IF GOD IS SOVEREIGN, CAN MAN BE FREE?

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The purpose of this paper is to outline the key arguments in the incompatibilist and

compatibilist debate on human freedom. This is a philosophical debate which takes into account

the broad areas of determinism and indeterminism. In theology, this debate takes the form of the

debate between God's sovereignty and man's free will which has perhaps been the most

persistent such dispute in the entire history of the church.[1] The issues at stake for the Christian

are as broad as one's "theological understanding, evangelistic practices, and ecclesiastical

methods."[2] Therefore, a clear understanding of this debate is essential to developing one's faith

and practice. This paper will seek to examine the compatibilist and incompatibilist positions in

light of the philosophical and theological evidence available with the intention of showing that

compatibilism is the position which can best be harmonized with this evidence.

Philosophical Issues and Problems

Two broad areas of thought in regard to the divine sovereignty and human freedom

debate are determinism and indeterminism. An understanding of these terms is essential to being

able to conduct the more specific debate of incompatibilism and compatibilism. Each of these

terms will only be used in their broadest possible sense since there are variations within each of

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[1]D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 219.

[2]Ibid., 222.

these two systems of thought. However, the kind of determinism advocated in this paper is

sometimes called soft determinism to distinguish it from hard determinism which is fatalism.

Determinism has been defined as "the theory that all events, including human actions and

choices, are, without exception, totally determined."[3] Indeterminism, as the name implies, is the

logical contradictory of determinism.[4] More specifically, it can be defined as "the theory that

some events are not determined."[5]

In the history of philosophy, two ancient thinkers proposed their versions of determinism

and indeterminism: Democritus and Epicurus. Democritus held that every event occurred as the

consequence of the "purposeless interaction between mindless, material atoms."[6] Although, for

Democritus, the collision of atoms occur without plan or design, the motion and subsequent

change in motion following collision are determined by what has happened previously.[7] In other

words, everything happens for a reason.

On the other hand, Epicurus sought to preserve human freedom by taking away the

condition of causation. This was accomplished by introducing a tiny sphere of independence for

man that he called an uncaused swerve in the atoms. In this way Epicurus asserted perhaps the

first description of an undetermined event which has made its way into the annals of philosophy

as the beginning of indeterminism.[8]

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[3]Joel Feinberg, *Reason & Responsibility* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 342.

[4]Ibid., 343.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 327.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

The assumption behind indeterminism is the belief that free will and determinism are logically incompatible. This view is called incompatibilism.[9] For the incompatibilist, any kind of determinism makes human freedom impossible. Therefore determinism is rejected in favor of indeterminism which is seen to be more favorable to the concept of human freedom.

Determinists, on the other hand, believe that free will and determinism are logically compatible. This view is called compatibilism.[10] Compatibilism understands that human free actions and determinism can be reconciled, they are not logically inconsistent.

Philosophical and Theological Solutions

The debate between determinists and indeterminists with their respective views of human freedom divides people into Calvinists and Arminians among Christians.[11] Calvinism begins with[12] and affirms in the strongest possible terms[13] God's absolute sovereignty. This view does not see God's sovereignty and human freedom as mutually exclusive. God is said to have immutably decreed all things that have come or will come to pass.[14] According to Louis Berkhof, God's decree is founded in Divine wisdom, and are eternal, efficacious, immutable, unconditional, universal, and permissive.[15] John Calvin stated the case very plainly when he

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[9]Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 133.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, 331.

[12]John S. Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will,* eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 460.

[13]Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 158.

[14]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 102.

[15]Ibid., 103-105.

wrote the following:

> Indeed, Scripture, to express more plainly that nothing at all in the world is undertaken without his determination, shows that things seemingly most fortuitous are subject to him. For what can you attribute more to chance than when a branch breaking off from a tree kills a passing traveler? But the Lord speaks far differently, acknowledging that he has delivered him to the hand of the slayer [Ex. 21:13].[16]

This view of divine sovereignty sees God as the controller of all things, which includes the free actions of creatures.[17] Loraine Boettner explains how these two are reconcilable for the Calvinist:

> While the act remains that of the individual, it is nevertheless due more or less to the predisposing agency and efficacy of divine power exerted in lawful ways. This may be illustrated to a certain extent in the case of a man who wishes to construct a building. He decides on his plan. Then he hires carpenters, masons, plumbers, etc., to do the work. These men are not forced to do the work. No compulsion of any kind is used. The owner simply offers the necessary inducements by way of wages, working conditions, and so on, so that the men work freely and gladly. They do in detail just what he plans for them to do. His is the primary and theirs is the secondary will or cause for the construction of the building. We often direct the actions of our fellow men without infringing on their freedom or responsibility. In a similar way and to an infinitely greater degree God can direct our actions. His will for the course of events is the primary cause and man's will is the secondary cause; and the two work together in perfect harmony.[18]

If these two paradoxical truths can be harmonized on the human level, how much more should we expect them to be able to be reconciled in the infinite mind of God. Thus, Calvinism's notion that God's sovereignty and man's freedom can be reconciled because God has not only chosen the ends, He has also chosen the means to the ends. These means include the circumstances and factors which are necessary to convince an individual that the act which God

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[16]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Vol. 1. 1.16.6, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 205.

[17]Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," 469.

[18]Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), 209.

has decreed is the act that the person wants to do. This is accomplished entirely without

constraint.[19]

The other major view is Arminianism, or semi-Pelagianism. This view embraces

indeterminism because it views the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty as being incompatible

with human freedom, hence they are incompatibilists. Arminianism's view of the relationship

between God's providence and man's free will is best seen in the words of James Arminius for

whom Armininianism received its name. He said, "The providence of God is subordinate to

creation; and it is, therefore, necessary that it should not impinge against creation, which it would

do, were it to inhibit or hinder the use of free will in man."[20] In this view God's sovereignty is

"subordinate" to man's will. Any view of sovereignty that violates the Arminian's notion of free

will is impossible for those who hold to this position. Resulting from the above view of the

relationship between God's sovereignty and man's free will is the idea that God's foreknowledge

of man's free actions is the basis by which God's decree is established. Norman Geisler has

modified this view. Geisler, while denying that foreknowledge serves as the basis of God's

decree, nevertheless affirms that "God's predetermination is in accord with his foreknowledge."[21]

But the net effect of this view is to "subordinate" (Arminius' term) God's decree to man's free

will. Notice how Geisler explains this, "The answer lies in the fact that God knows – for sure –

(infallibly) precisely how everyone will use his freedom. So, from the vantage point of His

omniscience, the act is totally determined. Yet from the standpoint of our freedom it is not

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[19]John S. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will,* eds. David and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 26.

[20]James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius.* Vol. 2, in *The Master Christian Library* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 460.

[21]Norman Geisler, "God Knows All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will,* eds. David and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 70.

determined. God knows *for sure* what we will *freely do*."[22] In other words, Geisler states that

man's actions can only be free if they are only foreknown without being predetermined. This

places him as one of the foremost spokesmen for the Arminian or Incompatibilist view in our day

in the field of theology.

<div align="center">**Compatibilism Defended**</div>

Of the two positions outlined above, the Calvinistic position provides the best harmony

with the teachings of Scripture. Although finite human beings may never solve this problem,[23]

there is a recognizable harmony between the Calvinist view and the teachings of Scripture. It is

this position that will be argued for in the remainder of this paper.

A good starting point for discussing this topic is to define God's sovereign decree. God's

decree is the way He exercises control over all of His creation. Wayne Grudem defines God's

decree as "the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to

bring about everything that comes to pass."[24] This is a consistent theme throughout Scriptures.

Psalms 115:3 states that ". . . our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath

pleased." This doctrine is stated even more clearly through the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar, king

of Babylon, in Daniel 4:35. There the Scripture declares that "all the inhabitants of the earth are

reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the

inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" The

Bible is extremely clear that God has an eternal plan that will be followed to the minutest of

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[22]Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1999), 178.

[23]Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 2.

[24]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 332.

details.

It is the providence of God which carries out His decree. God's providence is the "the continuing action of God in preserving his creation and guiding it toward his intended purposes."[25] One of the most comprehensive of all the statements of God's sovereign decree worked out in providence is found in Ephesians 1:11,[26] which states "we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:" In this verse we see both the "purpose," God's sovereign decree, and the providence, "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." God has an eternal purpose which he works out in time. Everything that happens was both planned in eternity and is worked out in time. Nothing outside of God's purposeful providence ever occurs.[27]

Having established God's sovereignty, the problem of the free agency of humans is immediately raised. Some declare that the Calvinist position on God's decree and providence is inconsistent with the free agency of man.[28] If God exercises providential control over all events are we in any sense free?[29] The answer to this question depends on how one defines the word *free*. Many prominent Calvinist theologians like Louis Berkhof and John Calvin have used the word "free" to describe the acts and choices of man.[30] There are no Scriptures that suggest that man is "free" in the sense of being outside of God's control. Neither does Scripture affirm our

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[25]Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 412.

[26]Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," 465.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1986), 545.

[29]Grudem, *Systematic Theology,* 330.

[30]Ibid.

ability to make choices that are not caused by anything.[31] The Calvinist position has consistently

held that men do commit "free" acts which are nonetheless a part of the overall purpose of God.[32]

This is consistent with the overall implicit teaching of Scripture and the explicit teaching of Acts

2:23. This verse states that Christ was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge

of God," but it also declares "ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

Here, in this single verse, the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is

raised. Man's actions are seen as both "free" and having moral consequences. However, man's

actions are also ascribed to the "determinate counsel . . . of God." There is no effort in Scripture

to get around this issue. In fact, both truths are affirmed. Sometimes this even occurs in the

same passage as in Acts 2:23.

Again, the resolution of this problem seems to be in how we define a free choice.   Some

have defined man's freedom in making choices as "free from previous determining causation."[33]

This view is the libertarian or in philosophical terms, the incompatibilist view of freedom.[34] This

is to be contrasted with the Calvinist view which is known in philosophical terms as

compatibilism.[35] Compatibilism assumes a deterministic view of the universe with God in

control of all things. Determinism states "that no finite events can happen purely by chance, but

that all events are causally determined in their nature and action by previous states of affairs –

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[31]Ibid., 331.

[32]Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. 1, 545-546.

[33]R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 44.

[34]Nash, *Life's Ultimate Question*, 329.

[35]Ibid., 327.

that there are no uncaused events in the world."[36] The above definition of determinism best

represents both the Biblical and observable evidence. Therefore, whatever one means by "free

will," one must not mean that it happens without a cause or for no reason.

Although the Calvinist affirms the definition of "free will" which corresponds best with

determinism, he nevertheless declares that man is responsible. To say that man is responsible is

to say he is answerable to God as the judge of his actions.[37] Our moral responsibility to God is

based upon the fact that, as our Creator, He has the right to call our actions to judgment.[38] Our

responsibility, therefore, is not contingent upon our "free will" as the Arminians define it. Our

responsibility is based upon the sovereign rights of our Creator to call us to account for our

actions.[39] Jonathan Edwards concluded his discussion of this topic in his monumental work, *On

The Freedom Of The Will*, with these words, "Thus, this *Arminian* notion of Liberty of the Will,

consisting in the Will's *Self-determinism*, is repugnant to itself, and shuts itself wholly out of the

world."[40]

Two objections may be raised against the Calvinist view. The first objection is that the

doctrine of Divine sovereignty is fatalism. Fatalism, which is sometimes called hard

determinism is the belief "that all events come to pass through the working of a blind,

unintelligent, impersonal, non-moral force which cannot be distinguished from physical

necessity, and which carries us helplessly within its grasp as a mighty river carries a piece of

[36]Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty*, 44.

[37]Ibid., 56.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* Vol. 1. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1998), 14.

wood."[41] In contrast to this, Calvinism proclaims "that events come to pass because an infinitely

wise, powerful, and holy God has so appointed them."[42] The difference between these two is the

difference between night and day. The only thing held in common between these two views is

that both assume the absolute certainty of all future events.[43]

Fatalism is a mechanistic view of the world which views the universe as a machine and

human beings as robots with no motivation for moral accountability.[44] In contrast to the

mechanistic view, Calvinism affirms that all events are worked out by a *personal* God who

interacts with *personal* creatures.[45] Our choices are made as real persons and they are "real

choices." In other words, our eternal destiny is dependent upon whether we believe and repent or

not.[46] Therefore the Calvinist view not only is not fatalistic, "it is its absolute opposite and only

alternative."[47] This view allows for free actions of humans that are compatible with God's

sovereignty.

A second objection raised against the Calvinist position is that it makes God the author of

sin. The question that is often raised is "If God is good and sovereign, how can evil exist?" This

question has been answered wrongly in one of two ways. One way is to deny God's sovereignty

by simply saying that God cannot prevent evil. The other option is to deny God's goodness by

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[41]Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 205.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 674.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination,* 207.

denying God's desire to prevent evil even though He is able. Neither of these options are viable

for the Christian who desires to be Biblical. The Bible teaches both that God is sovereign and

good.[48] Whatever we affirm concerning God's nature it must include these two attributes.

According to the Arminian, the Calvinist view makes God the author of sin. If, as argued

earlier, man's choices are the results of some cause which is primarily God's will, isn't God the

author of sin. The answer to that question is "no" because man's choices are themselves causes

(secondary) and man is therefore responsible. The choices which man makes are made freely.[49]

There is a theological distinction that may be helpful at this point. God's will of decree is

often divided into two main categories: His permissive (or secret) will and His revealed will

(Deuteronomy 29:29). God's revealed will is that which is explicitly given in Scripture such as

the Ten Commandments. These include morally good acts. God's permissive will includes

those decrees which are brought about secondarily through sinful human beings. In this way,

God Himself never sins but always brings about His will through secondary causes.[50] When

people commit acts of lawlessness, they are permitted by God and therefore under His sovereign

decree. God does not actively commit these sinful acts. Therefore, God is not the author of sin

because they occur through the free agency of man. Man is responsible for these actions and will

ultimately face judgment for these actions because they are contrary to God's revealed will which

every man has the moral responsibility to obey. The greatest illustration of this is the

aforementioned Acts 2:23. There events which were "foreordained" by God are also stated to be

committed by morally responsible human beings. The tension of divine sovereignty and human

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[48]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 437.

[49]Grudem, *Systematic Theology,* 343.

[50]Ibid.

responsibility in this verse is key to understanding these doctrines. Both must be affirmed since God seems to see no contradiction between them.

The Calvinist view which was argued for in this paper is the view which best reconciles the truths of divine sovereignty and human free will. The Arminian position cannot be reconciled with either the testimony of Scripture or the theological and philosophical evidence. Unfortunately, many evangelical scholars reject all attempts to determine how Scripture fits together theologically.[51] The Calvinist view can affirm the freedom and responsibility of man while proclaiming the sovereignty of God. The Arminian seems to be unable to affirm God's sovereignty while proclaiming the freedom and responsibility of man. This is just another example where the Arminian view fails to be able to reconcile the teaching of Scripture with his system of thought.

Conclusion

Although the Calvinist view of compatibilism can best reconcile the doctrines of God's sovereignty and man's freedom, not all questions about this topic will be answered this side of heaven. We must affirm that they are reconcilable because the inspired Word of God declares them both to be true. However, as D. A. Carson has written, "The sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved: rather, it is a framework to be explored."[52] This means we must continue to seek to work within this framework of study until we are face to face with the one who "works all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11).

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[51]Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, *Still Sovereign* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 20.

[52]Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 2.

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