EMBRACNG BOTH SOVEREIGNTY AND FREE WILL

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Embracing Both Divine Sovereignty And Free Will

The best way to approach this and most any complex, highly debated issue is to first look at it from a distance. This paper will attempt to paint a broad picture of the subject and then zero in on the particulars. If we can first encapsulate the "whole," we will be far more likely to understand the various viewpoints contending to define the "components" of the debate. With that said, the foundational question under-girding the divine-sovereignty/human freedom (free will) tension asks: "what is the relationship between the decree of God and creation?" Different perspectives on this question offer an effective overview of the subject matter as well as a perfect entry point for this work.

When we talk about the decree of God we are discussing the plans God made before any of creation came into being. The real question at the heart of the broader question is: "how much of the future, does God really know, and what is the nature of His knowing?" While many people are quick to say: "Well, God knows everything." Many today would contend that those who are so quick to respond have not given the concept of free will its biblical justice. On the other hand, the people who suggest that God does not know the future, having been all but handcuffed by the free will he gave to humanity, are negating one of God's core characteristics – His sovereignty. As we will see, there are three pillar positions represented in this continuum: classical theism, open theism, and process theism – each with their own myriad of subdivisions.

The first perspective to consider is classical or traditional theism. Those holding to this position are generally regarded as defenders of the highest view of Scripture. Herein we find the advocates of an inerrant and infallible Bible. Given their acceptance

of the entire Word of God being inspired, classical theists tend to apply literal interpretations to the Bible. Therefore, God's sovereignty is heavily weighted in comparison to the "open" and "process" position. Within the classical or traditional camp there is a division worth noting. While both viewpoints stand far to the left of open and process theism, Arminianism and Calvinism divide the classical position. "Not only did Arminius work through a series of key biblical and theological loci related to the problems of grace, human will, and predestination, he also became acquainted with a series of Lutheran and Roman Catholic views in which alternative approaches (to Calvinism) were to be found."[1] The particular differences found within traditional theism will be covered in more detail below. Open theism however, builds on the premise of Arminianism (libertarian freedom) but takes it to an extreme. In short, open theism argues that God cannot know the future free actions of creatures. Consider the following view offered in support of such a position: "…those who do not believe will be lost. But if we ask why some believe and others do not, we can say no more than that this is part of the mystery of evil to which the Pastorals, like the rest of the Scripture, can offer no answer."[2] Embedded in this theological position is the divorce of any connection between God's "plan" and creation – not to mention biblical revelation. So much weight is given to freedom in open theism that God's sovereignty is minimized to the point of defying its definition.

The doctrine of providence (God's prior knowledge and provision for the world) serves as the theological framework for this debate between sovereignty and freedom. While the word "providence" in not found in the Bible, the concept of providence is

[1] Thomas R. Schreiner, Bruce A. Ware, *The Grace of God – The Bondage of the Will,* (Baker Books, 1995), 255.
[2] Clark Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man,* (Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 69.

clearly a bedrock foundation to Scriptural teaching. Based on the clear and frequent reference to God's omniscience (all-knowing) and omnipotence (all-powerful) in the Bible, the question of providence has led to the broader debate of Scriptural reliability (characterized and spearheaded by the liberal wing of Christianity noted above, namely open and processed theists).

There are three aspects of divine providence: preservation, concurrence, and government. Preservation speaks to God's required involvement in the sustaining of creation. In essence, the need for God's preservation in the universe acknowledges Him as the glue that keeps everything together. Next, concurrence speaks to the fact that God is active in everyday living. Concurrence tells us that God does more than just check in on creation every once in a while. A direct and powerful, personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the finest example I know of to demonstrate the validity of concurrence. Those who know the wonder of having been carried or sustained by the love of Christ recognize His ever-present role in creation. Lastly, God's government is seen best in the coming to fruition of His plans and purposes. There is no such thing as "blind luck" or "mystical fate" – it is through God's governance that all things, big and small, come to pass.

The filter of providence allows us to see two contemporary models or perspectives on God's sovereignty. The first is referred to as "general sovereignty" and weights human freedom as its predominant characteristic. Within the general sovereignty camp there is a sub-continuum with traditional Arminianism on the far left, Paradox Indeterminism centered, and Open Theism representing the far right.[3] At the root of these three positions is the belief that God has granted mankind a libertarian freedom. In

[3] Stephen Wellum, Lecture Handouts (SBTS, Spring 2004)

so doing, they contend that God has eliminated the possibility of a fully mapped out plan for creation through eternity. That is not to say that He is not in charge or in full control, rather the Arminian contention is that God has in affect allowed humanity to choose the specific route and role that each individual will play in His creation. In short, choice supercedes control. Paradox Indeterminism divorces human reason and simply clings to the two paradoxical, but arguably biblically defendable standards of God's absolute sovereignty and libertarian free will.[4] Lastly, as noted earlier, Open Theism limits God's sovereignty all together. Open theism forces one to accept a god that can do little more than hope, thereby requiring Him to make contingency plans and take risks. There are two verses in Scripture that general sovereignty models consider to be foundational to their views: 2 Peter 3:9 and Matthew 23:37. They also point to the problem of evil as a necessity for espousing their view.

The other model is called "specific sovereignty" and emphasizes God's overarching foreknowledge and plan for creation. In so much as God has already worked out all the details of creation (past, present, and future), those who hold to the specific sovereignty position acknowledge the responsibility of the individual in daily living but fall short of delegating libertarian freedom to each person. "The free will is not violated when the outcome of an event is in God's hands, and when God according to his hidden decision guides men differently from what they have resolved… God's mercy precedes our will, accompanies it and gives it fruitfulness."[5] Collectively, this position is most frequently referred to as Calvinism. However, as was the case within the general sovereignty view, specific sovereignty can also be divided into sub-categories: Paradox

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ernst Winter, *Discourse on Free Will,* (Fredrick Ungar Publishing, 1961), 49.

Specific Sovereignty and Compatibilistic Specific Sovereignty. The Paradox category within specific sovereignty is much like its counterpart in general sovereignty – it upholds both God's complete sovereignty and man's libertarian freedom. The paradox represented in the position is acknowledged by its advocates. They hold to their beliefs nonetheless because they believe the Bible describes both tenets as valid. Moreover, like their paradoxical brethren from the general sovereignty camp, they are not willing to forgo what they believe to be biblical truth so as to fit their theology into the compartmentalism of human rationale. The Compatibilistic Specific Sovereignty position will be detailed below as it represents my personal convictions and will be defended as such.

In describing and defending the Compatibilistic Specific Sovereignty position, there is a fundamental understanding that must be established. In short, that which the Bible says - will be accepted as absolute truth. What the Bible does not say will be checked against the full context of what the Bible does say, and where there appears to be conflict beyond our ability to reason, neither side of the biblical givens will be minimized; rather, both will be upheld as truth and the biblically ordained use of "mystery" will be inserted to bridge the biblical givens. Consequently, the question of sovereignty versus free will no longer becomes an either/or proposition but a "both/and" acceptance of the Word. Moreover, there need not be a paradoxical (the inexplicable marriage of two theological opposites) interpretation but rather a complimentary understanding of the relationship therein. "God's controlling providence and his causality by grace with man's will is the source and condition of man's achievement of

true freedom."[6]The nature of this complementary relationship between sovereignty and freedom is at the heart of the compatibilist position. What it says is that God did predetermine each person's actions, but He never constrained anyone from doing what they wanted. The hair-splitting comes down to how one defines freedom. The general sovereignty (Arminian) camp would say that if God knew what the outcome would be, then genuine freedom could not have been given to humanity, which means that people should not be held responsible for their actions, which would imply God is unjust. Conversely, the specific sovereignty view says that whether or not God knew the outcome is not the determining question in this matter. Rather, the proper question to ask is: was the person forced to act in a way contrary to their wishes?[7] If, according to we compatibilists, the agent is uninhibited and free to choose, "Biblical freedom" is maintained and the "either/or," as well as the "paradoxical" interpretations can be eliminated. I particularly like Jewett's perspective when, while trying to expand his reader's understanding of biblical "election" he writes: "Election means that in his eternal counsel, God has decreed that they only shall be saved who acknowledge his Son. Thus, election is solely in Christ, who earnestly desires the salvation of all, a desire that is not fulfilled because – and only because – the wicked make it impossible for the Spirit to effectually to work for their salvation."[8]

There are three biblical givens that serve as the under-girding premise for the compatibilistic position. First, God is absolutely sovereign. The following Scriptural references carry this point beyond the possibility of debate (Isa: 14:24-26; 46:9-11; Jer. 23:20; and Eph. 1:11). Next, human beings are moral creatures held accountable as well

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[6] John Farrelly, *Predestination, Grace, and Free Will,* (The Newman Press, 1964), 310.
[7] Stephen Wellum, Lecture Notes (SBTS, Spring 2004)
[8] Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination,* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 11-12

as responsible for our actions. We can see God's heart in regards to His relationship with humanity in the following verses: (Rom. 10:9-11; Gen. 22:12; Mic. 3:1-12; Isa. 30:18). Thirdly, God is perfectly good and just – that can never be questioned, it is at the heart of God's character and identity. Lest there be any doubts, see John 1:5 and Rev. 15:3-4. The Bible places these three "givens" together in Isa. 10:5-17; Phil. 2:12-13; and Acts2:23; 4:23-31.

The bottom line is that there is no Christianity without God's sovereignty. Moreover, sovereignty is an absolute term. To espouse anything less than an omniscience, omnipotent God is simply heresy. Therefore, any and all positions that minimize or strip God of His sovereignty cannot be embraced as Biblical Christianity. At the same time, Scripture tells us that man is granted freedom. Consequently, we are challenged to understand the nature and definition of free will within both the orthodox appreciation of God's sovereignty as well as the context of biblical truth. Given the premise of the specific sovereignty position (not to mention our Christian faith in general), namely, that God is completely sovereign, man is responsible, and God is always good and just, a "both/and" understanding of the issue must be revealed. Otherwise, we are required to fall back upon the declaration of "mystery." The point is, we never have the luxury of saying: "it doesn't make sense to my finite mind, therefore, I reject either/or biblical truth… now I believe… this or that." Lastly, if anyone would lose sight of the third bedrock to biblical truth, that God is always good and just, they are no longer debating within the framework of Christianity.

In my humble opinion, no other theological position can so aptly embrace the three foundational tenets of biblical teaching. Consequently, the specific sovereignty model could and should be heralded as the one, "comprehensive, non-paradoxical, both/and position" when it comes to the question of divine-sovereignty and human freedom. It is this writer's opinion that specific sovereignty is the most complete encapsulation of biblical orthodoxy on the subject. The position is unique in so much as it stands on Scripture alone and yet minimizes nothing in terms of biblical content. All other perspectives appear to force us to pick and choose, or at least emphasize and minimize tenets of our faith. I do not believe God intended for us to sift through the Bible the way we do the world. Every word in Scripture is true and edifying. While we as creatures have been given the freedom to make choices in our lives, one must never forget that God's Word is absolute truth – regardless of whether or not we creatures choose to believe it.

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