Are People Truly Free?

Much of the debate between Calvinists and Arminians concerns what the Bible teaches about divine sovereignty and human freedom. Has God strictly determined everything that will happen so that people are merely puppets on a divine string – a fatalistic approach that some extreme Calvinists embrace? Or did God create people with such libertarian freedom that even He does not know the choices they will make tomorrow, as some Arminians believe? How we understand the interaction between God's sovereignty and human freedom says a great deal about where we fall along the Calvinist-Arminian scale. In this study, we will look at the twin truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility; examine three views of divine sovereignty and human responsibility; and then survey a number of ways Bible commentators view the "freedom" God grants to human beings.

The twin truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility

The Bible is clear that God is sovereign; that is, He is the source of all creation and all things come from and depend on Him. The Bible speaks of God's sovereignty in many ways, according to William Leonard in *The Holman Bible Dictionary*:

- **Creative sovereignty.** God is the Lord of creation, the source of all things.
- **Moral sovereignty.** God's authority is grounded in His essential nature, which is moral. He is to be obeyed not simply because He is mighty but because He is righteous.
- **Transcendent sovereignty.** God's sovereignty is beyond our complete comprehension.
- **Purposeful sovereignty.** God's purpose is to bring His whole creation to fullness and completion, to fellowship with Him. The kingdom of God is the end toward which God moves His creation.

While God is sovereign, Scripture stresses that people are "free" in that they are morally responsible for their words and deeds. "God has created a world in which freedom is a real possibility," says Leonard. "The gospel suggests that human beings find genuine freedom, not in doing everything they wish, but in submitting themselves to the sovereign will of God, the rule and reign of God in their individual and collective lives. The sovereignty of God involves God's self-limitation in order that His creation might also choose freedom in Him."

To illustrate the complementary truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, let's look at three events in the passion of Christ:

- **The conspiracy.** Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jewish leaders "assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed," said Peter. Yet they did "whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28).
- **The betrayal.** Judas chose to betray Jesus "as it ha[d] been determined" (Luke 22:22).
- **The cross.** Christ was "delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23), yet Jesus freely laid down His life (John 10:17-18).

There are many other examples in Scripture we could cite. But the question is: *How* do the seemingly contradictory truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility work together?

Three views of divine sovereignty and human responsibility

There are three primary views of the connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, according to Norman Geisler in *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*:

- **God's predetermination is *independent* of His foreknowledge (Strong Calvinist).** God operates with such unapproachable sovereignty that His choices are made without any regard for the choices of human beings. God saves whomever He wishes and gives only the elect saving faith while withholding it from the rest. Some who hold to an extreme perspective of this view (known as hyper-Calvinists) believe that God not only elects some for salvation, but "hates" the non-elect and chooses them for hell.
- **God's predetermination is *based* on His foreknowledge (Arminian).** God knows in advance (by His omniscience) the choices that everyone will make, including whether to accept or reject Christ for salvation. As a result, election is conditioned on foreseen faith. A variation of this view is that God unconditionally willed that salvation would be received on the condition of faith. Therefore, people are free and yet God is in complete control. His control is not based on coercion but on the knowledge of what the free agents will do under whatever persuasive means God may use on them.
- **God's predetermination is in *accord* with His foreknowledge (Moderate Calvinist).** God's election is neither based on His foreknowledge of people's free choices nor exercised independently of it. All aspects of the eternal purpose of God are equally timeless. God's foreknowledge and predetermination are simultaneous and eternal acts. As Geisler states, "[O]ur moral actions are truly free, and God determined that they would be such. God is totally sovereign in the sense of actually determining what occurs, and yet man is completely free and responsible for what he chooses" (p. 53).

Is God a divine puppet master?

Not everyone who holds to the sovereignty of God also believes in human freedom. Those who do come to different conclusions about the nature and extent of that freedom. Here are three ways Bible commentators view the "freedom" that God has granted to human beings:

- **Hard determinism (no free acts).** This is the belief that "every event has a sufficient cause and is part of an unbreakable causal chain with a very long (perhaps infinite) history…. hard determinism has a distinctive understanding of a free act: namely, a free act is one that has no cause and thus no causal history" (Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, p. 102). Those who hold to hard determinism say there are no free acts; therefore, people are not responsible for their actions. This is not to deny that all of us have a "subjective sense of freedom;" that is, we feel we are free. But in reality, we are to be neither praised nor condemned for our actions since all actions are the necessary result of natural law.
- **Libertarian freedom (free acts).** This is the view that a free action does not have a sufficient cause prior to its occurrence; in other words, some human actions are truly free. At the same time, proponents of libertarian freedom believe strongly in moral responsibility; for us to be free requires moral responsibility, and moral responsibility

implies freedom. Put another way, a person cannot be held morally responsible for an act unless he or she is free to perform that act and free not to perform it.

- **Compatibilism/soft determinism (conditionally free acts).** This view holds that all things are determined. At the same time, people are responsible for their actions, so in some sense they are free. Soft determinists affirm both complete determinism and freedom. But they define freedom differently than hard determinists and libertarians do. Specifically, a free act must meet three conditions: 1) It must not be compelled or caused by anything outside of the person – that is, forced against the person's will; 2) However, it is caused by something internal to the person who performs it – a psychological state such as a belief, desire, or a combination of the two. 3) The person performing the act could have acted differently if he or she had wanted to do so. But the person could not have wanted to act differently given his or her background, experience, etc.

Calvinists tend to embrace either hard determinism or compatibilism, while Arminians generally hold to some version of libertarian freedom. A look at Article 10.1 of the Westminster Confession is helpful in understanding the Calvinist position:

> All those whom God hath predestined unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power *determining* them to that which is good, and *effectually drawing* them to Jesus Christ, yet so as they come most *freely*, being *made willing* by his grace [emphasis mine].

It appears that this statement supports soft determinism, in which God changes the elect sinner's heart so that he or she is "made willing" to trust in Christ and comes "freely" (and irresistibly) to Him in belief and repentance. The proponent of libertarian freedom would cry foul, arguing either that the sinner was manipulated and given the illusion of freedom (hard determinism) or was transformed internally against his or her will (soft determinism) – even though, admittedly, the result was a good one (eternal life for the elect).

There are other objections that moderate Calvinists and Arminians raise to a deterministic point of view:

- It denies the love of God for all mankind (omnibenevolence). If God is love and loves all mankind, why does He not irresistibly draw all people to Himself in salvation? He certainly could, and all people would worship Him for it. The Calvinist response that God is most glorified through the full display of His sovereign mercy *and* wrath does little to answer this question and does nothing to comfort those who spend eternity in hell having never been given saving grace, which God could have granted.
- A deterministic point of view denies the biblical teaching of "contrary choice," the God-given ability of people to choose one thing when they could have chosen another. Hard determinism says people only have the illusion of freedom; soft determinism says free choice is doing what we desire, but only the elect will ever desire God.

- If determinism and human freedom are compatible, then it is possible that God could determine all persons to freely do good at all times. Why doesn't He?
- There are large stretches of Scripture that are hard to make sense of if humans are not free in the libertarian sense of the word. Jeremiah 7:1-29 is one example where God enumerates the sins of His people and reminds them that while they were doing such things, He warned them again and again. But instead of repenting, they persisted in idolatry and other self-destructive behavior. Therefore, God promises to punish them for their sins but again says that He repeatedly sent his prophets to urge them to obey. If the Jews are not free in the libertarian sense, why does God strongly imply that they are?

Conclusion

J.I. Packer, in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, has a uniquely simple perspective on the whole matter. He writes that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are both clearly taught in Scripture, and it's not necessarily our job to figure it out. "Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other" (p. 21).

Scripture does not expressly define the nature of our freedom or draw philosophical distinctions for us. But it is still worth asking what sort of freedom is implied by various texts of Scripture. Norman Geisler sums the issue up this way:

> God's predestination and human free choice are a mystery, but not a contradiction. They go beyond reason, but not against reason. That is, they are not incongruous, but neither can we see exactly how they are complementary. We apprehend each as true, but we do not comprehend how both are true…. There is no contradiction in God knowingly predetermining and predeterminately knowing from all eternity precisely what we would do with our free acts. For God determined that moral creatures would do things freely. He did not determine that they would be forced to perform free acts. What is forced is not free, and what is free is not forced (*Chosen But Free*, pp. 54-55).

Next week: Going to Extremes (the dangers of extreme Calvinism and Arminianism)

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