers and servants. God's angel led the Israelites through the wilderness. An angel freed Peter from prison. God sends angels to guide and deliver His people. Evil angels, including Satan, are subject to the Lord. In Judges 9, He sent an evil spirit to stir up rebellion among the people of Abimelech. He put a lying spirit in Ahab's prophets. He sent an evil spirit to torment King Saul. Demons obeyed Christ's command to enter 2,000 pigs. Satan could not touch Job until God gave him permission to do so. One day God will send His angels to gather His elect from all corners of the globe, and He will cast the devil and his angels into the lake of fire.

CBS

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

Salvation is completely the work of God. Some are saved, and some are not. Why is this so? It is not because some are too sinful or too hard-hearted to believe. It is not because some are naturally inclined to believe; all are dead in sin and thus are unable to come to Christ. Salvation is not the result of human effort; it is the work of all three persons of the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God the Father sovereignly chose to save certain people. All human beings are described as lumps of clay in the Potter's hands; all are by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). Left to themselves, none would come to God for salvation. Yet God, for His own purposes and for His own glory, foreknew or loved certain people; He elected and predestinated these people to eternal life. Acts 13:48 says that, in response to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, "all who were appointed for eternal life believed." According to Ephesians 1:4, we were chosen before the creation of the world. ***"Not only does God have the right to do what He wants with people, but He exercises this right. This is most plainly seen in His predestining grace."*** He not only decreed their salvation but also the means by which they come to faith.

God the Son sovereignly purchased salvation for the elect. Christ's goal was to do the will of the Father and to carry out the Father's plans. The Father chose certain people for salvation, and Jesus' work on the cross was directed toward those same people. The death of Christ satisfied God's wrath against sin. The ransom was paid in full. It purchased salvation for those the Father had predestined unto salvation. Jesus was also our substitutionary sacrifice, dying in our place. If Christ died in the place of every human being, then all are saved. However, His death was efficacious; it perfectly accomplished what it was intended to accomplish. He is now the high priest of His people, and only those people enjoy the benefits of His atonement.

"Christ did not die merely to make possible the salvation of all mankind, but to assure that everyone that the Father had given Him would be saved."

"The mission of the Holy Spirit in the world today is to deliver the benefits purchased by Christ's sacrifice." The Holy Spirit is in full agreement with the other two persons of the trinity. His work is aimed at the same people who were chosen by the Father and purchased by the Son. Because the Spirit is the sovereign God, He acts freely. Jesus compared the Spirit's work with the wind, which blows wherever it wishes. The elect are dead in their sins and are unable to respond in faith; therefore, the Spirit brings those people to life. He gives new birth to those who are spiritually dead. He produces faith in God and conviction of sin. His work completes the work of salvation begun by the Father before the foundation of the world.

"Each of the three persons in the blessed trinity is concerned with our salvation: with the Father it is predestination; with the Son propitiation; with the Spirit regeneration. The Father chose us; the Son died for us; the Spirit quickens us. The Father was concerned about us; the Son shed His blood for us; the Spirit performs His work within us."

CBS

The Sovereignty of God in Reprobation

Just as God has predestined some people to salvation, so He has predestined some to eternal judgment. The act of choosing some implies that others are not chosen. It also follows that if Jesus died for some, He did not die for others; and if the Holy Spirit quickens and gives faith to some, there are others who are not given these graces. But this is more than merely a logical inference; Scripture is clear that it was God's will that some people not be saved.

For thousands of years before the incarnation of Christ, God communicated His will to a small percentage of the human race. God limited His communication to the nation of Israel, and the only way Gentile nations could hear God's Word was through Israel. If God had wanted those nations to be saved, He would have provided a way to tell them about God and about His requirements. God decrees not only the end but the means to that end. Clearly God chose not to call people from those nations. In doing this, God is absolutely just and righteous, and those who are destined for destruction get exactly what their sins deserve.

In Joshua 11 we read that God hardened the hearts of certain people many Canaanites so that they would oppose Israel and be destroyed. Proverbs 16:4 affirms that the wicked were created for the day of judgment. In Romans 9:15, Paul quotes from Exodus the declaration that God will have mercy and compassion on those He chooses. As the Potter, God has the right to create some vessels for honor and others for dishonor. Pharaoh's heart was hardened to bring about his own destruction and thus to declare God's glory throughout the earth. Romans 11:7 contrasts the elect with those who were hardened. First Thessalonians 5:9 says that we were not appointed to wrath but to obtain salvation—again, a contrast between two groups. First Peter 2:8 says that those who “stumble” over Christ were destined for that end. And the book of Revelation makes it clear that there are some people whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life.

Having said all this, in order to prevent abuse of the doctrine of reprobation and to avoid false assumptions, it is important to specify some things that the doctrine does not mean:

First, God did not take innocent creatures, make them sin, and then damn them. All are sinners and all deserve condemnation. Had God chosen not to save any, He would still be just.

Second, reprobation doesn't mean that God refuses salvation to those who earnestly seek it. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, no one longs for the Savior.

Third, reprobation does not conflict with God's goodness. Through His general providence, God showers earthly blessings upon all people, elect and non-elect alike.

Fourth, it is impossible for any of us to know who among us are the reprobate. The most vile sinner may be quickened by the Spirit and come to Christ one day. Therefore, we must treat all people equally; we must faithfully proclaim the gospel to every creature.

The Sovereignty of God in Operation

God created this world and actively rules it. He has decreed all that has happened and that will happen. Therefore, His knowledge of the future is certain. All of His purposes for this world and for human beings will come to pass exactly as He has determined. And all His actions are designed to demonstrate His goodness, grace, and glory.

His rule produces different effects on different people. The elect are brought to life from spiritual death and given the ability to know and understand what that new life requires. They understand the depth of their sin and turn to God; then they acquire a desire for holiness. God empowers them to live the Christian life. He guides them in the way they should go. Finally, He preserves His elect and protects them from evil.

God exerts a restraining influence on the wicked, preventing them from being as evil as they could be. For example, He prevented Abimelech from having intercourse with Sarah. He prevented Joseph's brothers from killing him. He prevented Balaam from pronouncing a curse on the Israelites. He softens and influences their hearts so that they accomplish His purposes and desire to do those things that further His cause.

For example, He inclined the heart of Potiphar so that he looked upon Joseph with favor. He melted the heart of Pharaoh's daughter when she saw the Hebrew baby in the basket. Esther and Daniel found favor with the pagan kings they served. And in Isaiah, God calls Cyrus His servant because that Persian king will accomplish God's will. He directs events so that good comes from evil. This was Joseph's testimony at the end of the book of Genesis; his brothers intended evil toward him, but God intended it for good. He also hardens the hearts and blinds the minds of evil people according to His own will and purposes.

God's Sovereignty and the Human Will

The will is the faculty of choice, of decision making. But the will does not act independently. It is always influenced one way or the other, and it acts in response to that influence. Many factors have an influence on the will; the strongest influences determine the specific choice.

Human beings are born in sin, and this sinful nature binds and limits the will. The unregenerate person is not free to please God, but only to sin. The will is not morally neutral; because the person has an inclination toward sin, so does the will. Consequently, in himself or herself, a human being does not have the ability to freely choose or reject Jesus as Savior. Therefore, the concept of "free will" is a myth. We are not free to choose God unless He makes us free.

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Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Without doing away with human responsibility, God restrains evil in some cases and permits it in others. Though we are born in sin and therefore are incapable of pleasing God, we are responsible for freely choosing to sin. Because human hearts are inclined to evil, their sinful acts and their rejection of God are done freely. People act according to their own desires and inclinations, and they are responsible for those acts. The elect are changed by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's work results in new inclinations and desires.

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God's Sovereignty and Prayer

Why does God command us to pray if everything that happens has been foreordained? Prayer is one of the means God has chosen to use in accomplishing His ends. Prayer honors God. It is an act of worship in which we acknowledge our utter dependence on God, declare that He is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and cast ourselves upon His mercy.

God has also ordained prayer as a means of our spiritual growth. When we pray, we exercise faith. We gladly bring to God our burdens and care, knowing that He loves us and cares for us. When we tell God our needs, we reinforce our own awareness of our dependence on Him. In prayer, we do not change or bend the will of God; we align ourselves with His will.

"Because prayer is an attitude of dependency, the one who really prays is submissive to the divine will, which means that we are content for the Lord to supply our need according to His own sovereign pleasure."

CBS

Our Attitude Toward His Sovereignty

A proper understanding of divine sovereignty will produce some specific attitudes. First, it will produce godly fear. When there is no fear of God, people are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, they are complacent about the condition of their own souls, they deny the authority of God's Word over their lives, and they disregard God's clear commands.

Second, a vision of God's sovereignty produces obedience. Disobedience has its roots in irreverence. The obedient person doesn't pick and choose among God's commands, going along with certain commands and disregarding others. Rather, the response of the obedient saint is, "What do you want me to do?"

Third, an understanding of God's sovereignty produces complete resignation to God's will. When our plans fail, we accept the result as the will of God. When our health fails, when tragedy and disappointment come, when suffering and sorrow afflict us, we do not rail against God. ***"A true recognition of God's sovereignty will affirm God's perfect right to do with us as He wills."*** Job and Eli are just two biblical examples of people who received tragic news with equanimity because they trusted in the sovereign will of God.

Fourth, a belief in God's sovereignty produces thankfulness and joy. We are able to be thankful in every situation: pleasant or unpleasant. We are able to rejoice always. Our attitudes and emotions are shaped by God and His Word rather than by our circumstances.

Fifth, an understanding of God's sovereignty produces adoring worship. The sovereign Lord is worthy of all praise. He is not only all powerful, but He is infinitely good and wise and loving.

CBS

Difficulties and Objections

We must affirm the clear teachings of Scripture, including two that at first glance seem contradictory: divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both must be affirmed. Some people simply disregard one or the other, but that does not resolve anything. Denying one or the other requires us to deny some parts of the Word of God.

Some of the Scripture passages that seem most difficult are misread. In others, God's purpose is to communicate with human beings on their own level. In other cases, figurative language is erroneously interpreted literally. In other cases, people have used an isolated Scripture as the basis for a doctrinal judgment without taking the trouble to compare that passage with others that can throw light on its meaning. For example, passages that describe the electing love of God are often misapplied to the whole human race.

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The Value of This Doctrine

The doctrine of divine sovereignty has a number of desirable effects in the life of the Christian. First, it deepens our reverence for God's character. When we realize He is sovereign, we will honor Him in our thoughts, and we will give Him His proper place in our hearts.

Second, the doctrine shows the *"unfathomable depth of His wisdom."* When we consider that the holy God uses sin for His purposes, the all-powerful God allows Satan to wage war against Him and His creation, the loving God decreed the death of His Son, and the God of grace condemns millions to the lake of fire, we must humbly acknowledge that His thoughts are far above our thoughts and His ways high above our ways.

Third, the doctrine tells us that His will is irreversible. Despite what our experience may suggest, we can rest assured that no plan of His can be thwarted. This is a source of great comfort.

Fourth, the doctrine magnifies His grace. Because salvation is of God and not of us, everything pertaining to the salvation of the elect and the condemnation of the lost emphasizes the meaning of grace.

Fifth, the doctrine is the solid foundation of the Christian faith. No other foundation is suitable. The doctrine puts God in His rightful place and puts us in ours. He does not serve us; we serve Him. We desire to be conformed to Him rather than trying to force Him to conform to us. Divine sovereignty makes the difference between worshipping God and participating in meaningless activity.

Sixth, the doctrine exposes the heresy of salvation by works. It is not true that salvation depends equally upon divine action and human action, as if God were helpless to save without human cooperation. Rather, the doctrine affirms that human action (repentance, faith, obedience) are the result of God's action. Salvation is all of God.

Seventh, the doctrine is profoundly humbling. It is the most effective antidote to human pride. If we contributed anything to our salvation, we would have something to boast about. If we had the ability to keep

ourselves in the grace of God, we would have grounds to lord it over weaker Christians. When we see ourselves in the proper perspective, the response of our hearts is to humble ourselves before God. And as we humble ourselves and depend on Him completely, we find that in Him we have infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

"To bow before the sovereign will of God is one of the great secrets of peace and happiness. There can be no real submission with contentment until we are broken in spirit, that is, until we are willing and glad for the Lord to have *his* way with us."

Eighth, the doctrine gives us a sense of complete security. Safe in the hands of Him who rules all, we need fear nothing: people, circumstances, future uncertainties, or anything else. The Scriptures abound with examples of saints who faced life without fear because their confidence was in God.

Ninth, the doctrine provides comfort in sorrow. Affliction and suffering do not indicate that God's plans for us have been frustrated. The sovereign Lord has every event under control, and He works everything together to accomplish His eternal purposes.

Tenth, the doctrine enables the believer to have an attitude of joyful resignation. We can say with gladness and anticipation, "Your will be done." Because we know that God is in control and that His will is good, we can accept the circumstances of life with peace and contentment and joy.

Eleventh, the doctrine produces praise. Though we don't understand how specific events fit into His

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The Value of This Doctrine

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plan, we can praise the God who ordained and governs everything. In faith and trust, we exhibit an attitude of praise and adoration toward our King.

Twelfth, the doctrine guarantees the final triumph of good and the destruction of evil. The world, the flesh, and the devil have not had the last word. God rules. He will save and preserve His people; His will will be done.

Finally, the doctrine provides a resting place for our hearts. In light of all that has been said, we have a sure foundation for every aspect of our lives.



Conclusion

Two facts remain clear: God is absolutely sovereign and man is absolutely responsible. Admittedly, placing too much emphasis on one and ignoring the other can be hazardous. In fact, focusing on God's sovereignty and failing to maintain the accountability of the creature leads to fatalism. Conversely, working so diligently to maintain the responsibility of man that we lose sight of the sovereignty of God, ***"is to exalt the creature and dishonor the creator."***

This book was written to correct deeply held errors about the nature of God.

"In modern American culture, God is considered a far-distant spectator, and a helpless one at that ... Originally, man was made in the image and likeness of God, but today we are asked to believe in a god made in the image and likeness of man."

The doctrine of divine sovereignty is crucial to the believer's growth in grace. We acknowledge that in ourselves we are unable to live for Him, so we turn to Him who has all power in heaven and earth.

This doctrine is also crucial to our Christian service. We recognize that our responsibility is to be faithful and obedient. We do not claim credit for our successes nor do we become discouraged at what seem to be failures.



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The mission of Christian Book Summaries is to enhance the ministry of thinking Christians by providing thorough and readable summaries of noteworthy books from Christian publishers.

The opinions expressed are those of the original writers and are not necessarily those of Christian Book Summaries or its Council of Reference.

The Sovereignty of God by Arthur W. Pink. First published in 1919 by Arthur W. Pink. During most of his lifetime, Pink was not well-known or widely read. He quietly pastored churches in the United States and Australia for most of his working life. In 1922, he started a magazine entitled Studies in Scriptures which circulated among English-speaking Christians worldwide. Pink died in relative obscurity. After his death in 1952 his works were republished by The Banner of Truth Trust and reached a much wider audience as a result.

The author: Arthur W. Pink (1886–1952), an evangelist and biblical scholar, was born in Nottingham, England. At an early age he embraced theosophy, an anti-Christian belief system. He was considered a rising star in that cult, speaking at public meetings. In 1908, at the age of 22, he was dramatically converted to Christ. He became passionately devoted to the study of the Bible. He served as a pastor and itinerant Bible teacher in the United States, Australia, and England. In 1922, he started *Studies in the Scriptures*, a monthly magazine with a circulation of only about 1,000. Toward the end of his life, his ministry consisted mainly of writing books and pamphlets.

The summarizer: John Conaway is a writer and editor with over 30 years of experience in publishing and product development. He and his wife, MaryEllen, live in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Their daughter and their two grandsons live nearby. John studied at Moody Bible Institute and Roosevelt University and graduated from Loyola University in Chicago.