

Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility

The Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God is in control of history. He decrees, elects, foreknows, foreordains, and predestines such that his plan and purposes are accomplished. At the same time, humans think, decide, believe, choose, and act such that they are held totally accountable for their own thoughts, choices, and actions.

The tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility has been discussed and debated for centuries. First of all, we must realize that we are finite human beings attempting to understand the workings of an infinite God. I believe it is impossible to fully explain this tension, and attempts to do so tend to compromise the biblical truth concerning one side of the tension. In any case, its truthfulness is not dependent upon human explanation.

Nevertheless, if divine sovereignty and human responsibility are logically incompatible, we have reason to be concerned. In response, it is not necessary to *prove* logical compatibility, but it *is* important to show that the tension is not *necessarily* logically incompatible. In fact, due to particular uncertainties and ambiguities, we *cannot* conclude that the tension is necessarily logically incompatible. These uncertainties and ambiguities include the following.¹

Limits of "Free Will"

- "Free Will" is often understood in terms of absolute freedom (see "libertarianism" below). Many Christian philosophers and theologians defend this type of freedom. Others believe that *absolute* freedom means God is *absolutely* contingent: in other words, he is not in total control. Otherwise, God would perpetually need to respond and adjust to free human actions in order to accomplish his will, which I think diminishes the biblical concept of sovereignty.
- "Free Agency" is used by theologians to denote genuine free human action that is compatible with divine causal conditions that decisively incline the will without constraining the will (that is, to cause one to act contrary to his/her wishes or desires). Theologians can provide biblical support for this view of freedom, but it is hard for many to accept philosophically.

Time & Eternity

- Since God created time, He is above and outside time.² Many point to this in attempts to qualify terms such as *pre*-destination, *fore*-knowledge, and *fore*-ordination. However, what does it mean to say that God is outside time? Does God experience sequence?

The "Will(s)" of God

- Theologians and philosophers sometimes distinguish between different "wills" of God (for example, God's "permissive will" versus "God's determinative will"). Such distinctions suffer from shortcomings, but some kind of distinction seems appropriate. Some verses speak of what God wants (related to his disposition) while others speak of what he decrees.

Transcendence and Personality

- As a transcendent God, he is above and outside the space and time in which we are bound.
- As a personal God, he has a speaking, interacting, and responding nature.
- We cannot understand how a personal God can also be transcendent.

¹ This section of the paper was influenced by D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994).

² This is a complex subject in itself. For example, see *God & Time: Four Views*, edited by Gregory E. Ganssle.

There are enough uncertainties and ambiguities in the above areas to prevent us from concluding logical incompatibility. Again, I believe the tension is simply beyond our finite ability to understand. When philosophers attempt to explain the tension, they ultimately resort to the categories of “determinism” and “libertarianism.” These terms are defined below.

Determinism

Determinism states that, for every event that happens, there are conditions, such that given them, nothing else could have happened.³ “Hard determinism” states that determinism is incompatible with free will. “Soft determinism” (or “compatibilism”) states that determinism and freedom *are* compatible, but “freedom” is defined differently than in *hard determinism* and *libertarianism*.

Libertarianism

Libertarianism states that free will is incompatible with determinism. A person is the absolute originator of his/her own actions. Desires or beliefs may influence (even *strongly* influence) choices, but not *cause* them. Human beings always have the freedom to choose otherwise.

What Does the Bible Teach?

The Bible does not provide an explicit philosophical explanation of the tension, but the tension is evident *throughout* the Bible. Two brief examples include Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27-28. In the latter passage, Herod and Pilate were fully responsible for their “conspiring” against Jesus. At the same time, “they did what [God’s] power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

What Do I Think?

Personally, I am not fully satisfied with either the compatibilist explanation or the libertarian explanation. Thus I am inclined to entertain a mediating position (one I am willing to quickly abandon if given good reason). Since God is a personal Being (not a mechanical process) who is dealing with other personal beings, must He always operate with absolute uniformity? Christian determinists say that God is the ultimate cause of *every* choice. Libertarians say that human beings *always* have the freedom to choose otherwise. However, might God use various degrees of influence (including irresistible influence) at particular times on particular people in order to accomplish his plan and purpose?⁴

Let’s Get Practical⁵

After centuries of debate concerning this subject, equally devoted Christians still disagree. As I have repeated, I believe it is impossible to fully explain this tension. However, I also believe that God has adequately revealed all that we really need to know. The first paragraph of this paper states what we need to know. We should believe and respond accordingly.

³ Determinism and fatalism should be distinguished. Fatalism states that, everything that happens does so necessarily and, therefore, humans cannot do anything other than what they do. “Global fatalism” applies to everything. “Local fatalism” applies to some instances regardless of deliberations or choice. *Compatibilism* agrees that only one future course of events can happen, but *not* irrespective of human deliberations and choices. Libertarians would argue that since deliberations and choices are determined in compatibilism, it is still fatalistic.

⁴ The determinist may consider this idea just another version of libertarianism. However, based on the biblical data, I doubt that human beings *always* have the freedom to choose otherwise. In such cases, the compatibilist explanation makes sense relative to human responsibility. Of course, I realize that my opinion raises questions at a fundamental level, particularly concerning soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). It is apparent that I am not a “Calvinist” with regard to the *ordo salutis* (logical order of salvation), particularly concerning regeneration and faith/repentance.

⁵ For those without much theological background, or for those whose first language is not English, much of this paper may not make sense! I have not really attempted to simplify the language and concepts (which is difficult to do). However, the practical response is most important. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me.