

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELECTION, FREE WILL, AND HUMAN
RESPONSIBILITY?

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Introduction

For centuries there has been the intense debate between Calvinists and Arminians regarding man's involvement in salvation. This subject involves the relationship between God's sovereignty in saving people and the responsibility of people to repent and believe. The following aims to provide an approach to the so dubbed "antinomy," by exploring the possibility of reconciliation of the two concepts. After providing a definition for "election," selected Scriptures speaking of this doctrine in both the Old and New Testaments will be studied. "God's sovereignty" and "human freedom" will be explained in greater detail to avoid misunderstanding. Lastly, an attempt at an answer will be made by summarizing and synthesizing the main truths already discussed. This is not an attempt to solve the mystery contained in the question but merely to provide a way to approach it soberly.

Definition

In this section we will aim at providing a definition for the term “election” or “predestination.” In his systematic theology Culver has an excellent section where he introduces the subject to his readers. In this section we will depend quite extensively on his findings.

According to him:

“Election is strictly a salvational (soteriological) term. In connection with the doctrine of God and His works, the Bible presents a doctrine of what are styled ‘decrees.’ God is presented as in charge of history, planning it, overtaken by no surprises, including man’s free choices and what philosophers call contingency. But this, though not related, is not the same as the doctrine of election. Further, though ‘predestination’ sometimes means the same decrees, sometimes it is used to designate God’s purposes regarding fallen men only (whether elect or not); it is only rarely used as applying only to the believing, or elect.”¹

Culver goes on by providing qualifications and cautions regarding the resolving of problems and objections to election. He offers nine points regarding this which I will paraphrase:

1. Election is a manifested truth of Scripture not a notion borrowed from philosophy.
2. It is a biblical teaching not the teaching of some sect. Election was in the Bible long before anyone made either a “hobby” or “whipping boy” out of it.
3. It cannot be associated with certain pagan or philosophical notions such as kismet, Islam, karma, Moira or fate.
4. The one who is the author of election is the all-wise, gracious and loving Father.
5. In attempting to understand election one cannot avoid its difficulties.
6. To make election the main argument of one’s teaching is misleading and unbalanced.
7. We cannot go to extremes when making statements regarding the doctrine especially if the Bible does not support our views.

¹ R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 672.

8. Belief in the doctrine of election does not take away the responsibility for evil actions or the responsibility to turn to Christ.

9. Once again, we must view election as a soteriological term.

Regarding a working definition for the doctrine of election Gibson (as quoted by Culver) offers one that is insightful. He says that “Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) He hath constantly decreed by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation as vessels made to honour.”²

Is Election Fair?

I believe that there is reason to believe that even though the concept seems unfair that there is actually more reason to believe in its fairness. Terry Johnson offers a compelling answer to this age-old question. He sets out to do this by referring the reader to Romans 9-11. Here he refers the reader to the peculiarity of the fact that the Jews, who best knew the Scriptures, missed the Messiah when He came. They did not think that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. This according to him is a serious fallacy that Paul sets out to explain in this portion of Scripture. Johnson goes on by referring to the fact that Paul proceeds to answer the question concerning their unbelief of the gospel. One might be tempted to ask if the problem lies with God, or even with the gospel. Yet Paul maintains that the problem is not with any of these two. To him it is not as if the word of God has failed. The answer is to be found in something else and this is what Paul sets out to convince the reader about according to Johnson: “Then what is the answer? He

² Edgar C.S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England Explained with an Introduction*, 8th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), 47.

continues, ‘For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel’ (Rom. 9:6). Jewish unbelief is to be explained by the doctrine of election. God’s sovereign choice is the ultimate reason why some believe, and others do not. But don’t think that that this is a novel explanation. This is the way it has always been, from the beginning of redemptive (Biblical) history, he tells them.”³ Paul takes an interesting apologetic with them so that the Jews could understand the logic of his argument. He starts by telling them about Abraham. Johnson says, paraphrasing what Paul says: “Go back to Abraham. Wasn’t he elect from among the nations? Why should he and his descendants be singled out as a ‘chosen’ people? Because God determined that it should be so. God sovereignly elected him.” A dichotomy enters in when Paul enters into a discussion regarding the two sons of Abraham. It is evident that Isaac was elected by God, yet Ishmael was not. Even in the generation after Isaac we see God’s sovereign electing hand as He elects Jacob and not Esau.

It becomes clear that God actively seeks those whom He desires through His sovereign election. Johnson goes on by pointing the reader to the fact that Paul believed there was a believing remnant in Israel through election. Romans 11:5 says: “In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice.” It is at this point in the Pauline explanation of election that Johnson attempts to explain the question originally asked:

“Is this fair? Interesting that you should ask. Paul anticipates your question. We read on: ‘What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!’ (Rom. 9:14). But notice what his answer is: ‘For He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy’ (Rom. 9:15, 16). Paul doesn’t explain how it is fair. He merely asserts God’s right to do as He pleases. God answers to no one. If He wishes to show mercy He may. But He is not obligated to do so. Paul

³ Terry L. Johnson, *When grace Comes Home* (Geanies House, GB: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 20.

then points to the example of Pharaoh, whose heart God hardened and concludes: ‘So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires’ (Rom. 9:18). But it’s not just, you say. How can He blame Pharaoh when He hardened Pharaoh’s heart? Again, Paul anticipates your complaint: ‘You will say to me then, Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ (Rom. 9:19) What is the answer to that question? There isn’t one. There is no denial that His will cannot be resisted. There is just a reminder that one is approaching impertinence. You have begun to challenge the ways of God and you don’t know what you are talking about.”⁴

Then there is no denial of the fact that even though this doctrine appears unfair there is no reason to challenge God in His election of human beings. As God’s creation we do not have the right to question Him as to why He deals with His creatures the way He does.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament we find a limited number of examples concerning the question of the eternal election of certain individuals unto life. It is believed that the final destination to which God was leading the chosen ones was described in terms that, to a large extent, seem purely temporal and social. Through this it became ever clearer that God had in mind the personal happiness of His chosen ones in a future life which will be spent forever with Him. Farrelly says that since Paul witnessed in God’s choosing of Israel that he was planning for the future inclusion of a larger group of people. The investigation of God’s activity in the Old Testament in which He chooses some and rejects others is relevant to the question at hand.⁵

⁴ Johnson goes on by quoting Romans 9:20-22 in proving his answer: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, Why did you make me like this, will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?” Terry L. Johnson, *When grace Comes Home*, 22.

⁵ M.J. Farrelly, *Predestination, Grace, and Free Will* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1964), 39.

The presence of God's election of people becomes evident to the reader as early as the creation account. According to Farrelly in this account (looking specifically at the relation of God to Adam and Eve) the main elements of the response to the question becomes evident:

“The different parts of the world with their goodness are seen to result from God's free, sovereign, and creative will. With the same free initiative he created man and set him to dwell in Eden, where God walked in friendship and intimacy with him. Adam was given an enduring life and a harmony with God, with himself, with his wife, and with the rest of the world over which he was given dominion. But the continuance of this state was made dependent upon his obedience to God's command. Because he rejected God's order, he was thrown out of the garden and stripped of the privileges he had enjoyed there. But even in this condition of estrangement from his maker, and before he had done anything to reverse it, God promised him victory over the evil one who had drawn into opposition to God, and in this victory a return to friendship with God.”⁶

What we experience thus through reading the creation account is that though man came in opposition to God, God restored this lost relationship with Him by intervening in the fate man had caused for himself. In this account we are also made aware by the author that the cause of man's state of hopelessness was something that they brought over themselves. Farrelly indicates that the author of Genesis had the intention to “show men religious truths relevant to their own experience, and thus the elements of God's relation to Adam not indicated as proper to man's condition as innocent remain true in his relation to Adam's descendants.”⁷ The teaching of these first chapters of the book of Genesis is to show the reader that everything that man possessed, came from God. He says that “we see that all man's goods come from God's free gift not elicited by a previous good in man. Man's present goods come from God's past gifts; and his future goods, to which he looks forward, come from God's past promises, the endurance and the fulfillment of which for individual men are wholly conditioned upon man's not rejecting God's

⁶ M.J Farrelly, *Predestination, Grace, and Free Will*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*

commands.”⁸ From this section it becomes clear then that God takes the first initiative in the “election” of man as such. God created man, and then he placed him in the garden where he was his God. I was man who caused the division between him and God as is evidenced in the account of the fall.

In this example we find the first component of human responsibility to obey God. It must be said that although God created and elected Adam and Eve that they had to prove their love for God by their obedience thus not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God left them with the responsibility to show their love for Him by obeying Him and by also glorifying Him in caring for the creation. Apart from this they also received the mandate to multiply and to populate the earth.

Another example of God’s unconditional election of human beings is found in the life of Abraham. There is nothing that points the reader to the fact that Abraham was by any means worthy of God’s election of him. In fact, Abraham was an idolater when God had first revealed himself unto him.⁹ We see that God’s ultimate purpose for electing Abraham becomes clear through the promises God makes to him. Once again this is not contingent upon any good that Abraham has done from his side but purely because of God’s graciousness towards Abraham. The outworking of the promise was however contingent upon Abraham’s faith in God. Farrelly points us to the fact that Abraham could have refused to believe God and to respond in obedience

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Nothing is written to indicate that Abraham had made himself particularly worthy of God’s gift at the time of his first call by God. Yet at the very first call, God made to him a promise that included all the later gifts Abraham was to receive from him: In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. M.J Farrelly, *Predestination, Grace, and Free Will*, 40-41.

towards Him. Therefore God's call of Abraham must be interpreted as being conditioned upon Abraham's response.¹⁰

Thus, in this event we find yet another example of how God's election of man is connected to the responsibility of man to respond in obedience. Abraham was an idolater who did not even know about the existence of God until He revealed himself unto Abraham. From this point forward we see that it becomes important for Abraham to respond in a certain way. God becomes pleased by Abraham's response since he does indeed respond in faith.

Later in Genesis chapter 15 God promises unto Abraham that He will give him a son who comes from his own body. He said to Abraham that "one who will come from your own body, he shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4). God explains the weight of His promise to Abraham by pointing him to the stars and telling him that as the stars are innumerable so also will his descendants be innumerable. Here we find reference to the fact that God's promises and the election of Abraham is once again contingent upon his response to God. It says in verse 6: "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Clearly here God finds faith in Abraham once again and this is acceptable to God. Abraham thus becomes a prime example of one who responds properly to God and who is accepted by God accordingly.

God is also seen as electing Israel as nation, years after Abraham already died. It is said by Peterson that God's election of Israel is particular. He says "He (God) did not choose Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon, but chose Israel alone out of all the nations (Deut. 7:6; 10:15; 14:2). Although some might think this is unfair, it is God's gracious act to one sinful people among all that deserved his judgment."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peterson, Robert A. Spr 2007. The Bible's story of election. *Presbyterian*. 33 (1):31-43.

New Testament

Various References

In the New Testament we find a large number of texts that refer to the fact that God calls sinners and in so doing elects them. This is however evidenced in the Old Testament examples which also speak of the responsibility of man to respond to God in faith. The first texts that we will discuss are Matthew 20:16 and 22:14. Here we find Jesus saying the words that “many are called, but few are chosen.” Fisk in quoting Alexander Maclaren points the reader to the fact that those who do not respond to the invitation of the king show themselves to not be chosen. So also do the ones who do not want to put on the wedding garment. Even though these individuals were called they were clearly not chosen. Clearly from this text one can gather that we cannot understand the secrets of God in His election of us but that everyone has the clear responsibility to respond favourably to the king’s invitation.¹²

Another word from the Lord Jesus regarding our election in Him is available in John 6:44 where He says that “no man can come to Me, except the father which hath sent Me draw him.” Fisk does not see this verse as problematic as it might appear. He refers the reader to the very next verse (45). This verse says: “It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught of God.” This verse is interpreted by him as referring to the human responsibility of obedience. Fisk also offers insight in pointing us to the context of John 6:44. He says that the context in which this is given necessitates that we view it in light of man’s responsibility to turn to God. He says: “In chapter 5:40 Jesus revealed the responsible part which man plays, in the words, ‘and ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life.’ The indication is that they could come, but the fault was squarely on them, ‘ye will not.’”¹³

¹² S. Fisk, *Election and Predestiantion: Keys to a Clearer Understanding* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 94-96.

¹³ S. Fisk, *Election and Predestiantion: Keys to a Clearer Understanding*, 97.

In John 6:65 we find yet another statement by Jesus regarding the fact that salvation is only made possible if God draws people to himself. He says: “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by the Father.” Sproul comments in the following manner regarding this verse. Firstly, he refers to the fact that the first element of this teaching is a universal negative. In other words, one should interpret the words “no one” as including everyone, thus being “all-inclusive.” These words do not allow for any exception to what they are stating except we find words that qualify them. Jesus goes ahead and does just this. The word “can” also deserves a closer look because it shows the reader in which way that which follows should be viewed. This word is interpreted by Sproul as referring to “ability” not “permission.” What Jesus is saying in this verse is not that no one is allowed to come to Him, rather, that no one is ‘able’ to come to Him. The word following is just as important. It places a condition on what has gone before it. We can therefore say that “unless” something happens then the other thing will not occur. Sproul goes on by saying:

“The meaning of Jesus words is clear. No human being can possibly come to Christ unless something happens that makes it possible for him to come. That necessary condition Jesus declares is that ‘it has been granted to him by the Father.’ Jesus is saying here that the ability to come to him is a gift from God. Man does not have the ability in and of himself to come to Christ. God must do something first. The passage teaches at least this much: It is not within fallen man’s natural ability to come to Christ on his own, without some kind of divine assistance.”¹⁴

Thus, we should take this passage to refer to our salvation as only something that God brings about. God has to be the one who first draws us to himself. We have also seen that it is impossible for anyone to come to Jesus in that we do not possess the ability to do so. The Father has to grant the ability to do so.

¹⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 68..

Paul also has a lot to say about our election in Christ. Not only in the epistle to the Romans, as will be touched on later, but also in the letter to the Ephesians do we find clear indications of the reality of election. In the opening verses of the epistle Paul makes reference to the fact that the Ephesian believers have been “predestined” through adoption. He says in 1:5: “...he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...” What this means according to Hoehner is that saints who are chosen by God are predestined as adopted sons (and daughters) of God.¹⁵ He goes on to say that those who were formerly called “sons of disobedience” and “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:2-3), do not have any obligations to their old father the devil anymore. They are now seen as God’s sons and daughters and they are controlled by him accordingly.¹⁶ Hoehner offers this insight into Paul’s reference to predestination:

“...predestination puts more emphasis on the ‘what’ than the ‘who.’ God took the initiative to predetermine our destiny as adopted sons into the family of God. He accomplished this through (διὰ) his Son Jesus Christ to bring us to (εἰς) God himself. This was done all according (κατὰ) to his pleasure freely operating from his own will. Because he has predestined us, he chose us out of all humanity. These actions are not only the basis of every spiritual blessing but also are the spiritual blessings themselves. Is it any wonder that God is to be praised!”¹⁷

We have thus been accepted in the beloved. This act of acceptance is something that God does for us. We do not accept him. Because of this when we are accepted by God. There is nothing that we can do to fall out of grace again. Parsons writes: “...if it is God who accepts us, it is God who keeps us.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2002), 196.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 199.

¹⁸ Burk Parsons, *Assured by God: Living in the Fullness of God’s Grace* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 27.

Instrumentality of Christ

From the above it becomes clear to us that Christ is the medium through whom God chooses to save us. The instrumentality of Christ is seen by Shank in the derivation of His ministry of mediation between God and man.¹⁹ He says the following:

“The mediatorial office of Jesus Christ is among the greatest themes of Holy Scripture – a theme that, as a golden chain, binds together all the blessings for which Paul praises God in his doxology in the Epistle to the Ephesians: through Christ come gracious blessings in the fullness of times (1:10) when God will continue to show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus (2:7).

The mediatorial work of Jesus Christ is seen as pivotal to our election by God. Furthermore, the Gospels are seen by Shank as abounding with assertions regarding the necessity of Jesus’ death on the cross for the redemption of men.²⁰ He points our attention to one of these examples found in Luke 24: 44-48:

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’”

If we do not preach Christ as the means of salvation, we totally miss the true message of the Bible. Taylor believes one of the pitfalls any Christian can fall into regarding the espousing of any system of teaching is to adopt a theology that blatantly undermines the efficacy of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.²¹

¹⁹ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Springfield: Westcott Publishers, 1970), 33.

²⁰ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son*, 34-35.

²¹ F. Taylor, Sr., R. McClurkin & H. Mackay, *Biblical Balance in Free Will and Election* (Toronto: Everyday Publications, 1979), 5.

The New Testament View of Election

The New Testament can be interpreted as conveying a certain message regarding the doctrine of election. Wayne Grudem offers insight in this regard by drawing our attention to three components regarding the New Testament's presentation of the doctrine of election firstly as a comfort, secondly as a reason to praise God and thirdly, as an encouragement to evangelism.²²

Comforting

It can be said that the New Testament offers the doctrine of election as a comfort for believers. Grudem draws our attention to Romans 8:28 where Paul uses knowledge of the doctrine of election as a comfort. He says: "And we know for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." According to him, when Paul writes about this truth, he does so by giving God's work of election as a reason for believing in this truth. The comfort lies in these words that follow in verses 29-30: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." Grudem says that "Paul's point is to say that God has always acted for the good of those whom he called to himself. If Paul looks into the distant past before the creation of the world, he sees that God has determined to give perfect, glorified bodies to those who believe in Christ. From eternity to eternity God has acted with the good of his people in mind."²³ Paul is also seen to take this line

²² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 673.

²³ Ibid.

of reasoning to its logical conclusion thus saying that in the present circumstances of the believer God will also make everything work together for his/her good. In this way the doctrine of election is seen as comforting.

Reason to Praise God

Grudem also sees the doctrine of election as a reason to praise God. He refers us to Ephesians 1:12 which reads that “we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.” Moreover, Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers and he qualifies the reason for their giving of thanks. He says that “we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you” (1 Thess. 1:4). Grudem agrees with this by saying: “The reason Paul can give thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians is that he knows God is ultimately responsible for their salvation and has in fact chosen them to be saved. This is made even clearer in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: ‘But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved.’”²⁴

In this Grudem sees the obligation of Paul to give thanks to God for the salvation of the Thessalonians. Not because of their own doing however, but only as a result of God’s election of them. In this Paul praises God for having saved them instead of praising the Thessalonians. Grudem concludes this section by saying regarding the doctrine of election: “Understood in this way, the doctrine of election does increase praise given to God for our salvation and seriously diminishes any pride that we might feel if we thought that our salvation was due to something good in us or something for which we should receive credit.”²⁵ Ultimately then, God is to be praised for His choice of those who are saved.

²⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 674.

²⁵ Ibid.

Encouraging Us to Evangelize

Lastly, the doctrine of election offers us a profound reason to be actively involved in evangelism. Once again Grudem refers us to the apostle Paul this time in the letter of second Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2:10 Paul says: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” What Paul is saying through this is firstly, that he agrees that God has chosen some individuals unto salvation and secondly, that he will do everything in his power to preach the gospel. Grudem says that “He (Paul) knows that God has chosen some people to be saved, and he sees this as an encouragement to preach the gospel, even if it means enduring great suffering.”²⁶ Furthermore Paul is left to say that he will suffer greatly just so that the elect would be saved. As those who have been elected by God we should have the same attitude as Paul.

An Accurate Approach

God’s Sovereignty

One might want to ask what happens first then. Is it God who elects us first, or do we first respond in faith? Can it even be that both of these happen simultaneously? R.C. Sproul makes clear that it is important that we do not get off track in our protection of the freedom of man when we discuss predestination. The crucial importance of the sovereignty of God must be considered first. Opening his discussion of the topic Sproul says the following: “Though God is not a creature, he is personal, with supreme dignity and supreme freedom. We are aware of the ticklish problems surrounding the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human freedom.

²⁶ Ibid.

We must also be aware of the close relationship between God's sovereignty and God's freedom. The freedom of a sovereign is always greater than the freedom of his subjects."²⁷

In attempting to answer this question then, we cannot go a step further without having viewed God in the above mentioned manner. He is indeed the sovereign of all His creation and we have to view his actions as just. One can go as far as saying that the rejection of the sovereignty of God is tantamount to atheism as Sproul illustrates. Having asked a classroom of students if they agree with the statement from the Westminster confession that "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass," he illustrated unto those who did not agree with the quoted statement that if one does not believe that God foreordains everything in the universe he cannot rightfully be God. He says the following in explaining his belief: "That God in some sense foreordains whatever comes to pass is a necessary result of his sovereignty. In itself it does not plead for Calvinism. It only declares that God is absolutely sovereign over his creation. God can foreordain things in different ways. But everything that happens must at least happen by his permission. If he permits something, then he must decide to allow it. If He decides to allow something, then in a sense he is foreordaining it. Who, among Christians, would argue that God could not stop something in this world from happening? If God so desires, he has the power to stop the whole world. To say that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over his entire creation. If something could come to pass apart from his sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate his sovereignty. If God refused to permit something to happen and it happened anyway, then whatever caused it to happen would have more authority and power than God himself."²⁸

²⁷ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 23-24.

²⁸ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 26.

I agree with Sproul's insightful illustration. If the slightest possibility exists that God could not rule completely over His creation, then it must be assumed that there is room that God cannot rule perfectly over that which He had created. This touches on one of the attributes that separates God from His creation. Sproul concluded this lecture unto his students having persuaded them that divine sovereignty is not an issue peculiar to Calvinism, or even Christianity. He says that "without sovereignty God cannot be God. If we reject divine sovereignty, then we must embrace atheism. This is the problem we all face. We must hold tightly to God's sovereignty. Yet we must do it in such a way so as not to violate human freedom. The concept of human freedom will also become the next topic we will discuss in the pursuit of a proper view of election and human responsibility in the Bible. If we are unbalanced in our view the consequences could be serious.

Human Freedom

Most or all Christians take comfort in the fact that they serve an all knowing, sovereign God who holds all the events of the past, present, and future in his hand. To most of us knowing this is indeed calming when we view the fall of society around us. Yet one might be spurred to desire knowledge regarding the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom.

Some believe that the will is bound by the sinful state of mankind as becomes evident in the following explanation by Storms: "Is man free? My answer, or rather, the answer of the Bible, is no. A man's will is the extension and the expression of his nature. As he is, so he wills. A man is no more free to act or will contrary to his nature than an apple tree is free to produce acorns."²⁹ Yet Pasewark explaining Luther's understanding of predestination and human

²⁹ C. Samuel Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 37.

freedom says because grace is external to those who benefit from it, it cannot change or remove freedom in the world.³⁰ What must be our approach then?

Sproul agrees to the magnitude of the problem that we face in trying to answer this question. He says that we might take a “fight or flight” approach, since we are either tempted to settle for a superficial answer that is at least logical, or to “take a turn and run as fast as we can from it.”³¹ And as is the case with most of us he agrees that most of us decide to run. Sproul goes on by telling about the most common explanation which is to say that “divine sovereignty and human freedom are contradictions that we must have the courage to embrace.”³²

Accordingly, he refers us to some of the analogies that were offered him when he was in college: “As a college student I heard two analogies that gave me temporary relief, like a theological package of Roloids: Analogy #1 – ‘God’s sovereignty and human freedom are like parallel lines that meet in eternity.’ Analogy #2 – ‘God’s sovereignty and human freedom are like ropes in a well. On the surface they seem to be separate, but in the darkness of the bottom of the well they come together.’”³³ Sproul says that he was quite relieved having heard these analogies. He goes on to say that he had great dissatisfaction with these analogies in the end since two parallel lines cannot eventually meet in eternity. This concept seems to be contradictory to natural science or logic. It led him to the following consideration: “If human and divine sovereignty are real contradictions, then one of them, at least, has to go. If sovereignty

³⁰ Pasewark, Kyle A. Spr. 1998. Predestination as a Condition of Freedom. *Lutheran Quarterly*. (1): 57-78.

³¹ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ R.C Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 39-40.

excludes freedom and freedom excludes sovereignty, then either God is not sovereign or man is not free.”³⁴

Sproul is convinced however that we can keep both concepts if we can prove that they are not contradictory. He draws our attention to the difference between “freedom” and “autonomy.” He illustrates this by referring to the example of people who live in a country where a monarch rules. These citizens are said to have freedom in the land which is obviously governed by the king. So then, at a human level it becomes possible for us to see that it is possible for people to live in a land with a certain measure of freedom. This leads us to the term “autonomy.” Sproul explains it in this way:

“The word comes from the prefix ‘auto’ and the root ‘nomos.’ Auto means ‘self.’ An automobile is something that moves itself. ‘Automatic’ describes something that is self-acting. The root ‘nomos’ is the Greek word for ‘law.’ The word autonomy means, then, ‘self-law.’ To be autonomous means to be a law unto oneself. An autonomous creature would be answerable to no one. He would have no governor, least of all a sovereign governor. It is logically impossible to have a sovereign God existing at the same time as an autonomous creature. The two concepts are utterly incompatible. To think of their coexistence would be like imagining the meeting of an immovable object and an irresistible force. What would happen? If the object moved, then it could no longer be considered immovable. If it failed to move, then the irresistible force would no longer be irresistible.”³⁵

It thus becomes clear that the problem does not lie with human freedom as such but rather with human autonomy. The problem with autonomy lies in the fact that it implies absolute freedom. As those who have been created by God for his purposes we cannot view ourselves as being absolutely free. Our freedom is limited as determined by God himself.

³⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 41.

³⁵ R.C Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 41-42.

Arminianism

At this point it becomes necessary to explain how it can be possible for us to misrepresent the freedom of man. The theology of the free choices of man has historically been termed ‘Arminianism’ named after Joseph Arminius, a Dutch theologian who popularized the view. Grudem defines it as “a theological tradition that seeks to preserve the free choices of human beings and denies God’s providential control over the details of all events.”³⁶

In his response to Norman Geisler’s “Chosen but Free” White commenting on Geisler’s interpretation of Hebrews 7:22-25 says the following:

“...as we have seen, the Arminian says God decrees to save, but leaves the identity of who will be saved to the free choices of human beings. They might be tempted to insert this over-riding concern into the passage as well by pointing to the fact that Jesus saves ‘those who draw near to God through Him.’ ‘Obviously, drawing near to God involves an act of free will’ would be the assertion, again placing the first power of choice in the hands of the sinner. But, of course, we have already seen that Jesus taught that no man is able to exercise this kind of ‘coming’ unless it is granted by the Father...”³⁷

The above quoted is an example of the thinking of the Arminian and the one who believes in God’s sovereignty alike. Dave Hunt, a popular proponent of Arminianism says of Arminianism that “there are so many evangelical historians who praise Arminius as thoroughly orthodox in his doctrine that one finds it difficult to understand why he is held in such disrespect by Calvinists.”³⁸ Yet I do not believe that the kind of Arminianism believed in by Hunt is exactly what Arminius believed in.

Here follows a comparison between Arminianism and Calvinism as found in Nettleton³⁹:

³⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 1236.

³⁷ James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 2000), 240.

³⁸ D. Hunt, *What Love is This?* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002), 78.

³⁹ David Nettleton, *Chosen to Salvation* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1983), 43.

ARMINIANISM	CALVINISM
<p>Depravity Man is depraved, lost, guilty, but has been helped so that he can believe if he will.</p>	<p>Depravity Man is totally depraved. He is dead. Depravity indicates inability. Man's will is not free, but enslaved by sin.</p>
<p>Election God elected those whom He foresaw would believe.</p>	<p>Election God's election rested solely in His own sovereign will. It is not based on anything foreseen in man.</p>
<p>Redemption Christ died to provide salvation for all. Those who believe will be saved.</p>	<p>Redemption Christ died to provide salvation for all and to secure and guarantee salvation for the elect. Faith is necessary to salvation, and faith is certain since the means as well as the end are secured. This is known as particular redemption and sometimes called limited atonement (a poor term).</p>
<p>Obedience Man can obey the gospel call or disobey and reject. God's grace is not invincible, but can be and often is rejected and thwarted by man.</p>	<p>Obedience Man can obey the gospel call or disobey, but God makes certain that the inward call to the elect is willingly obeyed. God's plan of election is invincible and will not be thwarted.</p>
<p>Security Believers can lose their salvation. (Arminius was uncertain about this).</p>	<p>Security True believers are eternally secure.</p>

For the sake of brevity, it will be accepted in light of the preceding discussion on the Sovereignty of God and human freedom (as explained by Sproul) that man's will is bound and only has this inborn inclination – to choose for death. Therefore, the theological system of Arminianism cannot be viewed as an accurate approach to God's working in the saving of human beings.

Furthermore, Hunt believes that there is “neither a biblical nor rational reason why God in His sovereignty could not give to all mankind the power of choice.”⁴⁰ At first glance, what Hunt suggests may be the most reasonable thing for God to do. On closer inspection however,

⁴⁰ D. Hunt & J. White, *Debating Calvinism* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 49.

what would have been most reasonable for God to do is the total annihilation of the human race for any sin, since He is holy. For this reason, it is perhaps better to look at it from the perspective of human beings. We are bound in sins and transgressions, not so much because God chose not to give us free will, rather, as a race, when we still had freedom of choice that was graciously given by God (Gen. 2:16; 3:17), “*in Adam*” (Rom. 5:12) all of us indirectly chose to protest and rebel against God which led to our total depravity and bound will. This said, it is very difficult to understand, perhaps impossible, to arrive at a clear-cut explanation for the inter-relatedness between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. This brings us to the point where we need to push for balance in the argument.

Free Will vs. Sovereignty

What we must realize when we deal with the topic of the relationship between God’s sovereignty and the will of man is that we are dealing with something that we will probably never understand this side of eternity. Nettleton agrees when he says that:

“Mystery must be admitted. How can God be sovereign and how can man be responsible? How can there be responsibility without ability? How can limits be placed on an infinite sacrifice? Mystery there is and mystery there must be. The best of minds has bowed before the mystery. Great preachers have strongly emphasized both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. All that we can hope for is an erasure of ignorance and misunderstanding in these areas, and a willingness to be patient, kind and humble.”⁴¹

How do we proceed in making sure that we are not guilty of misunderstanding? I think it starts with a proper understanding of both of the concepts that are in the equation. We need to have a proper understanding of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. I agree with Sproul’s explanation of the two concepts. He finds agreement with Grudem when he explains:

⁴¹ David Nettleton, *Chosen to Salvation*, 44.

“...when we ask whether we have ‘free will,’ it is important to be clear as to what is meant by the phrase. Scripture nowhere says that we are ‘free’ in the sense of being outside of God’s control or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything. (This is the sense in which many people seem to assume we must be free...) Nor does it say we are ‘free’ in the sense of being able to do right on our own apart from God’s power. But we are nonetheless free in the greatest sense that any creature of God could be free – we make *willing* choices, choices that have *real effects*. We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions. We must insist that we have the power of *willing* choice; otherwise we will fall into the error of fatalism or determinism and thus conclude that our choices do not matter, or that we cannot really make willing choices. On the other hand, the kind of freedom that is demanded by those who deny God’s providential control over all things, a freedom to be outside of God’s sustaining and controlling activity, would be impossible if Jesus Christ is indeed ‘continually carrying along things by his word of power’ (Heb. 1:3, author’s translation).”

In this sense we need to remind ourselves that balance is very important to ensure a proper understanding of the interplay between the two concepts under discussion. It is as if we are balancing ourselves on the tightrope of interpretation. The Bible is our balancing pole and it is the only instrument that helps us not to lose our balance. If we go too far to the one side, we make ourselves guilty of fatalism, determinism or hyper-Calvinism. If we go too far to the other side, we make ourselves guilty of Semi-Pelagianism as MacArthur explains. He says: “the gist of Semi-Pelagianism is that human depravity, while real, is not really *total*. Sinners are still good enough to be able to lay hold of saving grace on their own. Saving grace, therefore, is a response to human initiative rather than the efficient cause of our salvation.”⁴² He goes on to describe how this view was denounced by several church councils starting with the Second Council of Orange in 529. Along with this he mentions that numerous influential teachers throughout church history have proposed variations and modification, avoiding being labelled Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian. These teachers however still sought a way to promote the idea that salvation is reliant on human

⁴² Burk Parsons, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology* (Orlando: Reformation trust Publishing, 2008), 132.

free will. MacArthur goes on to say that Arminianism takes exactly this approach.⁴³ It must be the aim of every serious Christian not to fall in the trap of imbalance as may be the case with any of these views.

Another issue that once again deserves to be mentioned is that God does not owe anyone anything. He only owes to be true to himself. J.I Packer brilliantly draws our attention to this:

“We can only claim from him justice – and justice, for us, means certain condemnation. God does not owe it to anyone to stop justice taking its course. He is not obliged to pity and pardon; if he does so it is an act done, as we say, ‘of his own free will,’ and nobody forces his hand. ‘It does not depend on man’s will or effort, but on God’s mercy’ (Rom 9:16 NEB). Grace is free, in the sense of being self-originated and of proceeding from One who was free not to be gracious. Only when it is seen that what decides each individual’s destiny is whether or not God resolves to save him from his sins, and that this is a decision which God need not make in any single case, can one begin to grasp the biblical view of grace.”⁴⁴

The grace of God then should be viewed as that which God did not even have to make available unto us since we are so wicked. Yet, He does choose people to be saved. In summary, we must conclude that our free will is truly limited and one sided (leading to death). God in His infinite grace elects people unto salvation and so gives them true free choice. Election and human responsibility may seem to be contradictory yet both are present in the Bible and thus we have to embrace both. It is not a blind embracing. We know how election and human freedom works since these concepts are explained in the Word. But the best we will do in reconciling

⁴³ MacArthur proceeds in explaining how Arminianism was formed: “This view, of course, arose in reaction to Calvinism; it wasn’t a significant factor until some fifty years after John Calvin’s death. But in order to understand the various ways people have tried to avoid the implications of total depravity, it might be helpful to summarize Arminianism... The Arminian position is based on a slight modification of the Semi-Pelagian principle. (In fact, many who call themselves Arminians today are actually Pelagians or Semi-Pelagians.) No true Arminian would deliberately deny that Adam’s sin left his progeny depraved and in bondage to sin. But according to the Arminian scheme, a measure of ‘prevenient grace’ has been universally granted to sinners, nullifying or mitigating the effects of the fall. It’s not enough grace for salvation, but just enough to restore a small measure of volitional liberty to the sinners. Therefore, Arminians believe it is now possible for sinners who hear the gospel to make their own free-will choice about whether to receive it.” Ibid.

⁴⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 132.

these two concepts is to agree along with Packer that we are undeserving to begin with and therefore to rejoice in God's election of us.

Is it the will of God to save all people? At first glance 1 Timothy 2:3-4 might seem to teach this: "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." The verb "desire" may be misunderstood in this sense. Demarest suggests that God is bound to His position as judge and must therefore judge the wicked accordingly, however this is something he does not delight in.⁴⁵ 2 Peter 3:9 poses the same problem: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Since the "you" and "any" can be understood as referring to the elect, we must understand the passage as expressing God's desire for His entire elect to come in before He comes in judgment.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Election unto salvation is a biblical doctrine which cannot be denied. The respective biblical texts are clear and unambiguous leading us to the understanding that unless God first regenerates the sinner unto salvation, preceded by his sovereign election and effectual calling of them, no one can be saved. From a human perspective it may appear that faith and repentance are the first steps leading to the new birth, however, without God's sovereign election of the sinner and his regenerating work in their lives, no one will ever respond in faith through repentance.

⁴⁵ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 143.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The doctrine of election is as intricate as it is interesting. However, we need not be intimidated by it since it is something that God has revealed in His Word. The best we can do is to agree that both God's sovereignty and human responsibility are clearly taught in the Bible and attempt to live according to our knowledge of it. We do not need to be ashamed to say that we believe God elects individuals, yet at the same token, we should not see predestination as a reason to be passive in our responsibility to evangelise the lost.

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