

The Sovereignty of God and the Freewill of Man

By

Jeff Sievertson

Thesis Statement:

Since the advent of the computer, software engineers have been designing computer models to analyze such phenomena as the weather, movements of the heavenly bodies, structural integrity of various materials, and the explosion of nuclear weapons. These models have been built upon empirical data that have been accumulated over the years. As new data is acquired it is then incorporated into these models to give better and more accurate predictions. Man of course, is limited in his knowledge, but God on the other hand is without bounds when it comes to His understanding of all things. It's this authors contention that the sovereignty of God and the freewill of man can be best understood when seen from a design standpoint, as apposed to the other models presented by theologians.

Introduction

The sovereignty of God and the free will of man has been the subject of many debates throughout the centuries. Such men as Augustine, Pelagius, Calvin, Erasmus, Arminius, Luther, Whitefield, and Wesley have tried to define and categorize a controversial topic which some consider to be an irreconcilable paradox. Inevitably, for the Christian, this leads to the question; “What part do I play in my salvation?” Much of this falls under the theological field of Soteriology; which is the study of salvation in relation to Jesus Christ.¹

So many questions arise out of this topic. For example; has the ability for us to exercise our will been removed by God, even to the point that we cannot make even the smallest of decisions? Or is it the other end of the spectrum where God has set things in motion and the rest is up for us to decide? Often times, the best solution is found somewhere in between these two extremes; however is this the official position taken by Scripture?

Others ask; if my salvation is within my hands, then might I loose it? Where then is eternal security as illustrated by Romans 8:38, 39? If we do have freewill then what are its limitations? But then again, how can God be sovereign if he does not rule over the hearts of men? Can there be a middle ground that allows God to remain sovereign, but also allows man to have a will that is free to make choices?

The Word of God certainly does have a particular viewpoint, yet it is not embodied in just one or two passages of Scripture. This, unfortunately, brings about the problem of finding a universal model that accommodates all the variables. Because there are no direct passages that undeniably settle this dispute, the viewpoints that are often put forth by theologians can become inferences from the text.²

The proposal set forth in this treatise will take a slightly different view that will not only incorporate apparently conflicting passages of Scripture, but will also include a perspective that takes its view, not from antiquity or philosophy per se, but from some of the operational sciences; most especially in the area of engineering and design.

Defining the Problem

It is agreed upon by a majority of Protestants and Evangelicals that, humans are saved by grace through faith, and not by works. The consensus among most conservative Christians is that grace and works are diametrically apposed to one another as described in Romans 11:6.³ It appears though, that much of the debate over the sovereignty of God and the freewill of man, among Christians, has been over what constitutes a “work”; and how do you define the foreknowledge of God.⁴ These two issues seem to divide most Christians when discussing this subject matter.

Questions arise, such as, does mans ability to exercise his will comprise a form of work, which would then override the sovereignty of God; or is choosing to believe in Christ, as their Lord and Savior, totally outside the scope of what would be considered a “work”? The Calvinists, of course, remains vigilant in their assertion that mans freewill would “frustrate” the intentions of God in saving mankind.⁵ Therefore, they guard the sovereignty of God with much fervor. The Arminianists however, in opposition to the Calvinists allow for the freewill of man; and for some, even go so far as to permit man to play a part in God’s redemptive work.⁶ This inevitably led to the notion by the Arminianists that one can fall from grace and lose their salvation.⁷

Scripture appears to, at a glance; support both sides of the coin. On one hand God seems to be giving mankind the ability to make a selection between one or more options; either by

presenting a set of choices or by making a conditional statement. For example, in Deuteronomy 30:19, God commands the Israelites to choose between a blessing and a cursing. Also, in Matthew 6:14, 15, Christ states that if you forgive men of their sins, then your heavenly Father will forgive you also, but if you don't then He won't either. From these passages of Scripture it appears that the decision is left up to the individual.

For the other side of this coin, there appears to be scriptural support for a God that has preordained all things from the beginning and has excluded mans freewill. For example, from Romans 8:29 it appears that God has already decided from eternities past to set apart a group of chosen individuals to be His children; thus appearing to negate mans will. Also, in Proverbs 21:1, it states the following; "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will." The Calvinist will point to this scripture and say that even the thoughts within a man's heart are directed by God.⁸

Unfortunately, when it comes to debating this issue, each side will castigate the other for not being able to give an appropriate response to their "clear" exegetical interpretation. Most of these discussions are more reminiscent of political mudslinging than they are of Christian brothers and sisters coming together to reason from the Scriptures.

It is, however, this author's contention that these two sides, and everything in between, can be reconciled once viewed from the perspective of God's omniscience, which includes perfect foreknowledge, His omnipotence, and His ability to incorporate all of these anomalies, even man's freewill, into the framework of His creation to bring about what He has purposed in Himself. It is doubtful that this issue will be settled once and for all by this paper, but hopefully it will shed a slightly different perspective on such a divisive topic.

The Prevailing Philosophies

In order to better understand this issue, we need to take a closer look at some of the existing philosophies surrounding this debate that have already been mentioned. Calvinism and Arminianism tend to be the bookends when it comes to this debate among conservative Christians. Therefore these two extremes will help to limit the discussion and establish our boundaries. This examination of the extremes is meant only to help illustrate the limitations and the problems with reconciling these two apparently polar issues.

Calvinism

The French theologian, John Calvin, along with Martin Luther, became to be known as one of the guiding spirits of the Protestant Reformation beginning in the 1500's. Calvin is most noted for the publication of his 1536 lengthy discourse, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁹ It was from this treatise that the doctrine of predestination was propounded. Predestination comes from a Latin word meaning, *determined beforehand*.¹⁰

Calvin was not officially trained in theology, as would a priest or a member of the clergy, but in, Greek, Latin, and Law. His education was very much influenced by the liberal and humanistic Renaissance period of his day.¹¹ It was this training that gave him the ability to argue his point with shrewd logic and authority.¹² His writings and doctrinal influence can still be seen today among the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and some Baptist denominations.¹³

His doctrine of predestination is summarized in the acrostic, **TULIP**, which stands for; **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rrresistible Grace, and **P**erseverance of the Saints.¹⁴ Without having to break down each point, it's best to highlight the underlying principle that drives each facet of his theology. The overriding tenet of the doctrine emphasizes the belief that the eternal destiny of mankind is determined solely by God; and not only man's eternal destiny but also his temporal as well.¹⁵

John Calvin was not the first to purport this ideology though. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), Thomas Aquinas, and others were among the first to develop this particular doctrine within the church.¹⁶ Outside the church this doctrine could be found in some of the ancient religions of Greece, India, China, and Egypt. Even Islam teaches that some human beings are predestined to goodness and happiness while the rest are predestined to evil and misery.¹⁷ Therefore, Calvinism was not a new theology per se, but it was promulgated and defended by Calvin more so than his predecessors.

Within Calvinism, the sovereignty of God takes center stage. In order for God to be all-powerful, He must have power over all things; and that includes man's every thought, word, and deed; which, according to critics, logically leads to God causing mankind to commit sin.¹⁸ The critics then conclude that this in turn makes God the author of sin which is a direct contradiction of Scripture (James 1:13).¹⁹

Calvinists attempt to account for man's obvious freewill by saying that man does have a choice, but his only choice is towards sin at all times and is incapable of accepting the gift of eternal life on their own; unless God were to change their hearts through regeneration.²⁰ This is reminiscent of Henry Ford's comment about customers wanting more than one option in the color of their Model T; 'People can have the Model T in any color; so long as it's black.'²¹ This of course is not a choice at all, and could not be defined as a will that is free.

Non-Calvinists sardonically point out that God could have changed the hearts of all those that were destined to hell, but decided otherwise, thus turning God into a cruel prankster when he pleads for all to come to Him.²² Calvinists do assert that God decided to set aside only a small group of people known as the elect, but then destines the rest to eternal hell and torment for reasons only know to Him.²³ For that reason, critics ask what kind of love is this that God, who

could have saved a multitude by changing their hearts, but decided otherwise because it somehow brings Him glory to damn a multitude.²⁴

For the non-Calvinist, this is a heresy beyond comprehension. They ask, why would Christ say in Matthew 11:28; “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”; but then say you can not do that unless God regenerates you? Therefore, if God does not regenerate you, then you cannot come; but you are still responsible for not receiving His gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. This seems to be an even greater paradox than that of the subject of this paper.

The idea that God is the author of evil is certainly not a new concept within the body of Christ. It even goes back further than Calvin. According to Eusebius in book five of *The Church History*, Irenaeus who was a contemporary of Polycarp (who was a disciple of the apostle John), wrote several letters to the church in Rome to squelch several unsound doctrines that were emanating from there. One letter entitled, *On the Sole Sovereignty or God is not the Author of Evil*, was written to Florinus who apparently defended this heretical idea.²⁵

Irenaeus writes the following: “*These opinions Florinus, do not reflect sound judgment to put it mildly. These opinions are discordant with the church and consign those who share them to the greatest wickedness.*”²⁶ Irenaeus affirms to Florinus that nothing of the sort was ever handed down from the Apostles. As a young boy he listened intently to Polycarp as he passed down the teachings from the apostle John. To insinuate that God would author the actions of evil men would be nothing short of blasphemy.

Therefore, in respect to this debate, Calvinism magnifies the sovereignty of God while excluding the freewill of man. They do contend that man does have a choice but it’s one which includes only one option; and that is to sin; which would not be a choice at all. As a result, even

man's ability to receive or deny the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ would be considered a work which would also remove the faith of a believer as a requirement for salvation.

In respect to foreknowledge, for the Calvinist, God has exhaustively predetermined all things, even the thoughts and deeds of every human. This teaching also goes against the very character and nature of God by changing His love for all into a selective love meant only for a few "elect"; which contradicts those passages of Scripture that state that God is a respecter of no person, but loves all the same (Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17).

As sound as their arguments may be; they run contrary even to our own innate understanding of God's justice and mercy. According to Dr. Daniel Steele, of Boston University; "Consciousness killed Calvinism and it did it in spite of Calvinism's cast iron logic."²⁷ In other words, it just doesn't make sense. Therefore, Calvinism, in any of its forms, has been rejected by many as heretical and contradictory to Scripture.

Arminianism

Even though Calvinism had become the prevailing theological system of the Reformation, some had publicly and adamantly apposed this movement. One of those was a Dutch theologian and professor at the University of Leyden by the name of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).²⁸ He tried unsuccessfully to liberate the Dutch from their dominant Calvinistic views on predestination.

He completely rejected the notion that man has no freewill when it comes to believing and receiving Christ through faith.²⁹ Arminius was convinced from the Bible that the saints in heaven were there because they believed the gospel message and not because God elected them to be saved by regenerating them without any faith on their part.³⁰

One year after his death, his followers published a *Remonstrance* (protest) to publicize his views. Similar to Calvin's five points, the *Remonstrance* also embodied five points that outlined their disagreements. Each of these points was directed against those earlier mentioned five points of Calvinism.³¹

The *Remonstrance* is briefly summarized as follows; the decree of predestination is not absolute, but conditional on man's response; the offer of salvation goes out to all men, which does, in principle allow for all to be saved; man can exercise this freewill but only after receiving grace; once received, grace then can be accepted or denied; thus leading to the possibility that believers can fall from grace and lose their salvation.³²

According to the Works of James Arminius, Volume 1 & 2, in a statement delivered before the states of Holland at The Hague on October the thirtieth, 1608, Arminius declared that he did believe in the eternal security of the believer and refuted the claims that were circulating about him believing that one could lose their salvation.³³ This view however, of losing salvation, was disseminated by his successors, which did bring a great deal of criticism from the Calvinists. R. K. McGregor Wright, a devoted Calvinist, acknowledge that Arminius did affirm to the doctrine of eternal security, but it was the heirs of Arminianism that abandoned this assertion a few years after his death.³⁴

Unfortunately, the criticisms directed against Calvinism were not as successful as Arminius had hoped. In 1618 the Synod of Dort, held at Dordrecht, solemnly condemned and repressed the views put forth by the Remonstrants.³⁵ Followers of Arminius point out that only the supporters of Calvinism were allowed to attend; and those of the Remonstrants appeared only as the accused.³⁶ Therefore, to them, this was not a debate, but a condemnation of the Arminius viewpoint as heterodoxy (heretical teaching).³⁷

James (Jacobus) initially formed his opinions to modify Calvinism so that, God might not be considered the author of sin; nor man to be just an automaton in the hands of God.³⁸ These viewpoints became the admitted to and logical conclusion of Calvinism, which he attempted to refute. Arminius was a supporter of the Calvinistic system early on, but moved to a more moderate position after further study of Scripture.³⁹ It was his successors though that swung much further away and took this debate to its other extreme.

Arminianism, however, did not die out with the Synod of Dort. A number of denominations today do share some of these viewpoints; such as the Assembly of God churches; the Pentecostal churches, and the Methodist Church founded by John Wesley.⁴⁰ Wesley was one of the successors to the teachings of the Remonstrants. He adamantly apposed the teachings of Calvin. When asked what is the direct antidote to Methodism, he replied; “Calvinism”.⁴¹

Wesley did hold to the notion that man could fall from grace through sin and that the believer was not eternally secure once they experienced that initial salvation moment.⁴² Some supporters of Arminianism will even define which sins will cause a person to fall from grace and thus lose their salvation.⁴³

Critics of Arminianism, as it is defined today, point out the logical fallacies of their doctrine (losing salvation, no security, etc) by showing that Christ died for all the sins of a believer and not just for those sins that occurred prior to a person’s initial salvation experience. Many more condemnations have been level against them, but for this debate, this is the main criticism to Arminianism by Calvinists.

Certainly more could be said about this theological system, but for the sake of this discussion, Arminianism claims that man does play a part in his salvation; if not the initial experience, then at least a maintaining of salvation through the abstention of certain kinds of sin.

This of course is contradictory to the Scriptures clear teaching that man's efforts cannot save nor maintain his salvation in any way (Rom 8:38-39; 11:6; Eph 2:8).

Calmenianism

As with any theological system, viewpoints can be motivated by hidden underlying objectives. Dr. Stanley L. Derickson believes that both Calvinism and Arminianism were driven by philosophical and reactionary motives. For Calvin it was his humanist studies of cause and effect that greatly affected his system of thought when applied to Scripture. For the followers of Arminius, it might have been a pendulum swing reaction to Calvinism. Derickson states the following: "It seems to me that we may well have in Calvinism and Arminianism the two extremes of theological thought that are back swings to humanism. This may well be why today we have most conservative theologians somewhere in the middle — Calmenian."⁴⁴ He defines Calmenian as a viewpoint that lies somewhere in between these two extremes.⁴⁵

Therefore, when it comes to the matter of salvation, for the Arminianist the election of the saints is based upon God's foreknowledge of a persons choice, while that of the Calvinist is due to God's preordaining their choice.⁴⁶ Hence, one side takes into account mans choice; even going so far as to include a person in God's redemptive work; while the other excludes it entirely; even a persons ability to exercise faith. Thus, when it comes to the issue of this debate, we can see the resolution to this matter will lie somewhere in between; one that allows for God to remain sovereign over his creation, as the Calvinist affirms, but also allows for mans will to be free to accept or reject the call to salvation; as the Arminianist declares.

Free will's Limitations

For us as humans, we are severely limited in our ability to control the outcome of events that occur within our lives. We certainly cannot control the timing of our birth, and with the

exception of suicide, we cannot ultimately determine the manner and method of our death. Also, there are a number of phenomena that can happen to us that we have no way of foreknowing or directing; fatal diseases, life altering events, local and world wide catastrophes, etc.

Therefore, for God to take over those aspects that we have no control over would not be a violation against our freewill. For example in Jeremiah 1:5 is says; “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.” From here we can see that God does have control over our birth; which would then consign us to a certain time and place in history.

When it comes to our future plans and intentions, Proverbs 16:33 says; “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.” We do have the freedom to make plans for the future, but the results are not always within our control. The intentions of world leaders and the state of the economy is a glaring testimony to that fact.

We may not be able to control most of the events in the world, but we can chose how we will react to them. God’s continual pleading with the Israelites to turn from their wicked ways attests to the fact that God does give people the choice to avoid circumstances that are beyond their ability to control (i.e. 2 Chron 7:14). They could not directly determine the outcome, but they could decide as to how they would react; by either repenting of their sins and returning to God, or by continuing in their rebellion and suffer the consequences.

Also, with respect to “thoughts”; God does not violate our freewill if he chooses to place a particular thought in our mind. We still have the ability to react to that thought. Satan of course can also place thoughts in our head which we can also decide as to how we will respond. This is very similar to the leading and inspiring done by the Holy Spirit. He can give us the thought as to what we should do; however, we must still react to that leading.

Therefore, when it comes to the bounds of our free will, we are limited in our ability to choose. God then in no way violates our freewill by directing those things that are beyond our power to manage. Thus, freewill is free, but to only a certain extent. The rest is kept within God's capacity to control.

Predictability of Nature and Mankind

A number of atheists believe that freewill is only an illusion because nature is governed solely by laws; some known and many unknown.⁴⁷ And since man, for them, is an evolved creature that came out of nature, he therefore can not have the ability to choose; it is only a stubborn delusion. Even though most Christians do not hold to such a notion, it is worthy to note that they do perceive the universe's order and structure.⁴⁸

It is these observable laws that are then incorporate into computer simulations which are used to formulate reliable predictions. For example, flight simulators take into account thermodynamics and weather when replicating the flow of air over a virtual wing.⁴⁹ And also with simulated nuclear blasts, the explosions are based upon the properties of the subatomic particles reacting with each other in the detonation of a particular radioactive substance.⁵⁰ Engineers can then use the outcome of these types of simulations to design better products that last longer and perform better.

If it were not for the predictable laws of the cosmos we would not be able to launch a satellite to the planet Mars; or to build aircraft to fly at mach six and above; or even do something as simple as sit down in a chair without wondering what will happen. These unwavering laws of nature make our lives to some degree, predictable. We as humans, of course, cannot alter any of the laws that govern the universe; they are completely beyond our

ability to control. As we increase in knowledge though, we can make more accurate predictions as to what could happen in a particular event.⁵¹

In fact, such creation scientists as Whitehead and Oppenheimer have noticed that the development of the modern sciences would not have been possible if it were not for the milieu of Christianity, with its notion of a God of order. The ancient world of the gods of mythology was a world where the possibility of articulating natural laws would not have been possible because of their belief that supernatural beings had similar passions like that of humans.⁵² Even the pseudepigraphical writer of the Book of Enoch noticed that the heavenly bodies follow God's order.⁵³ Engineers have observed the incredible order and design of creation (space, matter, and time) through their various fields of expertise.⁵⁴ In fact, the cosmos seems to be tuned so perfectly for life here on earth that scientists have given it the term, The Anthropic Principle.⁵⁵

Therefore, from an engineering perspective, if we could incorporate all available knowledge in the universe, with respect to nature, into a massive super computer, then we could theoretically make predictions well into the future. This of course is not possible, for one because of man's inherent limitations and secondly because of another limiting factor that goes beyond our ability to predict; and that is the freewill of man. Interestingly, the writers of the famous movie, *The Matrix*, recognized this concept and incorporated it into the plotline of the film. Human freewill was the one thing that this supercomputer could not account for; everything else was predictable.

God on the other hand, knows all about the heavens and the earth because He created them. He created the laws that govern it and set it in motion. He also holds it all together (Genesis 1; John 1:3; Col 1:16, 17). Therefore, God doesn't need to discover new information,

or run a simulation to make predictions. He already knows what will happen in respect to creation.

Man is incapable of knowing every thought that passes through the hearts and minds of everyone that is currently living. We are however able to make a certain level of predictability when it comes to human behavior. For example, economists can predict with some level of accuracy as to how the market will behave in the event of a war, or the election of a particular world leader. Several of these factors are driven by human behavior.

God however, knows the thoughts and intents of all the hearts of mankind throughout all of history (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; John 18:1). Nothing is beyond God's ability to know. Consequently, nothing escapes God's attention; whether it is the laws of nature that govern the universe, or the sinful nature of man that directs his decisions; He knows the outcome of all things.

Therefore, even though nature and human behavior are somewhat predictable from a human perspective, not every facet can be known and foreseen. We do not possess the capacity to know all things, especially the hearts and minds of everyone throughout history. We are in essence locked in time. We can remember yesterday, but we cannot remember tomorrow.⁵⁶

Since time is a part of this creation, often referred to as the fourth dimension, God has the ability to see all of time in an instant; which then gives him the ability to possess perfect foreknowledge (Isaiah 46:9,10; 57:15). How this is possible is not quite clear. Whether it's a "time telescope" to look ahead⁵⁷ or from an overhead view like that of a helicopter over a parade⁵⁸; we are not absolutely sure how God does possess perfect foreknowledge. It is clear though that he does based on the numerous fulfilled prophecies that go beyond statistical probability.⁵⁹

Conclusion

With respect to this debate of the sovereignty of God and the freewill of man, it's been shown that the boundaries to this issue can be found within Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinism magnifies the sovereignty of God by making Him sovereign even over the very thoughts and intents of the human heart. This has however, been shown to be a theology in violation of Scripture because it inevitably makes God the author of sin and turns man into a puppet.

Arminianism tends towards the opposite of Calvinism by allowing mankind to play a part in God's redemptive work, it not by gaining his salvation, but at least through maintaining his own salvation. This too is in violation of Scripture that makes it clear that man is saved by grace through faith and not of works. Also, Christ died for all sins and not just those up until the person's salvation experience.

Because God is omniscient, he is capable of incorporating all the laws of nature and all of the thoughts, intents, and deeds of every human that has and will ever live, into His design of creation to bring about His desired outcome. He is in essence a Master Engineer that has incorporated every conceivable design element into the fabric of His creation. He is able to incorporate those elements that are purely predictable (nature) with those that are unpredictable (humans). This is only possible because of His perfect foreknowledge.

To help illustrate this point, imagine what it would be like to play chess with God. Just because he knows your every move before you make it, doesn't mean that he makes them for you. As the game progresses, God can expand your move options or limit them by how he moves on the board. God knows every possible combination that could occur. He can steer you in any number of directions without interfering with you ability to decide where to move next.

It just so happens that He knows exactly where you will move, based on what options will be available to you.

But of course the world is far more complicated than a chess board. I do believe that when this debate is viewed from a design perspective; that is God being the ultimate engineer, we can see that this exalts not only His omniscience and omnipotence, but also His sovereignty even further than what Calvin had allowed. I believe that this also puts man's freewill into perspective. We do have the ability to choose, but those choices do have limits; and much of those limits are established by God. Therefore, the sovereignty of God and the freewill of man is fully supported by Scripture and can be best understood from a design standpoint.

Endnotes

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