

What is "The Moral Government of God"?

By Dean H. Harvey

I believe that the term "Moral government of God," is equivalent to the Biblical term "Kingdom of God," or it's equivalent "Kingdom of Heaven." The earliest I have been able to find the term is in the writings of Hugo Grotius in the 17th century, but it occurs commonly in Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century. N.W. Taylor defines moral government as:

1. A moral government is an influence **on moral beings**, or on **beings capable of moral action...**
2. A perfect moral government implies **a moral governor...**
3. The influence of a perfect moral government is **designed so to control the action of moral beings, as to secure the great end of action on their part...**
4. The influence of a perfect government is **the influence of authority**¹

Charles Finney defines it as:

“Moral government consists in the declaration and administration of moral law. It is the government of free will by motives as distinguished from the government of substance by force... Moral government presides over and controls, or seeks to control the actions of free will: it presides over intelligent and voluntary states and changes of mind. It is a government of motive, as opposed to a government of forceful control exercised, or sought to be exercised, in accordance with the law of liberty, as opposed to the law of necessity. It is the administration of moral as opposed to physical law.”²

In the author's simplified definition, "the moral government of God is the method God uses to get free moral beings created in His image to live according to the way He designed them to live." God is the "moral governor" in His government of the universe of free moral beings. Moral government is the means by which every moral being is governed in most situations. Family government is moral government, with the father and mother in the role of "moral governor." Civil government is moral government, with the role of the "moral governor" being shared by various branches or individuals in that particular government. Unless some means of force or causation is used to force, cause, or coerce conformity to a governor's will, it is a moral government. A prison would have less moral government and more causative government than an human institution I can think of.

So moral government is nothing to be afraid of, and nothing to be ashamed of. It is a perfectly good theological term, even though it is not found in the Bible, but neither are "trinity", nor "rapture." The concept is certainly found in the Bible, as early as Gen. 2:16-17, where God "governed" Adam by giving him a law, with the attendant consequences, "*You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the*

knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." Adam did not obey God, and therefore suffered the consequences of disobedience.

I am convinced that everyone who believes that man is really free believes in moral government, whether or not he knows it or has ever heard of the term. Every set of parents believes in moral government, since nothing else is possible as they try to raise their children.

The theological system of Calvinism practices moral government in the everyday life of individual believers, but denies it in its creeds and theology by saying that everything which happens is the will of God, and has been decreed by Him from some time in eternity past. Calvinism's definition of God as "sovereign" requires that nothing happened which is not controlled by God. This raises all kinds of questions and theological dilemmas, such as:

- Is God the author of sin?
- Is everything that ever happened, is happening now, and ever will happen, the will of God?
- Is man really free?
- If he is not free, is he responsible for anything he does, whether good or bad?
- Does prayer ever really change anything?
- Did Jesus die as a legal "payment" for the sins of anyone? of everyone?"
- Does God in His moral government exercise "irresistible grace" on anyone?
- Are a Christian's sins, past, present, and future, all paid for, so that he is in no danger of judgment from God, no matter how he lives?

Calvinism has become the main theological system within Christianity, and most Christians hold to one or more of the tenets of Calvinism. Many, if not most, non-Christians equate Calvinism with Christianity. But if we understand that man is created in the image of God as a free moral being, and that God cannot "control" a moral being without that person ceasing to be a moral being, then there are reasonable, Biblical answers to the above questions.

So since the concept of moral government touches all aspects of life, living, and theology, the term "Moral Government" has also become a title for a system of theology which begins with the Biblical revelation that God is free, that He created men to be free, and He is "governing" them as truly free beings. This touches every aspect of theology, and would result in quite different answers from Calvinism, and in some differences from Arminianism. It is this system of theology which is sometimes feared, sometimes called heresy, and mostly misunderstood. We will address various aspects of this wonderful subject in future issues.

¹Taylor, Nathaniel W., **Lectures on the Moral Government of God, Vol. 1**, published by Clark, Austin & Smith, 1859, pp. 70

²Finney, Charles G., **Lectures on Systematic Theology**, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969, p. 6
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