

The Sovereignty of God and the Free will of Humans

How can God be in complete control of His universe and still allow humans free will? This is a question that has been debated for centuries with solid Bible believing Christians on opposing sides. I would like to appeal for an intermediary ground while pleading for unity on all sides.

First let's deal with terminology. Norman Geisler gives a good definition of the sovereignty of God: "A God who is before all things, beyond all things, creates all things, upholds all things, knows all things, and can do all things is also in control of all things. This complete control of all things is called the sovereignty of God."¹ By "free will" I mean a limited but legitimate freedom to make choices concerning right and wrong, what J.I. Packer calls "free agency." Packer puts the difficulty of having God's sovereignty and human freedom in perspective: "Yet the fact of free agency confronts us with mystery, inasmuch as God's control over our free, self-determined activities is as complete as it is over anything else, and how this can be we do not know."² Stephen Smallman explains: "The Bible never explains *how* humans are free and responsible for their choices and at the same time bound to fulfill God's ultimate purposes. This is one of life's great paradoxes: we make our own choices every day and still have a sense that God's hand is over all things."³

Two major camps of thought have formed over the issue of God's sovereignty and human freedom: Calvinism which tends to emphasize God's sovereignty and extremely limit or reject human freedom, and Arminianism which is inclined to emphasize human freedom and limit God's sovereignty. There are many differing ideas on the specifics of our question within both camps. Both groups have extreme positions that are dangerous and therefore should be avoided. Among the Calvinist supporters some completely reject human freedom and therefore make God the cause of all that happens. In the Arminian camp some reject God's complete knowledge of future events and others reject his absolute power to accomplish his purposes. In the first extreme position God is made the author of evil and in the second God is made to be ignorant or impotent. Let's look in more detail at some of the specifics of this question.

Some Calvinists like Packer are satisfied in stating that God is sovereign and Humans are at least responsible if not free in some sense. They say that how these truths fit is a mystery. D.A. Carson explains this position:

¹Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), p.15.

²J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, Tyndale House, Quick Verse Deluxe).

³Stephen Smallman, *What is a Reformed Church?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2003), p. 11.

In the realm of philosophical theology, this position is sometimes called *compatibilism*. It simply means that God's unconditioned sovereignty and the responsibility of human beings are mutually compatible. It does not claim to show you *how* they are compatible. It claims only that we can get far enough in the evidence and the arguments to show how they are not necessarily *incompatible*, and that it is therefore entirely reasonable to think they are compatible if there is good evidence for them.⁴

This is a respectable position. In fact both major groups claim to believe in God's sovereignty and human free will and so believe in a compatible free will. Free will theists prefer the term *libertarian* freedom. Both groups should also embrace this term because it really is simply a redundant term. When the Calvinists or Arminians begin to explain how God is sovereign or how these two truths are compatible the problems arise as we will see.

One possible way God can remain in control and still allow free will (though we do not need a reason; we can simply accept the clear Scriptural teaching and trust God) is through middle knowledge. God not only knows everything that will happen in the world, He also knows all possible things that could happen; He knows all possible worlds along with knowing this world completely. God allowed this world to exist because He knew it would bring about His perfect will; He could have allowed any one of the other possible worlds to exist, but he chose this one - so it can be said that God chose this world and yet we are still free. William Craig explains:

The world view of the Bible involves a very strong conception of divine sovereignty, even as it presupposes human freedom and responsibility. Reconciling these two doctrines without compromising either has proven extraordinarily difficult. But Molina's theory of middle knowledge furnishes a startling solution to this enigma. Since God knows prior to his decision to create what any possible creature would do in any possible circumstances, God in deciding what creature to create and which circumstances to bring about or permit ultimately controls and directs the course of world history to his desired ends, yet without violating in any way the freedom of his creatures.⁵

Another possible way God can remain in control and still allow free will is the idea of the extra-dimensionality of God. We exist in three dimensions plus time, which can be understood as a fourth dimension. Suppose God exists in more dimensions including more time dimensions? Would this make it possible for God to control situations while at the same time allowing free choice? Hugh Ross asks a question and then gives two possible resolutions considering the extra-dimensionality of God:

How does God predetermine every choice without infringing on our control over the human choice vectors depicted in the previous figures? Several workable ways are made possible by the existence of His extra-dimensional powers. Here are two:

Resolution one: God can see not only what occurs throughout a person's life but also the

⁴D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), p. 52.

⁵Clark Pinnock, editor, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), p. 152.

events and conditions (physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) in which things occur. Each of us expresses our will in response to complex internal and external factors. Knowing all these factors, including the characteristics of our personality, the effects of our experiences and communications with people and even with angels and demons, God anticipates the direction of each choice and how strongly we will express our will in any instance. Thus, God could prescribe the exact conditions to generate the response of our will at any given moment that fits into His total plan. We would remain continuously in control of our will, while God would continuously control the circumstances and conditions in and around us that impact our will.

Resolution two: Let's assume two precepts are true: (1) Every step we make toward God, every acceptance and trust of His truth, strengthens His influence in our lives and weakens the influence of His adversary to encourage us to reject Him; and (2) every step of rejection weakens the influence of God's will while strengthening His adversary's influence on us to rebel against His authority. Then God can determine at each point of decision what amplitude of His will and Satan's will brings about the net response that fits into His total plan. In this scenario, we would remain continuously in control of our will while God would remain continuously in control of all the increases and decreases of the effects of His will, as well as of Satan's will, on each one of us.⁶

The extra-dimensionality of God or the middle knowledge of God are just two possible ways God could remain in control and yet allow limited freedom to His creation. It is very possible that this is simply a mystery we will never be able to completely understand. It is not illogical but it is beyond our finite ability to comprehend. We do not need to resort to ideas that reject one or the other truths - we can simply trust in God's goodness and power.

Mystery

I wish to argue that whatever side we may choose, we must make room for mystery. All too often the argumentation on both sides seeks to use reason in such a way that they go against clear passages of Scripture. Each side admits elements of mystery, but I believe it plays a much bigger part in this question than we may realize. Jonathan Edwards had a unique grasp of this subject and so is worth quoting extensively:

As He is God, He is so great that He is infinitely above all comprehension. And therefore it is unreasonable in us to quarrel with His dispensations, because they are mysterious. If He were a Being that we could comprehend, He would not be God. It would be unreasonable to suppose any other than that there should be many things in the nature of God, and in His works and government, which to us are mysterious, and which we never can fully find out... We are infinitely unequal to any such thing as comprehending God. We may less unreasonably expect that a nutshell should contain the ocean.... If we were sensible of the distance between God and us, we would see the reasonableness of that interrogation of the apostle in Romans 9:20: "Who art thou, O man, that repliest against

⁶Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1996), pp. 153-154.

God?” If we find fault with God’s government, we virtually suppose ourselves fit to be God’s counselors; whereas it becomes us rather, with great humility and adoration, to cry out with the apostle in Romans 11:33-36: “O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever.” If little children should rise up and find fault with the supreme legislature of a nation, or quarrel with the mysterious administrations of the sovereign, would it not be looked upon that they meddled with things too high for them? And what are we but babes? Our understandings are infinitely less than those of babes in comparison with the wisdom of God. It becomes us therefore to be sensible of it, and to behave ourselves accordingly. Psalm 131:1-2: “Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. Surely I have behaved and quieted myself as a child.”.... Nor have we any right to expect that God should particularly explain to us the reason for His dispensations. It is fitting that God should not give any account of His matters to us worms of the dust, so that we may be sensible of our distance from Him, and adore and submit to Him in humble reverence.⁷

Most will agree that we should not expect to understand everything about God because then we would have to be omniscient and therefore God ourselves, but when the passages that go against our understanding and ability to reason are brought up we somehow forget this proposition. The fact of mystery concerning God and His ways will be a controlling factor in this paper. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”⁸ Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declared the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” This does not mean we should not try to understand how God’s truths fit together; this is the objective of systematic theology. But it does mean we should tread lightly when we go beyond what the Scriptures declare. The Biblical writers don’t appear to have the same difficulties we have with putting God’s sovereignty alongside our responsibility and freedom. We may have an overly curious tendency to want to fit it all together with reason as the supreme authority. We are a product of the Age of Reason. Curiously the latest tendency in our culture is to reject reason. Our postmodern world has thrown out truth; this is due to its observation of the abuse of modernism. The Biblical writers never abandoned or demonized reason; they simply didn’t worship it. Reason is helpful as a servant, but should not be made Lord or Beelzebub. Let’s look at some of the difficulties that arise when we attempt to understand the sovereignty of God.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Our Great and Glorious God* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2003), pp. 42-43.

⁸ John Wesley comments on this verse: “The ways and judgments of God, tho’ never unjust, are often times hidden from us, unsearchable by our shallow capacities, and matter for our admiration, not our enquiry.” Owen Collins, editor, *The Classic Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 181.

Difficulties

Some Calvinists say that God does allow free will but controls it in that He puts the desires in people's hearts. They say free will is doing what one desires, but all desires come from God therefore He can still be in control. But if all desires come from God then the desire to sin came from God; this would put God against God, which is illogical. The Calvinists say things like this because they think that if God gave people free will without determining their desires He would be giving away His control. But God is big enough to be able to be in control and give people legitimate freedom.⁹

The biggest problem with saying God causes all things, including our free choices is that it makes God to be the author of evil. The Calvinists deny this charge but their words seem to prove it true. In speaking of the flood R.C. Sproul says, "It was God who created all the secondary causes which brought about his goal of nearly universal moral decadence."¹⁰ So Sproul is saying God's goal was "universal moral decadence." He says this because he doesn't believe humans can change their own inclination, so God must put those inclinations in them and yet somehow remain innocent. But couldn't a truly Almighty God create a being with the ability to change its own inclination? Paul Helm has the same difficulty as Sproul. He suggests the notion of people being caused to act voluntarily - this is simply a contradiction in terms.¹¹ Unlike Sproul he admits "God is to a degree responsible for what occurs in his universe."¹² Sproul and Helm's view of human freedom is simply not the true view of freedom. Their view seems to make God the ultimate author of evil. Their analysis also shows that God isn't free. Sproul says:

A second definition of free will is "the ability to choose what we want." This rests on the important foundation of human desire. To have free will is to be able to choose according to our desires. Here desire plays the vital role of providing a motivation or a reason for making a choice.

Now for the tricky part. According to Edwards a human being is not only free to choose what he desires but he *must* choose what he desires to be able to choose at all. What I call *Edwards's Law of Choice* is this: "The will always chooses according to its strongest inclination at the moment." This means that every choice is free *and* every choice is determined.¹³

This line of thinking if taken to its logical conclusion would also exclude God from having true free will. God must choose what is in accordance to His "strongest inclination." Thus God had to make the world out of necessity, and so God is a contingent being rather than a necessary being. This is of course blasphemy. God didn't have to make the world, but simply chose to out

⁹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1961), 110-111.

¹⁰ R.C. Sproul, *Almighty Over All* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), p. 70.

¹¹ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹³ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God*, p. 54.

of His goodness. But if God has real freedom then why couldn't He create a being in His image to the extent of having real freedom? Two people in the same situation choose differently, why? Some say because no one is in the same situation exactly, insinuating that we are no different than rats in a biology experiment (i.e. secular determinists such as B.F. Skinner). The truth is that humans have the free will to choose even against their strongest inclination. It seems Sproul's definition of "strongest inclination" is that which one chooses, which is circular reasoning and really doesn't *say* anything.

Theological and secular determinists are both wrong because they fail to see that humans really have freedom, limited freedom certainly, but true freedom. People are more than the sum of their parts. People are not just the effect of previous causes or the outcome of the strongest desire that God put in them. People can change their own inclinations because God is mighty enough to create legitimately free humans and still remain in control of His creation. Geisler explains that there are three possible views of human moral freedom: moral indeterminism, moral determinism and moral self-determinism.¹⁴ Some Calvinists accuse Arminians of holding to moral indeterminism, but the proper Biblical understanding is moral self-determinism. Many ask, "What is the cause of free will?" because they want to bring in the law of cause and effect to disprove moral self-determinism and advocate moral determinism. Geisler answers:

Technically, free will is not the efficient cause of a free act; free will is simply the power through which the agent performs the free act. The efficient cause of the free act is really the free *agent*, not the free will. Free will is simply the power by which the free agent acts. We do not say that humans *are* free will but only that they *have* free will. Likewise, we do not say that humans are thought but only that they have the power of thought. So it is not the power of free choice which causes a free act, but the *person* who has this power. Now if the real cause of a free act is not an act but an *actor*, then it makes no sense to ask for the cause of the actor as though the actor were another act.¹⁵

Some say that God is the ultimate cause of all our actions because he puts the thoughts, inclinations and desires within us, but He is not culpable because He is not the immediate cause. R.K. McGregor Wright puts it this way:

These statements [statements made previously] imply a specific view of the relationship that God has to sin and other evils. They are all included in God's free and unchangeable ordination, while yet God is not the author of sin. This is because first, God does not violate the human will, forcing people to sin against it, and second, because the secondary causes that give rise to sin are secured in their operation by the same "wise and holy counsel" to so ordain. God is the first cause of everything that happens (including all evils), because as the Creator he causes "whatsoever comes to pass." "Second causes" are the later things in the sequence of events (like Satan, Adam or me), from whom sins directly proceed. These secondary causes are the author(s) of sin, because they are the

¹⁴David Basinger and Randall Basinger, editors, *Predestination and Freewill*, pp. 74-80.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 76.

direct causes of it. According to the Westminster Confession, God is holy and separated from my sin by not being the direct cause (or author) of it. A cause may be ultimate (of which God is the original cause) or it may be proximate, such as the sinner. Therefore the sinner, not God, is the author of sin for the same reason that a father is not the author of his son's book.¹⁶

Wright is forced to use such strained reasoning because the only apparent alternative is that the Calvinist system makes God the author of evil. We will look at why this logic is poor and unbiblical in just a moment, but the last statement must be addressed: If the father taught the son everything the son eventually puts in the book, then the father does share some responsibility. If Wright is saying God made us the way we are, including "causing" what we will think then He is the ultimate author of sin.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states: God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.¹⁷

To *ordain* does not necessarily mean to *cause*; it can simply mean to allow so that God's ultimate purposes are ensured. If by ordain we mean He caused all things to happen, including evil, even though He is not the immediate cause because he caused secondary causes to do His will, He is still the ultimate cause of all things, including evil. If this is true God is guilty of evil. Jesus said in Luke 17:1-2:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin."

What does Jesus mean by "cause one of these little ones to sin"? The little one is the one who actually sins so by "causing" Jesus must mean to significantly influence someone to sin. The one who significantly influences someone to sin is guilty as well. John MacArthur in commenting on the parallel passage in Matthew 18:6-7 says, "It should not be that fellow believers lead others into sin, *directly or indirectly*. One would be better off dead" (My emphasis).¹⁸ If God causes us to choose to sin then He is significantly influencing us to sin (whether it is direct or indirect) and so, according to Jesus, God deserves to be punished for His evil. We know that God does not tempt anyone into sin (James 1:13), and so this scenario cannot be true. If someone were to hire a hit-man to kill someone else, that person is culpable even though they are not the immediate cause of the killing; they are the ultimate cause of the evil and so deserve jail. If I am playing billiards and I hit the white ball with my pool cue and it hits the eight ball into the pocket, no one would blame the white ball for losing the game - they would

¹⁶R.K McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), p. 200.

¹⁷Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, p.87.

¹⁸John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Bibles, 1997), p. 1426.

blame me. But we do not need to make God the ultimate cause of evil because He can create free human beings and still be in control.

As I said, to *ordain* does not necessarily mean to *cause*; it can simply mean to allow so that God's ultimate purposes are ensured; if taken in this sense God is not the author of evil, but His will is established. How can He establish His will by allowing evil without being culpable? Edwards explains:

I do not argue that God may commit evil that good may come of it, but that He may will that evil should come to pass, and permit that it may come to pass, that good may come of it. It is in itself absolutely evil for any being to commit evil that good may come of it. But it would be no evil, but good, even in a creature, to will that evil should come to pass if he had sufficient wisdom to see certainly that good would come of it, or that more good would come to pass in that way than in any other. And the only reason why it would not be lawful for a creature to permit evil to come to pass, and that it would not be wise, good, and virtuous in him so to do, is that he does not have perfect wisdom and sufficiency so as to render it fitting that such an affair should be trusted with him. In so doing he goes beyond his line; he goes out of his province; he meddles with things too high for him. It is everyone's duty to do things fitting for him in his sphere, and commensurate to his power. God never entrusted this providence in the hands of creatures of finite understandings, nor is it proper that He should.¹⁹

To use the idea of permission with overall control rather than causation answers the difficulties without accusing God of guilt because His motives are pure. The Puritan Thomas Watson reveals how permission keeps God in control without making him a sinner:

But, some may say, if God has a hand in ordering all things that fall out, he has a hand in the sins of men. I answer, No, by no means, he has no hand in any man's sin. God cannot go contrary to his own nature, he cannot do any unholy action, any more than the sun can be said to be darkened. Here you must take heed of two things; as you must take heed of making God ignorant of men's sins, so you must take heed of making God to have a hand in men's sins. Is it likely that God is the author of sin, and the avenger of it? Is it a likely thing that God should make a law against sin, and then have a hand in breaking his own law? God in his providence permits men's sins. 'He suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.' Acts xiv 16. God permitted their sin, which he never would, if he could not bring good out of it. Had not sin been permitted, God's justice in punishing sin, and his mercy in pardoning sin, had not been so well known. The Lord is pleased to permit it, but he has no hand in sin.²⁰

One last question concerning God making humans with free will concerns Adam and Eve. Some say Adam and Eve were significantly free, but after they sinned, sin entered the world and so the rest of humanity must have God make them respond to Him. However with the concept of

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Our Great and Glorious God*, pp. 67-68.

²⁰ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), p. 122.

prevenient grace (discussed later) God could bring them to a place of significant freedom like Adam and Eve were originally. Others say even Adam and Eve couldn't be significantly free even before the Fall; otherwise God wouldn't be in control. Did Adam and Eve have free will in the sense that God did not put into their minds the desire to eat the forbidden fruit, but rather they chose it freely without God influencing them to choose it? If Adam and Eve were truly free then was God in control? If Adam and Eve were not truly free then God is responsible for evil. To say that God puts the thoughts and desires to do evil in our minds and hearts and yet is not the author of evil is simply nonsensical and non-biblical. But once again we don't have to resort to such silly talking because God is powerful enough to create humans with legitimate freedom and still remain in complete control of His universe. We will discuss how "free" humans are since the Fall under the topic "total depravity."

The reason I have discussed this particular aspect of Calvinism in such detail is because if they are wrong at this point then a huge part of their system falls apart. If God can create a human with a legitimate free will without causing his free acts in any other way than simply allowing them to occur under His supervision, persuasion and veto power, then the Calvinist view of sovereignty and election must be seriously overhauled or at least tweaked considerably. I would like to suggest that the greatest difficulties derive from going beyond what the Scriptures explicitly teach; this is the same problem with the Arminian camp, as we will see. A little history lesson will help here.

In the Middle Ages a way of doing theology called Scholasticism became the dominant means of teaching and understanding the ways and being of God. The original reformers spoke out against scholasticism in favor of humanism as a style of doing theology, but the second-generation reformers quickly resorted back to scholasticism in order to combat Catholicism, using the same weapons of argumentation. Scholasticism has been accused of speculation and rightly so in many cases. The problem lies in trying to understand doctrine beyond what the Scriptures explicitly state. The use of reason is good when it is a servant, but when it becomes the king problems arise. Pastor Peter Sprague, also an engineer, likens the speculative aspect of scholasticism to carrying a math problem out too far in the decimals. 4.722222 should be seen as 4.7 unless the case warrants the precision to the millionth decimal. Most doctrine is given to the tenths place and so with a proper use of reason one may carry the logical conclusion to the hundredths place at times, but any further and speculation sets in – usually contradicting other clear teaching in Scripture. An example of this for our discussion is when we try to square the fact that God's choice comes before our response (both in time as well as logical priority) with the idea that God loves everyone and desires all to be saved. Acts 13:48b states: "And all who were appointed for eternal life believed." The Arminians twist this passage by saying God's appointment is based on something in humans, whether their future holiness or future choice, but if that were the case the passage would say, "and all who believed were appointed to eternal life." See also John 6:37 and 1 Samuel 2:25 for similar passages. The clear teaching of this passage is that God's choice is prior to people's response. So the decimal of 4.7 is the teaching that God's choice is prior in all respects to human response. The Calvinists at times try to stretch out this decimal to 4.722 by saying that since God only chooses some, he must not love everyone or at least he must not desire all to come to him. They then take clear passages of Scripture like John 3:16 and say the "world" doesn't mean everyone in the world but rather people throughout

the world; or they take passages like 2 Peter 3:9 and say the “all” means all kinds of people rather than everyone completely. They change what seems to be the obvious meaning of these passages because of reason, not revelation. The Arminians are just as guilty in their use of Acts 13:48 when they say it cannot mean what it seems to be saying because they think it would make people puppets or robots in the hands of a sovereign God. Once again reason should not be rejected, but at times it may need to be set aside into the category of “I don’t know” when it seems to go against Scripture. We do not have to figure out how everything works. At times God’s ways could seem puzzling to us. I am not arguing for irrational behavior or belief, but the most obvious interpretation of Scripture should be accepted unless other passages illuminate it differently, not simply because finite reasoning clarifies it another way. The Puritan Edward Fisher presents a healthy use of reason:

I do not contemn nor despise the use of reason; only I would not have you to establish it to the chief good; but I would have you to keep it under; so that, if with Hagar, it attempt to bear rule, and lord it over your faith, then would I have you, in the wisdom of God, like Sarah, to cast it out from having dominion. In few words, I would have you more strong in desire than curious in speculation, and to long more to feel communion with God than to be able to dispute of the genus or species of any question, either human or divine; and press hard to know God by powerful experience.²¹

Now let’s look at the doctrine of election specifically.

Election

There are two related topics that need to be discussed in order to understand the question of how God can be sovereign and humans can have free will at the same time: election and predestination. We will also need to discuss total depravity, irresistible grace, limited atonement and the perseverance of the saints to place this question in its historical and theological context. The first topic is election. When we consider election we can all accept the general understanding that God has chosen or elected a people for Himself before the foundation of the world. Ephesians 1:4 says, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 says:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Scripture is clear that God calls us and chooses us before we choose Him (John 15:16). God gets all the glory. We can accept that how He chooses and the intricacies involved are a mystery. When we seek to go further in our understanding of election we get into difficulties. It is good to attempt to go further in our understanding of God and His ways. We want to discuss the different possibilities. It is good and healthy so long as we tread lightly when we go beyond

²¹ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Divinity* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p. 253.

what Scripture says. It is ok to remain agnostic concerning the things Scripture does not explicitly teach. In seeking to understand election we are wise to consider all possibilities and not be too dogmatic. People have been killed over this issue due to extreme dogmatism. Even today people hold a proud, condescending outlook on all those who don't agree with their particular opinion. Pride has no place in theology, especially in areas not specifically detailed in Scripture.

There are three major views of election: The first position, which is the Calvinist position, says God has elected certain individuals to be saved and has bypassed others; only those elected will be saved and the rest will be damned to hell. His election is based only on His will rather than on anything the person does (i.e. faith, works, etc.). The second view says God elects some to be saved based on His foreknowledge of who will receive His forgiveness offered through the death of Jesus Christ. The third view is corporate election, meaning God elects a group rather than individuals to salvation.

The first view is the basic Calvinist position and is based on many passages of Scripture (Matthew 20:16; Acts 13:48; 2 Timothy 1:9; Romans 11:7 to name a few), but has some serious difficulties when the element of mystery is rejected. They claim that it is the only view that protects grace. If God's election is based on people's free will in placing their faith in Christ, then God is not in control of their salvation and faith becomes a work. This is simply not true. God is in control of salvation in that He did not have to offer it to anyone or provide forgiveness through the death of Christ. Faith is not a work just because it depends on the decision of a human. No one would say the birthday boy is working when he reaches out to receive his present. Salvation does depend on our faith and faith is not a work (Ephesians 2:8-9). But they are correct in chastising the Arminians because, as we will see, their system easily falls into legalism and self-righteousness. If my salvation is based on my choice then something in me must have been better than that in someone else who didn't choose Christ. Many Arminians don't fall into this pride, but their system seems to demand it. In reference to God's election in the Old Testament Deuteronomy 7:7 says: "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you." This is referring to a corporate choosing, but the principle that it had nothing to do with anything inside of them is still true. Romans 7:18 states: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature." The word for *sinful nature* is *sarx* better translated "flesh." Before we are saved we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 2:13) and so all we have is *sarx*. There is nothing good inside me that decides to choose God; God chooses me and I humbly respond to His choice because He opens my eyes to see how good He is and how true His plan is; this understanding does exalt grace more than the idea that God is dependent on human choice to accomplish His purposes. Romans 9:16 says, "It [God's election] does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." The Calvinist position does make salvation to be all of God and therefore only God is worthy of praise. There is nothing inside me that chooses God and therefore worthy of some of the praise.

A foundational question concerning salvation and faith is whether salvation is monergistic or synergistic. Monergism is the idea that there is only one working and synergism is the idea that two are involved. If by synergism we mean one works for his or her salvation then synergism

must be abandoned. Our salvation is all of God. But Calvinists insist that if people place their faith in Christ without God putting that desire in them irresistibly and without faith itself being seen as a gift He only gives to the elect irresistibly then salvation is synergistic not monergistic. The problem with this argumentation is that the Calvinists still say the person must place his or her faith in Christ. Even if they do this because of God's previous work, it is still them doing something so all accounts of salvation are in one sense synergistic. It is true that faith and even repentance are gifts from God, and so salvation should be seen as monergistic in some sense as well (Acts 11:18; 13:48; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29; James 1:17). Since our salvation should be seen as completely from God it is monergistic, but since we do participate in the act of believing it is synergistic. This would be illogical if it were monergistic and synergistic at the same time and in the same way, but it is not in the same way. It is monergistic in our complete dependence on God, and it is synergistic in our response to his grace.

A problem with the Calvinist position is that it can make God a respecter of persons. It is not a question of being fair because God would be perfectly just and fair if He didn't allow anyone to be saved - we all deserve hell as our punishment for sin. But for God to choose some and not others simply based on His good pleasure seems to be favoritism, which the Bible rejects (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). This position says that God does not really want everyone to be saved. The Scriptures are clear that God does desire all to be saved (Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32; Hosea 11:1-5, 8-9; John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). The Calvinist says these passages only reveal that God wants all types of people to be saved or that God actually has two wills, a revealed will and a secret will. To say these passages only say God wants all types of people to be saved is a classic illustration of eisegesis, interpreting Scripture to fit one's views rather than fitting one's views along with what Scripture says. Without the presupposition of Calvinism the Scriptures above would be interpreted to mean exactly what they say - God does want everyone to be saved. To say that God has two wills where the revealed will (God wants all to be saved) contradicts the secret will (God only wants some to be saved) is illogical. The Arminian believes in two wills of God in that He wills all to be saved in one sense but only those who place their faith in Jesus in another sense. The Arminian position is not illogical because it includes conditions. Look at the Calvinist position in logical form: God wants all saved. Joe is one of all people. Therefore God wants Joe saved. But the Calvinist could add, "But God secretly doesn't want Joe saved." This breaks the logical progression. Now look at the Arminian position in logical form: God wants all saved with the condition that they must place their faith in Christ. Joe does not want to place his faith in Christ. Therefore God would like Joe to be saved if he would place his faith in Christ, but since he won't, God will not save him. The Calvinist position fails logically and it fails Biblically by making God out to be a respecter of persons. R.C. Sproul tries to get out of this by saying:

The hue and cry the Calvinist usually hears at this point is "That's not fair!" But what is meant by fairness here? If by fair we mean equal, then of course the protest is accurate. God does not treat all men equally. Nothing could be clearer from the Bible than that. God appeared to Moses in a way that he did not appear to Hammurabi. God gave blessings to Israel that he did not give to Persia. Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus in a way he did not manifest himself to Pilate. God simply has not treated

every human being in history in exactly the same manner. That much is obvious.²²

But is this obvious? When we consider God's omniscience we find we do not have to settle for a God who shows favoritism contrary to His Word. Acts 17:26-27 says:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

The contingent "perhaps" is not meant to show that God doesn't know who will seek him, but it does mean God put people in different places because He knew what it would take for them to seek Him. His supposed non-equality only reveals that He focuses on those who will seek Him. An implication of this passage would be that if someone put in Iran would seek God (after He draws them) better in England, then God would put that person in England. We can hold to the whole of Scripture that God is not a respecter of persons and yet is still in control of the universe. God is not a tease! When it says He wants all to come to Him, it means He wants all to come to Him. He is not a schizophrenic where part of Him wants Joe to come to Him and part of Him doesn't want Joe to come to Him.

It may appear that I am schizophrenic seeming to side with the Calvinist in one moment and the Arminians the next. I am not necessarily siding with either group, but I do wish to argue in favor of each group when they have unjustly been accused or when it appears they are being misrepresented. In saying this I would like to include a possible option for the Calvinist holding to two wills of God by Jonathan Edwards, which he calls the decrees of God and the will of God:

Arminians ridicule the distinction between the secret and revealed will of God, or, more properly expressed, the distinction between the decree and law of God, because we say He may decree one thing and command another. And so, they argue, we hold a contrariety in God, as if one will of His contradicted another. However, if they will call this a contradiction of wills, we know that there is such a thing, so that it is the greatest absurdity to dispute about it. We and they know it was God's secret will that Abraham should not sacrifice his son Isaac, yet his command was that he should do it. We know that God willed that Pharaoh's heart should be hardened, and yet that the hardness of his heart was sin. We know that God willed the Egyptians should hate God's people. Psalm 105:25: "He turned their heart to hate His people, and deal subtly with His servants.".... His will of decree is not His will in the same sense as His will of command is. Therefore, it is no difficulty at all to suppose that the one may be otherwise than the other. His will in both senses is His inclination, but when we say that He wills virtue, or loves virtue, or the happiness of His creature, thereby is intended that virtue, or the creature's happiness, absolutely and simply considered, is agreeable to the inclination of His nature. His will of decree is His inclination to a thing, not as to that thing absolutely and simply, but with respect to the universality of things that have been, are, or shall be. So God, though He

²²R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), p. 37.

hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though He hates sin in itself, yet He may will to permit it for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things and at all times. So though He has no inclination to a creature's misery, considered absolutely, yet He may will it for the greater promotion of happiness in this universality. God inclines to excellency, which is harmony, or for the promotion of the harmony that there is in the universality, and making it shine the brighter. And thus it must be, and no hypothesis whatsoever will relieve a man, but that he must own these two wills of God. For all must own that God sometimes wills not to hinder the breach of His own commands because He does not in fact hinder it. He wills to permit sin, it is evident, because He does permit it. None will say that God Himself does what He does not will to do.²³

Some may not agree with the specifics of Edwards' arguments but he does show in general a possible way how God could decree one thing and will another. There could also be other options finite minds have not considered – mystery should not be abandoned.

The Calvinists sometimes teach that God does not really love everyone. If a person's salvation is based only on God's choosing, then it would seem that if God loves someone He will choose them to be saved. If He does not love them then He will not choose them to be saved; because of this many Calvinists claim God does not love everyone. John MacArthur, a Calvinist, quotes Arthur Pink who claims God does not love everyone:

God loves whom He chooses. He does not love everybody.... Is it true that God loves the one who is despising and rejecting His blessed Son? God is Light as well as Love, and therefore His love must be a holy love. To tell the Christ-rejecter that God loves him is to cauterize his conscience, as well as to afford him a sense of security in his sins. The fact is, that the love of God, is a truth for the saints only, and to present it to the enemies of God is to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs. With the exception of John 3:16, not once in the four gospels do we read of the Lord Jesus - the perfect teacher - telling sinners that God loved them!²⁴

MacArthur adds: "In an appendix to the unabridged edition, Pink argued that the word *world* in John 3:16 ("For God so loved the *world*...") 'refers to the *world* of believers (God's elect), in contradistinction from *the world of the ungodly*.'"²⁵

MacArthur says that, though we cannot understand how God can love someone and not choose them as the elect, we must not go against the clear teaching of Scripture that says God does love everyone. He refutes Pink and others who claim God does not love everyone:

Yet I am convinced from Scripture that God's hatred toward the wicked is not a hatred undiluted by compassion, mercy, or love. We know from human experience that love

²³Jonathan Edwards, *Our Great and Glorious God*, pp. 64-66.

²⁴John MacArthur, *The Love of God* (Dallas: Word, 1996), p. 13.

²⁵Ibid.

and hatred are not mutually exclusive. It is not the least bit unusual to have concurrent feelings of love and hatred directed at the same person. We often speak of people who have love-hate relationships. There is no reason to deny that in an infinitely purer and more noble sense, God's hatred toward the wicked is accompanied by a sincere, compassionate love for them as well.

The fact that God will send to eternal hell all sinners who persist in sin and unbelief proves His hatred toward them. On the other hand, the fact that God promises to forgive and bring into His eternal glory all who trust Christ as Savior - and even pleads with sinners to repent - proves His love toward them.

We must understand that it is God's very nature to love. The reason our Lord commanded us to love our enemies is "in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45, NASB). That passage and the verses in its immediate context refute Arthur Pink's claim that Jesus never told sinners God loved them. Here Jesus clearly characterized His Father as One who loves even those who purposefully set themselves at enmity against Him.²⁶

The idea that God does not love everyone is in direct contradiction with Scripture (John 3:16) and logic - if God is all loving then how could He not love all? If He only loved some then He could become more loving by loving more. Since God is infinitely loving he must love all. God does love all, but all will not receive His love to the same degree. Love cannot be forced on someone otherwise it is a form of rape. If some refuse His love, then they will receive the consequences of their rejection of His love without God loving them less. Real love demands free will. Norman Geisler expounds on God's love and what he calls "strong Calvinism:"

Irresistible force used by God on his free creatures would be a violation of both the charity of God and the dignity of humans. God is love. True love never forces itself on anyone. Forced love is rape, and God is not a divine rapist! Second, logically this view seems to lead to a denial of God's omnibenevolence (all-lovingness). The Bible says "God is love" (1 Jn 4:16) and that he "loves the world" (Jn 3:16). In fact, "God does not show favoritism" (Rom 2:11), not only in his justice but in all his attributes including love (Mt 5:45). In fact, if God is simple, then his love extends to all his essence, not just part of it. Hence, God cannot be partly loving. But if God is all-loving, then how can he love only some so as to give them and only them the desire to be saved? Suppose a farmer discovers three boys drowning in his pond where signs clearly forbid swimming. Further, noting their clear disobedience, he says to himself, "They have violated the warning and have brought these deserved consequences on themselves." Thus far we may be willing to agree. But if the farmer proceeds to say, "Therefore I will make no attempt to rescue them," we would immediately think something is lacking in his love. And suppose by some inexplicable whim he should declare "I have no obligation to save any of them, but out of the goodness of my heart I will save one of them and let the other

²⁶Ibid., p. 15.

two drown.” In such a case we would surely consider his love partial.²⁷

Free will and love are used as an apologetic for why God allows evil in the world:

God created Adam (and all people) to worship, obey, and have fellowship with Him - to love Him. Genuine love is inseparable from free will. God could have created Adam, and all other people, to think and act like robots. By divine mandate, God could have caused Adam not only to obey Him but to love Him. Would this have been genuine love? Of course not. Love can't be programmed; it must be freely expressed. God wanted Adam to show his love by freely choosing obedience. That's why God gave Adam a free will. A free choice, however, leaves the possibility of a wrong choice. Adam made the wrong choice, thereby allowing sin to enter the world.²⁸

God does love everyone, but will not force His love on them, therefore it is true that God loves all and wants all to be saved but does not save all. But what do we mean by God's love? D.A. Carson explains:

When he says he loves us, does not God rather mean something like the following? “Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway, not because you're attractive, but because it is my nature to love.” And in the case of the elect, God adds, “I have set my affection on you from before the foundation of the universe, not because you are wiser or better or stronger than others but because in grace I chose to love you. You are mine, and you will be transformed. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love mediated through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 8).²⁹

Carson is correct. It is God's nature to love - everybody! The Calvinist view could be accepted so long as we agree that God does love everyone though that love is not based on any thing loveable in the person but rather because God is love and that God is not a respecter of persons and so does truly desire for all to come to Christ. Why He elects only some rather than all if He loves all and desires all to be saved is a mystery but it is not illogical. God will not force His love on anyone. Our capacity and receptivity for His love must be considered. We have already seen that God legitimately offers salvation to all and wants all to come to Him; all means “all,” not “all kinds.” Could it be that He elects those who will receive His love? He does not elect those He knows will place their faith in Him, but rather elects those who will receive His love and then gives them the gift of faith; this will make more sense when the corporate election view is understood.

The second view of election is what we will call the “free will” theory. Free will theorists agree

²⁷David Basinger and Randall Basinger, editors, *Predestination and Freewill* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), pp. 69-70.

²⁸Dan Story, *Defending Your Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), p. 171-172.

²⁹D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, p. 63.

with the Calvinist that election pertains to individuals. They disagree with the Calvinist in that they hold to a conditional election as opposed to an unconditional election. The condition of their election is their faith. The Calvinist believes that election took place before creation so a person's faith, which takes place after creation cannot be the cause of the election. They also believe that faith is a gift from God and so cannot be the cause of their election, but rather the effect. Because of the Calvinists' understanding of total depravity, some believe that even regeneration comes before faith and therefore faith cannot be a condition of election.

First on the issue of the time of election, all agree that election took place before creation. Ephesians 1:4 says, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world." The free will theist says the election is based on God's foreknowledge of who would believe. Before time God knew who would believe so he elected them. 1 Peter 1:2 says, "who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." The difficulty with this position is seen when asked, "what's the point of election?" God elects or chooses the individuals to be saved whom He knows will believe? This position is really no different than saying God will save those He knows will be saved. There is no point in the extra step of election. The idea that God chooses those who choose Him first makes God dependent on humans and it really negates His choice. The Scriptures describe God's choosing as coming prior to human choice, not contingent to it. *Foreknowledge* is also used in reference to predestination (Romans 8:29). We will discuss these two concepts later.

Second on the issue of which comes first, regeneration or faith, the Scriptures are clear. Faith comes before regeneration. The Calvinist is forced to go contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture because he thinks his system demands it. The problem lies in the Calvinist view of total depravity. Even R.C. Sproul sees the need to use a different term because of the difficulties that arise with the term "total depravity." He suggests the term "radical corruption" instead. But does this total depravity or radical corruption make it impossible for unregenerate humans to respond to the gospel call? Jack Cotrell shows the Biblical answer to this question:

The fact is, however, that the Bible does not picture man as totally depraved. Man as a sinner is truly depraved and corrupted (Jer. 17:9), even to the point of being dead in his trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13). This does not mean, however, that he is unable to respond to the gospel call. The parallel between Eph. 2:1-10 and Col. 2:11-13 shows that even the person who is dead in his sins is regenerated *through his faith* in Christ, i.e., he believes before he is regenerated. His regeneration or his coming to life depends upon his faith.³⁰

We may disagree with Cotrell's softening of depravity, but Ephesians 2:1-10 makes it clear that regeneration comes after faith. Verse 5 speaks of regeneration: "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" and calls this salvation; "it is by grace you have been saved." But in verse 8 it says this salvation referred to in verse 5 comes "through faith," so the "being made alive" or regeneration comes through faith. John chapter three is just as clear as Ephesians. John 3:16 says that our belief brings eternal life. This eternal life is the same thing

³⁰Clark Pinnock, editor, *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 68.

as the life spoken of in verse 3 when he says “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Born again or regeneration is the receiving of eternal life; eternal life is the life we receive when we are born again. But verse 15 is the clincher: “That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” There is no reason to interpret these verses in any other way than the obvious interpretation that when one believes he receives eternal life - regeneration comes after faith. We see in the Calvinist position a problem with all systems of theology. When we come up with a system we are tempted to interpret Scripture to fit our system. Systems can be helpful but they should not force us into bad interpretation; they make great servants, but lousy masters.

Free will theists hold to their position on election because of their beliefs concerning human freedom and God’s sovereignty. Bruce Reichenbach gives a good definition of human freedom:

To say that person is free means that, given a certain set of circumstances, the person (to put it in the past tense) could have done otherwise than he did. He was not compelled by causes either internal to himself (genetic structure or irresistible drives) or external (other persons, God) to act as he did. Though certain causal conditions are present and indeed are necessary for persons to choose or act, if they are free these causal conditions are not sufficient to cause them to choose or act. The individual is the sufficient condition for the course of action chosen.³¹

This definition simply brings out that humans are more than the sum of their parts or the sum of their experiences - they are truly free as made in the image of God. Free will theists make their biggest mistake in their view of God’s sovereignty. Reichenbach says of God:

He does not purpose or dispose everything that happens; his purposes are both general and specific, but they do not include every detail of human existence. Not only does he work through his created natural law, but just as importantly he has (in part) entrusted his program to the hands and feet of people. This means, of course, that at times his plans and purposes are thwarted.³²

To say God’s plans and purposes can be thwarted makes God impotent and frustrated. However Job 42:2 says, “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.” Isaiah 14:27 says, “For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back? Psalms 33:10-11 says, “The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.” Proverbs 21:30 says, “There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.” Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.” Proverbs 16:4 says, “The LORD works out everything for his own ends - even the wicked for a day of disaster.” This is because as Proverbs 16:9 says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” This does not mean God programs a person’s every step; but it does mean God is in control and

³¹David Basinger and Randall Basinger, editors, *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), p. 102.

³²Ibid., p. 117.

His plan will not be thwarted. R.C. Sproul brings out the helpful understanding of God's active will and permissive will:

When we speak of divine sovereignty we are speaking about God's authority and about God's power. As sovereign, God is the supreme authority of heaven and earth. All other authority is lesser authority. Any other authority that exists in the universe is derived from and dependent upon God's authority. All other forms of authority exist either by God's command or by God's permission.³³

God either actively causes things to happen such as when He spoke and the universe came into existence, or He passively allows things to happen for His purposes such as the crucifixion of Christ. In speaking of Jesus Peter said in Acts 2:23, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." In referring to the same incident Peter says in Acts 4:28, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." God did not cause Judas to betray Jesus, or Pilate to sentence him to death, but it was in God's plan - His plan was not and never has been thwarted.

David Bassinger makes some similar mistakes in reference to God's sovereignty. He says that free will theists "maintain that God has voluntarily given up complete control of earthly affairs to the extent that he has voluntarily granted humanity freedom."³⁴ He says, "To the extent that God grants individuals freedom, he gives up complete control over the decisions that are made."³⁵ He admits the necessary conclusion of a full blown freewill theist position: "However, the fact remains that freewill theists, unlike theological determinists, must ultimately view God in a very real sense as a *risk-taker*."³⁶ As we have already seen, God is in complete control of His creation and He is certainly not a "risk-taker." Terrance Tiessen is correct in saying, "There is nothing that happens within the created reality outside of God's good and wise care and control. In creating other beings with self-determination, God has surrendered none of his control."³⁷ Tiessen also says, "Most of what happens within human history is determined by the will of creatures without special action by God to bring it about,"³⁸ but this does not take away from His sustaining power and ability to intervene whenever He sees necessary. He says, "I do not question the comprehensive providence of God, but I am suggesting that God's providential care for the details of the lives of all his creatures does not require ceaseless 'interventions' on his part." God either causes or allows all things and therefore maintains complete control of all events. Because God knows the future completely and even knows all counterfactual possibilities, He remains in control by bringing this universe into existence and keeping all the specific acts made by humans to be under His control. As a "middle knowledge" proponent Tiessen says:

³³R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God*, p. 24.

³⁴David Bassinger, *The Case for Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), p. 12.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁷Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), p. 291.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 298.

I believe that everything that occurs in world history is part of the eternal purpose of God, but I believe that, in forming his plan, God knew what all of his creatures would do in what circumstances, and he decided which circumstances would come about through the joint agency of God and his creatures, so that everything that happens is as God planned it, but God is not the only agent who works to bring it about.³⁹

The free will view has serious problems. It appears this view is held, at least by some, simply because they can't understand how God could be in complete control of His creation and still allow human freedom. Getting rid of or seriously limiting God's sovereignty is not a Biblical option. To admit that we are not capable of fully comprehending this complex question is more advisable – mystery. Deuteronomy 29:29 states, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” Ecclesiastes 7:24 says, “What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?” In Psalm 131:1 David confessed, “O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me.” The word for *difficult* is a niphal participle of אָבַר which means to be difficult, extraordinary, wonderful or marvelous. NLT translates it, “matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp.” NKJ renders it as “things too profound for me.” This is how I feel about this issue. I believe we should attempt to understand as much as we can about God and his ways, but should be satisfied with what he tells us in his word when we cannot completely figure out any particular issue. Reason is a great tool we should use to our fullest capacity, but we dare not make it master. It seems to me that many have unwittingly elevated reason to supreme status when it comes to the doctrine of election; I believe this is true in both Calvinist and Arminian camps.

The third view of election is corporate election. Deuteronomy 7:6 speaks of the election of Israel: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” It is clear that the election of Israel was corporate. One was included in this election by birth. In the New Testament the election is corporate and one is included by the new birth. Ephesians 1 brings out clearly that our election is “in Christ.” Verse 4 says, “For he chose us *in him* before the creation of the world.” Verse 6 says, “to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us *in the One he loves*.” Verse 11 says, “*In him* we were also chosen.” The choosing, the election is all *in Christ*. Jesus is the elect one and we become a part of the elect when we enter him. For Paul the concept *in Christ* was crucial to everything he wrote. So the question is, “When do we enter Christ and therefore become one of the elect?” Verse 13 states: “And you also were included *in Christ* when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked *in him* with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” This election is what Robert Shank calls a “Christocentric election.”⁴⁰

The election in the New Testament is a corporate election just like the election in the Old

³⁹Ibid., p. 320.

⁴⁰Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), p. 27.

Testament was a corporate election. What else should we have expected? William Klein has written an excellent book on corporate election that is worth quoting extensively in order for us to understand this position:

I conclude, first of all, that the New Testament writers address salvific election in primarily, if not exclusively, corporate terms. In other words, God has chosen an elect body to save. Election to salvation applies to the church, God's chosen body.

In our study of the Old Testament we discerned the pattern that God chose Abraham and his seed to be his chosen nation. Correspondingly, God chose Christ and those "in Him" to be his chosen people. God's free and sovereign electing grace has chosen the community of those "in Christ." Christ is God's Chosen One, and the church is chosen in him.

This brings us to consider the whole construct of "corporate solidarity" that is so foreign to our Western thinking. In his book *The New Testament World*, Bruce Malina argues persuasively that the first-century Mediterranean person did not share or comprehend our idea of an individual. Malina is convinced that instead of being individualistic, in the world of the New Testament, people were what he calls "dyadic." That is, they conceived of themselves in relation to others, not as separate entities. Thus they did not view people in terms of their specific qualities as individuals, but rather the qualities of their family, village, city, or nation. This sheds light on Paul's presentation of the church as incorporated into Christ. It helps explain the numerous corporate metaphors employed to describe the church - body of Christ, house (temple), bride, people of God, and "in Christ." Christians find their identity as members of this inclusive organism. Thus, though individualism dominates our thinking, it would have been very foreign to the world of the writers of the New Testament.

Paul has *not* conceived of election in terms markedly different from the election of Israel. We should not expect him to. In fact, the concepts are quite parallel. As Israel became God's chosen people when God chose Abraham, so the church finds her election in solidarity with Christ and his election.

The New Testament writers do not cite election as the underlying reason or cause why some individuals believe, or its lack as the explanation why others do not.... Rather than "God chose *me*," we need to stress "God chose *us*." A corporate understanding of election reveals the error in an individualistic "maverick Christianity." All believers find their identity as one of God's chosen ones through participation and incorporation in the body of Christ.

Christians today need to recapture the reality of the church as an organism. It is not a montage of individuals. No believer in Christ should feel or become isolated. Christians are members of one another. For Paul this is a basic and established *fact*, not a goal. Christian security rests not in an individualistic "God chose me," but in the reality that by faith "I am a member of his chosen body." Membership in the body of Christ provides

security, for we know that God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

The debates often center on the issue by asking: Has God chosen specific individuals to save, and, if so, was it on the basis of foreseen faith or simply a matter of God's sovereign will? We have concluded that this question does not trouble the biblical writers. God has chosen to save a people, and in New Testament language that people is the church. In the old covenant a person entered the chosen nation of Israel through natural birth. In the new covenant a person enters the chosen body, the church, through the new birth. To exercise faith in Christ is to enter into his body and become one of the "chosen ones."

If anything, we have seen in our exegesis of the appropriate texts in the New Testament the emphasis upon the universal availability of the gospel. To exercise faith seems possible for all. God holds people responsible and accountable for accepting or rejecting the gospel. The invitation goes out to all, as if anyone could respond. We have seen face-value statements that God wills that none perish, all come to repentance, and all people enter salvation.

In the context of Ro 9-11 Paul does not maintain that some individual Jews or Gentiles could not come to God in faith because God had not elected them. In fact, in 10:21 Paul quotes Isaiah, who says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people" (Isa 65:2). If these unbelieving Israelites (in both Isaiah's and Paul's times) were simply nonelect, why do Isaiah and Paul express such anguish? But more, in the Isaiah text *God* is speaking! Why does God make so impassioned an appeal if the ultimate explanation for their unbelief was that he had not chosen them for salvation? No, for God, Isaiah, and Paul, the plea makes more sense if the issue here is the need for faith, not a lack of election.

Clearly the modern church has lost the sense of group responsibility for our actions.... Goba cites a Zulu proverb, *Zifa ngamvunye*, which he translates, "When one individual has done wrong, the rest of the group to which he belongs is responsible." We have allowed cultural values like individualism to blind us to our obligation to maintain the purity of the body. We have lost the sense of "belongingness" that ought to characterize members of Christ's body.

We ought to celebrate the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper with a greater sense of their significance in affirming our corporate solidarity. In Ro 6:2-6 Paul attests that baptism celebrates the believers' incorporation into Christ, into the body that the Holy Spirit spawned (1 Co 12:13; see Gal 3:27; Eph 4:4-5). Likewise the Lord's Supper celebrates and proclaims the unity of the body. One loaf symbolizes one body (1 Co 10:16b-17). Paul reminded the Corinthians to discern the body of Christ (the church) when they ate the bread and drank the cup (1 Co 11:23-29). Participation in the Eucharist

ought to heighten our sense of corporateness.⁴¹

God's election of the church does not take away from our personal relationship with Christ or our personal responsibility for our sin. It does not negate our eternal security as we shall see. It simply shows that as far as election is concerned, God has elected a people in Christ. As we enter the new birth we enter Christ and are incorporated into the body and become a part of the elect. Our individualistic mindsets are not in accordance with the Biblical worldview. Gordon Fee is correct in saying:

Paul can hardly help himself: his focus and concern are always on the people as a whole. Though entered individually, salvation is seldom if ever thought of simply as a one-on-one relationship with God. While such a relationship is included, to be sure, "to be saved" means especially to be joined to the people of God. In this sense, the third-century church father Cyprian had it right: there is no salvation outside the church, because God is saving *a people* for his name, not a miscellaneous, unconnected set of individuals. Thus our present concern is with the primary goal of salvation: an eschatological people, who together live the life of the future in the present age as they await the final consummation.⁴²

There are problems with corporate election as well. Doesn't a group of people consist of a bunch of individuals? Even if corporate election is true, are not individuals chosen in some sense? Even in the corporate election of Israel the concept of a remnant comes into play to reveal that not all that are born Jewish are God's chosen. Romans 9:6b says, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." He then connects this idea with election in verses 11-13 where he specifically refers to individuals. Some have claimed that the passage he quotes from Malachi is referring to nations, but Paul is clearly referring to individuals in his use of the passage. Later in the same chapter he mentions the remnant idea in v.27 and then quotes Isaiah saying, "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah." Here Paul is plainly teaching that God preserves whom he wills and unless He does, nobody would be saved; individual election seems demanded. Does the corporate election view take away God's sovereignty? Klein has attempted to answer these criticisms but it is still wise to hold this position tentatively along with a full embrace of mystery. We can all agree that God chooses and is therefore in control while allowing us a limited freedom - the rest is not crystal clear and therefore can be understood as mystery. We certainly can respect each other's positions.

Predestination

The Calvinist position on predestination is that God predestines individuals to be saved. It is hard to see any difference at all in the Calvinist position on predestination and that of election.

⁴¹William Klein, *The New Chosen People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 257-258, 260, 261, 264, 265, 266, 267-268.

⁴²Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), p. 64.

We can apply all that is said on the Calvinist position on election towards their position on predestination. However predestination and election are two different concepts, as we shall see.

Some Arminians believe God predestines some to be saved according to His foreknowledge of who would be saved. This view is nonsensical. Why would God predestine to be saved those He knows will be saved? What is the purpose of predestination? If God knows they will be saved then they will be saved with or without this extra, unneeded step of predestination. The Arminian uses Romans 8:29 which says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined.” The foreknowledge here is seen as simple knowledge of the future fact that certain people would place their faith in Jesus. The Calvinist would reply that this foreknowledge is not simple prescience, but rather means to fore-love. Knowledge in the Bible is often used in an intimate sense rather than just a cognitive sense. The term *foreknowledge* is used in both a cognitive sense (Acts 2:23) and an intimate sense (Romans 11:2). The Bible doesn’t say how this foreknowledge in Romans 8:29 should be understood or what it is based on. It would be reasonable based on Romans 11:2 to see it as similar to fore-love. God loves everyone, but He has a special love for the elect. He has a special love for the elect in the New Covenant, just like He had a special love for the elect in the Old Covenant (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Remember He loves everyone, but a special love is given only to those who receive His love because God is not a spiritual rapist. But all of this arguing over what this predestination is based on and what this foreknowledge means is irrelevant when we see from the passages that the predestination is not concerning salvation, but rather the results of salvation.

Klein explains the Biblical understanding of predestination:

God predestined certain goals for his people. We insist this is the central point of predestination, not the selection of who will become his people. For those he foreknew (those in Christ), God predetermined certain benefits and privileges. Essentially these favors consist of the blessings of his eschatological salvation (1 Th 5:9), though they include present conformity to Christ’s image (Ro 8:29-30) and the capacity to do good works (Eph 2:10). Future glory is certain for the body of Christ (Ro 9:33; 1Co 2:7; Eph 1:11-12), for God had adopted believers into his family (Eph 1:5). These favors are definite for those in Christ; God had predestined them.⁴³

Clark Pinnock says, “When the term predestination is used in relation to salvation, it concerns the believer’s future destiny which is to be conformed to Jesus Christ, not to his becoming a Christian.”⁴⁴

The Greek word for “predestine” is *προορίζω* which gives the sense to “foreordain.” This word is used in a salvation context in Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:5,11. Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.*” The predestination is referring to our transformation into being more like Jesus. This is referred to in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being

⁴³Ibid. p. 279.

⁴⁴Clark Pinnock, *Grace Unlimited*, p. 18.

transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” This transformation into the likeness of Christ is a process that occurs in Christians. Romans 8:29-30 is merely showing that it is an inevitable process for the Christian. This passage can back up the Calvinist idea of the perseverance of the saints, but not necessarily the full-blown Calvinist position on election and predestination. Ephesians 1:5,11 are similar. Verse 5 says, “He predestined us *to be adopted as his sons* through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.” The “us” he is referring to is Paul and the Ephesians as well as all the other elect. The elect have been predestined to adoption. We are not only forgiven and justified but also adopted into the family of God with God himself as our father. It is the blessing of adoption as an added bonus (in fact the ultimate bonus) to salvation that is the focus of predestination in this passage. Verse 11 says we have been predestined according to his plan for the praise of His glory. This plan can be found in the next chapter, which describes that we are saved by grace through our faith in the finished work of Christ. God predestines those who follow His plan of salvation to be adopted as sons and to be for the praise of His glory. Predestination is a wonderful blessing to the believer. If you are a Christian you are predestined to be conformed into the likeness of His Son. This is why Paul could say in Philippians 1:6: “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Nothing can thwart God’s plan.

Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace

A few comments still need to be made concerning total depravity, irresistible grace, limited atonement and the perseverance of the saints. Total depravity is the doctrine that says every part of our being is corrupted by our sin. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” R.K. McGregor Wright makes several statements along with Scriptures worth quoting on total depravity:

1. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, all are born spiritually dead in their sin nature, and therefore require regeneration to a life they do not naturally possess. See Genesis 6:5-7; Psalm 51:5, 58:3; Jeremiah 17:9-10; John 1:12-13; 3:5-7; Romans 5:12; 8:7-8; Ephesians 2:1-3, 8-10; Colossians 2:13.
2. Being fallen, the natural heart and mind is sinfully corrupt and unenlightened. See Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Ecclesiastes 9:3; Jeremiah 17:9-10; Mark 7:21-23; John 3:19; Romans 8:7-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 4:17-19; 5:18; Titus 1:15.
3. Because the whole of nature is involved in the Fall and its results, sinners are slaves to sin. See John 8:34, 44; Romans 6:20; Ephesians 2:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:25-26; Titus 3:3; 1 John 3:10; 5:19.
4. No one escapes the unrighteous tendencies of the sinful Adamic nature. See 1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chronicles 6:36; Job 15:14-16; Psalm 130:3; 143:2; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20, 29; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:9-18; James 3:2, 8; 1 John 1:8-10.

5. Left to themselves, those dead in trespasses and sins have no spiritual ability to reform themselves, or to repent, or to believe savingly. See Job 14:4; Jeremiah 13:23; Matthew 7:16-18; 12:33; John 6:44, 65; Romans 11:35-36; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 4:7; 2 Corinthians 3:5.⁴⁵

We are dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1-3) and slaves to sin (Romans 6:17) before we come to Christ. John 6:44 is correct: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Romans 3:10-12 is clear:

As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God [so much for seeker sensitive churches]. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

Acts 16:14b says, “The Lord opened her [Lydia] heart to respond to Paul’s message.” The implication being that if the Lord had not opened Lydia’s heart she would not have responded to Paul’s message. Jacob Arminius himself believed in total depravity. Carl Bangs quotes Arminius:

In this state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatsoever except such as are excited by divine grace. For Christ has said, “Without me ye can do nothing.”⁴⁶

Does total depravity prove that only those God draws can come and all those God draws will come? John 6:44 makes it clear that only those God draws can come. But can we resist God’s drawing? Calvinists make much of the word for “draw” in John 6:44. They say it means “drag.” Does this mean God forces them against their will? They won’t go that far. But if it means “draw,” can’t they resist? It is true that unless God speaks to us, opens our hearts and draws us we won’t seek Him or come to Him - that is how depraved and dead in our sins we are before salvation. There is a real bondage of the will before we are saved. But the Bible speaks of how the gospel is powerful enough to penetrate our spiritual deadness. Romans 1:16 says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Acts 13:44-52 brings out the importance of presenting “the Word of the Lord” for people’s salvation by using the phrase “the Word of the Lord” four times in this one missionary encounter. A Holy Spirit empowered presentation of the gospel can penetrate our spiritual deadness and bring us to a point where we can place our faith in Jesus. But we can resist God’s grace. Some ask how a spiritually dead person can respond before being made alive - the difficulty of this question has led many Calvinists to accept the idea that a person is born again before faith (this idea has already been refuted above). First we go too far

⁴⁵R.K. McGregor Wright, *No Place For Sovereignty*, pp. 112-115.

⁴⁶Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), p. 341.

when we press the analogy of spiritual death to every detail of physical death. Second the idea of prevenient grace can be a possible answer to the question. When the word comes (prevenient grace) people are put in a place of being able to respond to the gospel; they are awakened. If they respond positively in faith they are born again. If they respond negatively in unbelief they remain spiritually dead. John 5:25 says, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live." This passage makes it very clear that they hear the voice before they live. But even if we cannot come up with a definitive answer to the question of how a spiritually dead person can respond to the voice of the Lord, we can simply accept the fact that the Bible teaches its possibility- mystery.

Does God only draw the elect? General revelation shows that God draws all people to some extent. Romans 1:18-32 points out that God has revealed Himself to everyone to such an extent that they are without excuse. This revelation of God can be seen in nature as seen in Psalms 19:1-4. Note verse 3 says, "There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard." This revelation is also seen in our conscience as seen in Romans 2:12-16. Note verse 15: "Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." Paul wrote about the conscience being a part of all humanity in the context of and because of his statement in verse 11: "For God does not show favoritism." Romans 1 doesn't give any hope that this general revelation where God reveals himself to everyone will actually bring anyone to salvation. But if it is powerful enough to make people culpable, it makes sense to believe that it is powerful enough to draw people to God. Does God mumble and hold us accountable for not hearing? It seems strange that God would reveal Himself simply to make people guiltier. Romans 2 in reference to the conscience gives some hope that the Gentiles might respond to God's drawing through the conscience since it says their thoughts at times even defend them, and in verse 14 it says the Gentiles can do by nature that which the law requires. Acts 17:26-27 reveals that God shows providential care to all (see also Acts 14:17 and Matthew 5:44). He says in verse 27, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." He shows providential care to all in order to draw them to himself - it is at this point only that people are able to seek Him. But the clear inference from these passages is that after the general revelation people can resist His drawing. Psalm 145:17-18 says: "The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Here we see providential care (what some call common grace) to all and closeness to all those who call on Him. A reasonable inference (4.722 on the Sprague scale) would be that those who call on Him are those who responded willingly and positively to His providential care. The common grace does have calling power, but not irresistible power. To think that God would show kindness and love to all people without calling them to Himself and in fact for the express purpose of making them more guilty seems amiss. The only reason this picture of God would be held is because the Calvinist seeks to protect God's sovereignty. But God can remain sovereign and allow free will. God's call in general revelation and common grace is loud enough for us to hear, but most of us plug our ears. This is why the special revelation of the gospel presentation of the Word of the Lord is necessary. John 12:32 says, "But I [Jesus], when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He does draw all people at least in some sense because He does not desire any to perish.

The Scriptures seem to go against the doctrine of irresistible grace. Jeremiah 7:13 says, “While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.” When God calls we can refuse to answer. The Calvinist idea that God calls but secretly doesn’t open our ears to hear makes for a strange God indeed. It is like He has one hand out waving for us to come over and the other hand held out to stop us. Isaiah 65:2 says, “All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations.” Psalms 81:10-12 says, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.” Here we see the people of God refused to listen to God and so God hardened their heart by giving them over to their sins (see Romans 1:18-32). Notice He hardens their heart in response to their refusal to hear Him, not the other way around. Luke 7:30 says, “But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.” Jesus said in Luke 13:34, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” Here is a clear case of resisting Jesus. Jesus sincerely wanted to draw them and they refused. Acts 7:51 says, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” Here is an obvious incident of people resisting the Holy Spirit. 1 Timothy 2:4 says, God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” 1 Timothy 4:10 says, “We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” Paul is not saying everyone is saved. He is saying God is potentially savior for all and is definitely savior of those who believe. The “all men” can’t be “all kinds of men” or “the elect” because the next phrase would be redundant – “especially those who believe.” He is savior of all who believe and potentially savior of all because He wants all people to be saved as 2 Peter 3:9 clearly brings out: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Isaiah 5:4 says, “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?” The answer to God’s question is not that God made them that way and didn’t effectually call them - then He could have done more by effectually calling them, but it says He did all that was possible. The answer to God’s question is that they resisted His grace. Why do the Calvinists resist all these Scriptures that clearly teach against the idea of irresistible grace? Because the doctrine of irresistible grace seems necessary to their system. Once we see that the system is faulty, as we have already shown (because no system is perfect due to our finiteness), we can embrace the clear teaching of Scripture that we can resist God’s grace. Some Calvinists resort to the idea that we can resist some of the gracious works or influences of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ But which works can we resist? Why isn’t God’s influence as powerful at these times as at the times when we can’t resist His will? These Scriptures are all-inclusive and point out that we can resist His will, even concerning salvation.

⁴⁷Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, editors, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 347.

Now since it may seem that I have thoroughly rejected the Calvinist position of irresistible grace, I want to discuss an alternative use of the word *irresistible*. If we mean by irresistible that God forces his will without our ability to resist then we must reject it. But if we use *irresistible* the way we use the term in normal speech we may be able to still use it concerning our salvation. People say, “That chocolate is irresistible,” meaning, they could resist it in reality, but they don’t want to. Could God reveal himself in such a way that he appears so attractive that those who see him this way couldn’t possibly want to resist him? Thomas Watson explains: “This spontaneity and willingness is from the attractive power of God’s Spirit: the Spirit does not *impellere*, force, but *trahere*, sweetly draws the will.”⁴⁸ If this were the case the question would still remain, “Then why wouldn’t God reveal himself in this way to everyone?” I can only answer that I don’t know. Mystery has to be embraced at some point. God’s knowledge of who will resist no matter what may factor into his degree of drawing. The Bible indicates that our part as watchmen who present the Gospel has a part to play in it as well (Ezekiel 33:1-11; Romans 10:14). God does want everyone saved. God only elects some. We know that God’s election is based on His will and good pleasure (Ephesians 1:5, 9 and 11). We don’t know what His will and good pleasure specifically entail or whether there are other factors involved that we finite creatures couldn’t understand so God didn’t include them in His revelation to us. God is good and so we trust Him even when we don’t understand without resorting to twisting the revelation we do have. Once again, reason is not a devil but it cannot be Lord; it must remain a servant that is used when available but not abused or bowed down to.

Limited Atonement

The extent of the atonement is seen in four ways: 1) Some believe in universalism which states Christ’s death is appropriated to all regardless of whether they put their faith in Christ or not. This view must be rejected. Jesus spoke more on hell than anyone else in the Bible and so definitely believed some were going there (e.g. Luke 16:23; Matthew 25:46). The Bible makes it clear that many will end up in hell (2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:10; Matthew 7:13-14). The Bible is our ultimate standard and Jesus is our Lord whom we must follow therefore universalism must be denied.

2) The scholastic Calvinist view says Christ died only for the elect. They see this as definite or specific atonement - something actually took place at the cross for the elect, rather than just making salvation possible. John Calvin may not have held to the idea of limited atonement; his writings are not clear on this subject. It seems he believed that the extent of the atonement was universal but the application of the atonement was only toward the elect - Calvin may not have been a complete Calvinist. The Calvinist view must be rejected for Biblical reasons as well. We are not saved until we place our faith in Jesus Christ. The appropriation takes place when we place our faith in Jesus, not at the cross. If we say, as Charles Spurgeon says, that Christ died to secure the salvation of the elect this would be closer to the Biblical view. John 15:13 says, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus is referring to the elect here so the atonement must be seen in some sense as being specifically for them without rejecting the other passages that speak more generally.

⁴⁸ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, p. 157.

3) The third view is that Christ died potentially for all people. Read John 1:29; John 3:16-17; John 12:47; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:3-4, 6 and Hebrews 2:9 which all state Christ died for all. As we have seen before, attempts to limit the “all” in these passages fail revealing more the interpreter’s system of theology than an honest interpretation of the text. The writers of these passages must be speaking potentially because universalism has already been shown to be false. But how do we reconcile the truths found in views 2 and 3?

4) The last view is the view of the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages as well as John Calvin: Christ died potentially for all, but only efficaciously for the elect. 1 Timothy 4:10 is the clincher: “(and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” Christ is the savior of all potentially and has secured the salvation of the elect. Geisler puts it this way: “Christ’s atonement was intended to *provide* salvation for all as well as to *procure* salvation for all who believe.”⁴⁹ Christ secured the salvation of the elect, but his death was infinite in worth and therefore capable of being sufficient for everyone’s salvation. The offer of salvation to everyone is legitimate though everyone will not receive it. We do not have to wonder if our offer of the gospel to them is proper, even stating that Christ died for them because he did die for them at least potentially. Most Calvinists would agree that the offer is legitimate and many hold to this view concerning the limits of the atonement.⁵⁰

Perseverance of the Saints

For this final doctrine in our discussion I would like to address salvation in general and bring in this important doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. There are many different groups that claim to use the Bible for their definition of salvation and yet come up with dissimilar conclusions as to how we are saved. Most agree that we have a problem and that we need to be saved, but there is disagreement as to what that problem is and how we are saved from it. Let’s look at what the Bible discloses concerning this subject.

We are saved from sin. Our problem is our sin because God is holy and will not allow any ungodliness to come into His kingdom and presence. Habakkuk 1:13 says, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” That is serious and we must take God seriously as well as our sinful lives. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We are saved from sin. Some people think we are saved from God’s wrath, which is eternal punishment in hell. This is true. Romans 5:9 says, “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” We are saved from the penalty of sin, but that is not all - we are saved from sin. Some people will supposedly accept Jesus as a kind of fire insurance – “Yeah I’ll trust Jesus to make sure I

⁴⁹Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, p. 205.

⁵⁰Many Puritans held to the fourth view of atonement presented above including Richard Baxter, Stephen Charnock and John Howe.

don't go to hell." They have no intentions of getting rid of their sin; they just don't want to go to hell – these people have not received true salvation. We are saved from the penalty of sin and we are saved from the power of sin (Romans 6) and we will eventually be saved from the presence of sin either when we die or when Jesus returns whichever comes first. Those who claim that they accept Jesus as savior but not as Lord do not understand what they need to be saved from, not to mention the Biblical writers would have never even conceived of dissecting Jesus like this. This is why true repentance is necessary for salvation. Acts 3:19 says, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Wayne Grudem defines repentance as follows: "Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."⁵¹ We must want to be saved from sin before we can be saved from sin. We must feel sorrow over our sin (not just that we have been caught) and truly desire to be rid of sin in our lives. For someone to say they want to be saved but they don't want to give up their sin is like holding onto a snake, clutching it without any intentions of letting it go and yet yelling "Help, save me from this snake." The lowest level of true faith will include a desire to be rescued from sin.

When the Bible talks about salvation it can be confusing because it uses this term in three different senses. In one sense we are already saved (Ephesians 2:8); in another sense we are being saved (2 Corinthians 2:15; Philippians 2:12); and in another sense we will be saved (1 Peter 1:5). This is because the term salvation is a broad term including justification, sanctification and glorification. Justification is a legal term meaning we are declared not guilty by God. Sanctification is the process of our being made holy after God justifies us. Hebrews 10:14 brings out both of these aspects when it says, "Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." In one sense we are already made perfect - that is justification. In God's eyes we are perfect because of the powerful blood of Jesus, which cleanses all of our sin. But in another sense we all must admit we still sin (1 John 1:8) and need help by God to be holy - we are "being made holy" - it is a process that takes all of our lives (Philippians 3:12). In one sense God has declared us righteous and in another sense we are being made what he has declared us to be. Glorification is the state of perfection we arrive at when we get to heaven.

When we hear the term "salvation" most people think of justification because this is how the term is used most often in the Bible. How can we be justified by a holy God who cannot look on or tolerate sin when we are so guilty? It is because of the work of Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection brought our salvation. Jesus paid the price we were supposed to pay for our sin by dying on the cross and suffering God's wrath in our place. It is not that God just decided to overlook our sin - that would be unjust. He announced the penalty and then paid it himself. Jesus suffered the wrath of God while on the cross; that is why he cried out "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Jesus took our sins upon himself and because of this God turned his back on Jesus and allowed him to suffer the wrath we were suppose to suffer. This is how God could be just and yet justifies those who place their faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). Romans 3:28 says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing

⁵¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 713.

the law.” God’s requirement is faith alone. Romans 4:5 says, “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” We are declared righteous by our faith in Jesus and what he did for us. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast.” Our trust in Jesus is the only thing that saves us. Our works have nothing to do with our being justified. This is how powerful the death of Jesus is. We cannot add anything to the finished work of Jesus on the cross. In fact when we say we are saved by faith plus being good, performing certain rituals, etc. we insult Jesus and are really saying his death on the cross wasn’t good enough. If we add works as necessary for our justification we are presenting another gospel that is really no gospel at all (Galatians 1:8-9). It is crucial to our salvation that we embrace the truth that we are saved through faith alone by the grace of God alone.

We are saved by faith and we stay saved by faith. Galatians 3:1-14; v.3 says, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Some people say we are saved by faith but when we sin we lose our salvation. This is a form of works salvation - you keep your salvation by your performance. This is a tragic belief for two reasons: 1) You could never be assured of your salvation. You would always live in fear wondering if you were going to make it, wondering if Jesus might come back while you are sinning at some time. 1 John 5:13 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” God wants us to know we are saved. We are not born again and then unborn again every time we sin (that could give you a spiritual headache). Some have a variation of this belief by saying that you don’t lose your salvation every time you sin but if you sin a lot you could lose your salvation. Well how many times does it take? In God’s eyes all sin is worthy of eternal punishment (James 2:10). The Bible certainly doesn’t say how many sins it takes to lose your salvation, so if this is true we could never be assured of our salvation, especially when we consider that our hearts are still sinful even after salvation. There are things in our lives that God hasn’t even dealt with us about yet. As we mature in the Lord He continues to reveal areas we need to work on. I don’t know how many areas God hasn’t dealt with me yet and so there could be enough sin in my life for me to lose my salvation for all I know. Thank God we don’t lose our salvation because of sin. 2) This is a faulty view of God. When God forgives us he doesn’t stop there. He takes off His judge’s robe and throws away His gavel. Then He goes over to the other side of the courthouse and signs the adoption papers declaring us to be His child (1 John 3:1; Ephesians 1:5). To think of an earthly father that was willing to totally reject his son for disobedience is horrible, but to think this way of our eternal Father is blasphemy. God loves us with an eternal love. He does punish us when we sin (Hebrews 12:5-11), but this is as a father punishing his son for his own good, not a judge punishing a criminal. The view that we lose our salvation when we sin and will go to hell unless we repent is the view that God never becomes our Father but always remains our judge and we are on probation in this life. Some believe you lose your salvation if you completely lose your faith. This position is not as bad as the others because it is not works salvation, but it still misunderstands what happens when we are really saved.

The fact is the Bible teaches that once we are saved God helps us to persevere unto the end so we won’t ever lose our salvation. John 6:39 says, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I

shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.” God won’t lose even one of his children. John 10:27-28 says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” This verse says not even the devil can take us or lure us away from the Father. It also says “they shall never perish.” If one child perishes then Jesus is a liar. The one who rejects the doctrine of eternal security needs to take this verse seriously because to imply by your doctrine that Jesus is a liar is blasphemy (though not an unforgivable sin). The fact is that we can trust Jesus’ word - we will never perish. Romans 8:29-30 says:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

This verse says that the people God foreknew were predestined by God to be conformed into the likeness of Jesus. There is no doubt they will be saved because He has predestined that they will be conformed into the likeness of Jesus. God will make sure we don’t fall away. That is why Jude 24 says God keeps us from falling. He does this by changing our hearts, putting new desires in us and coming to live inside us to make sure we don’t fall (Ezekiel 36:25-27). The passage in Romans 8 says that those who are predestined are called, justified, and glorified. The term glorified is in the past tense even though it doesn’t take place until the future to show how absolutely certain it is that everyone who is justified will be glorified.⁵² You can’t get unpredestined, unglorified or unborn-again. Romans 8:38-39 continue this teaching that once we are saved we cannot lose our salvation:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul goes out of his way to show that absolutely nothing can separate us from God once we are united to him. Some say that we can voluntarily leave God by renouncing our faith. This verse says nothing in all creation can separate us from him. We are in creation so this verse applies to us as well. Paul didn’t forget. We don’t need to put at the end of this verse “Oh yeah, we can separate ourselves.” This is true because God won’t let us go. Once we are saved we are no longer slaves to sin. Instead we have become slaves to God (Romans 6:22) and are now owned by God (1 Peter 2:9). He will not let us go.

This does not mean that someone can supposedly believe in Jesus and then abandon him and yet still claim to be saved. The Bible says we will persevere. Hebrews 3:14 says, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” In other words, if we don’t persevere in faith it proves we never came to share in Christ. 1 John 2:19 teaches the same thing: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them

⁵²A first century Greek method of stating the certainty of a future event was to put the future statement in the aorist tense (past tense).

belonged to us.” The very fact that someone leaves proves they never belonged. True Christians will continue to produce fruit and will continue to trust in Jesus because of the dramatic change God brought about. It is all up to God. If my salvation depended on me to hold onto it, I would lose it. I thank God it is up to him not me. This is the remarkable change that takes place when we are saved from our sins. That is why it is called “eternal life” (Romans 6:23). Eternal life refers to the quality and quantity of life we receive. The quality of life assures we will never go back. The quantity assures we can’t lose it - to be eternal it would have to last forever otherwise it was never eternal. The idea “I had eternal life for three years and then it stopped” is nonsensical; if it was ever eternal it couldn’t stop by its very nature.

You may ask, “But what about the warning passages in the Bible?” Some passages seem to teach that we can lose our salvation. All of these passages fall into one of three categories, but before we discuss these categories let’s understand what the implications are. The passages we just went over clearly teach we cannot lose our salvation. If other passages teach we can lose our salvation then the Bible contradicts itself - this is not an option for Christians (2 Peter 3:16-17). Since the passages that teach we cannot lose our salvation are so clear, there must be an explanation for the other passages. If we look closely at these passages we discover there is an explanation that fits perfectly with the other passages and we see both the need for the assurance passages as well as the need for the warning passages.

The warning passages fall into one of three categories: 1) They could be Old Testament passages that no longer apply under the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit left Saul (1 Samuel 16:14); David prayed that the Holy Spirit would not leave him (Psalm 51:11). Under the Old Covenant there was no assurance of salvation unless there was continual repentance (Ezekiel 18:21-24). They were saved by grace but they maintained their salvation through repentance and the provision of the sacrificial system. This is why God replaced the Old Covenant - it didn’t guarantee salvation and it didn’t make people perfect whereas the New Covenant does guarantee salvation and does completely justify us because the sacrifice of Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices (see Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:1-14). Therefore Old Testament passages do not prove that we can lose our salvation.

2 and 3) The passages could be either legitimate warnings to Christians or they are warnings to those who have embraced Christianity but have not actually entered the family of God yet. The warnings could be to Christians and are either not referring to the loss of salvation but just referring to the loss of God’s blessing or they are warnings of the loss of salvation but the warnings themselves are one of God’s ways to ensure that none will perish (i.e. God’s warning to Nineveh through Jonah kept it from being destroyed). Hebrews 6:1-9 is a case of a warning toward unbelievers. In this passage it describes people that have embraced Christianity to a certain extent and have even experienced the power of the Spirit in their lives but it is clear that they never were Christians. The passage uses the illustration of a fruitless field (7-8), which is proof that they never were Christians because all Christians will produce fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). In the passage just referred to in Matthew it goes on to describe people that were actually used by God to perform miracles and cast out demons (21-23) but Jesus says about them, “I never knew you.” He does not say, “I once knew you but you lost your salvation;” he says, “I never knew you.” They were never Christians just like the ones described in Hebrews 6 - we

know this by the way the writer of Hebrews concludes this section in Hebrews 6:9: “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation.” Those who have salvation will produce good fruit and will not lose their salvation. Those who think they are Christians but are not seeing any fruit in their lives need to take these warnings seriously. It is amazing that some will use this passage to prove you can lose your salvation and then gain it back again because this passage says in verse 6 that they can’t come back if they fall away. The fact is that it is referring to non-Christians who, like the Pharisees, blaspheme the Spirit (Mark 3:20-30), which is the only unpardonable sin (notice it is the Pharisees that were not saved whom Jesus accuses of committing this sin in Mark 3:30). Even if this passage is seen as speaking to Christians it does not prove that someone could actually lose their salvation - the warning will keep them from walking completely away. God would kill them before they walked away completely because He will not lose any of His children (see Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30). Hebrews 10:26-39 is another example. The only ones that will experience God’s wrath are “the enemies of God” (27). We as Christians are to take warning by this passage because our God is a consuming fire. We as Christians will experience a judgment of our works and if they don’t measure up they will be consumed and our lives will prove to be next to worthless (1 Corinthians 3:10-15), but as this passage in 1 Corinthians concludes: “If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” This is also how Hebrews 10:26-39 concludes: “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.” If you are truly a Christian you will persevere and will not shrink back - that is the fruit of true salvation. As Hebrews 3:14 says, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”

The truth that once we are truly saved we cannot lose our salvation is a tremendous blessing. We no longer have to fear eternal punishment. Now we can serve God just because we love him, not because we don’t want to go to hell. This is the only way our works can truly be unselfish. Some religions work hard obeying commands, knocking on doors to witness, etc. but it is all selfishly motivated - they are doing it, at least partially, for their own benefit. True Christians that rest in God’s eternal security can serve God completely out of love and gratitude. We can also wholeheartedly serve him even risking our life because we know he holds us in the palm of his hand. We can truly say with Paul, “For Christ’s *love* compels us.” We are not on probation where we have to mind our P’s and Q’s otherwise we could get cut from the team. Salvation is a done deal; I am His child now; I have eternal life now. Praise God I can rest in Him.

God’s grand plan of salvation is for a people He is calling to Himself. His plan is perfect and will be accomplished including each person He elects to salvation. Once they are saved His plan includes their eternal security – nothing can thwart the design and blueprint of the Almighty God. God has elected from eternity a people who will glorify, love and enjoy Him forever together. Those He elected He calls in such a way that they say yes to His call without coercion. Christ has already died for them specifically, securing their salvation. Once they are saved He moves in their lives in such a way that they are gradually transformed into the likeness of His Son with the absolute certainty that this will be accomplished for each and every believer. God does love everyone and desires their salvation and has even sent His son to die for them potentially. God has not created robots to do His bidding and then cast into hell the ones He

programmed to reject Him. How He can be sovereign and humans can have a legitimate freedom is beyond our comprehension, but true.

So What?

The question of God's sovereignty and human freedom has plagued Christianity for centuries. Why is this important? What is the usefulness of discussing this topic? Does mystery really help? I would like to give three reasons why this is not simply an academic argument for those who don't have anything better to do with their lives. 1) The closer we get to the truth the more we honor God. 2) Embracing mystery will lead us to marvel at God and therefore enjoy Him more fully. 3) Incorporating mystery into our lives will increase our faith.

Glorify and Enjoy God

The Westminster Catechism answers the question "What is the chief end of man?" by stating "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." If our eternal purpose is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever together with the rest of the saints throughout eternity then whatever enhances this endeavor and honors God is crucial to the life of the believer here. To fully understand the implications of this statement we will need to see what it means to glorify and enjoy God forever together. Then we will look at how our understanding of God's sovereignty enhances or detracts from our glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

The first part of the statement made by the Catechism is that we are to glorify God. Isaiah 43:7 says, "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory whom I formed and made." 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." What does it mean to glorify God? It cannot mean that we add to God's glory, because God is infinite in glory. We also cannot take away his glory because it is perfect and therefore incapable of diminishing. We do not make God glorious but we do declare (1 Peter 2:9) and reflect (2 Corinthians 3:18) His glory. Boston asserts: "Man glorifies God by thinking, speaking, and living to his glory."⁵³ We think to His glory by having proper thoughts of Him that lead us to worship Him. The first and second commandments bring out the necessity of having proper thoughts of God that lead to appropriate worship. We speak to His glory when we praise Him. Psalm 147:1 says, "Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!" Psalm 71:8 says, "Let my mouth be filled with your praise and with your glory all the day (NKJ)." We live to His glory when all that we do is ultimately for His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). "When it [the glory of God] is the ultimate end, the last end, the top and perfection of what we design, beyond which we have no more view, and to which all other ends are made subservient, and as means to that end."⁵⁴

⁵³ Thomas Boston, *The Works of Thomas Boston* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1853), 1:9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:12. Boston goes on to show that this does not mean we have to consciously think about God's glory in everything we do, but it must be the foundation of all we do. "Though it is a duty frequently to have a formal and express intention of the glory of God in our actings, yet to have it in every action is impossible: neither are we bound to it; for then, for that very intention we should be obliged to have another, another for that, and another for that, in infinitum. But we should always habitually and interpretatively design the glory of God. And that is done when, (1.) The course of our lives is directed to the glory of God, Psal. 1. ult. (2.) When we walk according to the rule of

Does our understanding of the doctrine of God's sovereignty make a difference in our glorifying God? Boston said, "Knowledge is a necessary foundation of faith and holiness; and where ignorance reigns in the mind, there is confusion in the heart and life."⁵⁵ This idea is true in general as well as in the specific case of understanding God's sovereignty. If we have false views of God in our minds it is a type of idolatry. The closer we get to the truth the more we honor God. Even if we claim to believe in the sovereignty of God, but emphasize human freedom and speak of God as a "risk-taker" and "not fully in control," we detract from His glory. When we elevate ourselves we detract from God's glory.⁵⁶ On the other hand when we make God to look like the author of sin or one who shows favoritism we also lessen His glory. To embrace the mystery of the Biblical declarations that God is sovereign in election yet without sin or favoritism heightens His glory.

Our chief duty is to glorify God and our chief happiness is to enjoy God (Psalm 73:25-28). God is the true satisfaction of our souls (Psalm 63). Whenever we seek anything else as ultimate to our happiness or pursue anything else more fervently than God to meet our needs we end up hurting ourselves. And the more we know God the better capable we are of enjoying Him. John 17:3 says, "Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." To know God in the Bible is not simply an intellectual endeavor; it includes the whole person. But it does embody understanding. John 8:31-32 states: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" Jesus is the truth (John 14:6) and so knowing the truth is not complete without an intimate relationship with Jesus. But this passage also brings out that holding to his teachings makes a difference in the life of the believer. The truth sets us free. The closer we get to the truth the freer we are – both a relationship with the Truth as well as understanding the truth of who God is and what are His ways as revealed to us by Christ and found in his Word. To go beyond the teaching of Scripture will not help us experience eternal life more fully or set us free from the bondages of this world, but to fully embrace all that the Bible does teach on who God is and what are His ways certainly enhances our enjoyment of God – this includes the teaching of our great and awesome sovereign God. To shy away from the mystery of God's sovereignty will only hurt us. To fully incorporate the mystery of God's sovereignty into our life can only elevate our experience of God's joy. When we marvel at the incomprehensible nature of the one true God who is infinitely above and beyond us in our finite, sinful state, we exalt God. When we dissect God into bite-size chunks so we can fully understand Him, we make Him out to be a big human not unlike the Greek and Roman gods. J. Sidlow Baxter makes a reference to the Trinity that is equally applicable to our

God's word, taking heed that we swerve not in any thing from it. And, (3.) When God's will is the reason as well as the rule of our actions; when we believe a truth, because God has said it; and do a duty, because God has commanded it. If we do not so, God loses his glory, and we lose our labour." *Ibid.*, 1:13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:9.

⁵⁶ It would be wise to ponder Boston's thoughts here: "Here is a rule to try doctrines by, and also practices. Whatever doctrine tends to glorify God, and promote his honour in the world, is certainly from God, and is to be embraced. And whatever practices have that same tendency, they are good, and deserve to be imitated. Whereas any doctrine that tends to dishonour God, to rob him of his glory, and set the crown upon the creature's head, ... is not from God." Thomas Boston, *Works*, 1:18.

subject at hand: “What is mysterious to the intellect has become heavenly sunshine to the heart.”⁵⁷

Incorporating mystery into our lives actually increases our faith. Larry Crabb makes an insightful point worth pondering:

Perhaps I’ve made my point: An honest look at life will produce confusion. But confusion isn’t bad, it’s good, because in the middle of confusion we become aware of a passionate desire to know that Someone strong and kind is working behind all we see, moving things carefully toward a just and joyful conclusion.... Tough faith never grows in a comfortable mind. But it can develop nicely when our mind is so troubled by confusion that we either believe God or give up on life. Letting oneself experience confusion creates a thirst that only faith can satisfy.⁵⁸

This is also true when we wrestle with who God is. A comfortable mind that has it all figured out is not forced to either believe or give up. We must be shaken out of our complacency and see God for who He really is – the awesome sovereign God of the universe that will accomplish His plan completely! I do not have to worry; I can completely trust in God and rest in His power and love – this is faith.

Conclusion

I hope this helps in our understanding of how God can remain sovereign and humans have a limited but legitimate free will. Search the Scriptures. Don’t let your system get in the way. God is sovereign and humans are free. God is in absolute control of the universe and nothing happens apart from His will. Humans are free to respond to God when He calls them to Himself. There is mystery involved, but we would really not want it any other way. If we could fully understand God and His ways we would either be God or fooled into believing a caricature of God. Mystery should lead us to marvel at our great and awesome God and trust in Him even when we don’t understand. God is sovereign and humans do have a limited but real freedom. As Norman Geisler says, “We are chosen but free.” How we are to understand these two seemingly contradictory truths is beyond our capability.

God is the greatest of all mysteries and the greatest of all realities. He is the infinite mystery behind all reality, and the absolute reality behind all mystery; unimaginably exceeding the profoundest grasp of human comprehension, and beyond all verbal definition. Neither the phenomenal universe nor the invisible universe of thought has any satisfactory explanation apart from God, but the being of God Himself is utterly beyond explanation.... How glibly we Christians often speak about God, as though biblical revelation and systematic theology had reduced the Deity to finite comprehension!⁵⁹

⁵⁷ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Majesty: The God You Should Know* (San Bernardino: Here’s Life Publishers, 1985), p. 101.

⁵⁸ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1988), pp. 106-107.

⁵⁹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Majesty: The God You Should Know*, pp. 7-8.

The proper response to the mystery of God's sovereignty is faith and worship.

Appendix

Clark Pinnock has moved from classic Reformed theology to an extreme Arminianism. One of the devastating results is in his rejection of God's full knowledge of future events. He uses Scriptures that seem to indicate God's ignorance (i.e. Deuteronomy 13:3; Jeremiah 32:35). These can easily be seen as anthropomorphisms. God can know something but still appreciate experiential knowledge. Isaiah 46:10 says, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." This is worked out in the myriad of detailed prophecies that have been fulfilled or will be fulfilled. Daniel's predictions of the four empires and the details given on Syria and Egypt are incredible unless He knew exactly what was going to happen. The same is true of the very last days with the beast and false prophet spoken of in Revelation. Pinnock says God can predict details when he is going to cause something, but not when it deals with the free will of people. But this would make God the cause of evil in the things the beast of Revelation will do (i.e. make war against the saints and conquer them - Revelation 13:7). Pinnock wants to avoid an omniscience of all events in the future because he thinks it demands God's causation. This is an argument also used by Calvinists but it is not logically compelling.⁶⁰ Pinnock's limited knowledge of the future would still demand causation if his premise is correct.

Pinnock's view of God's knowledge is devastating to prophecy. Roger Nicole says:

This view ruins the reality of prophecy as well as the significance of God's promises. How could God possibly know that Judas would betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, when the payment and acceptance of such a sum were dependent upon unforeseeable decisions of the chief priests and of Judas?⁶¹

Christians for centuries are certainly right in interpreting the omniscience of God as seen in Psalm 139:1-6 as well as other passages that refer to God's omniscience of all future events. Even Pinnock admits "God is not temporal as creatures are, however, but can enter into time and relate to sequence and history. When I say that God is in time, I do not mean that God is exhaustively in time."⁶² In view of God's perfections why is it so difficult to think that God supercedes time in a way we cannot? If time is seen as one dimension why can't we see God as multidimensional in the area of time?⁶³ Psalm 147:5 says, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit."

⁶⁰H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1946), pp. 98-99.

⁶¹Roger Nicole, *Book Review*, p. 3.

⁶²Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, p. 121.

⁶³Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs, Nav Press, 1996), chapter 7.