

God's Sovereignty vs Human Free Will



Definitions

God's Sovereignty

God is in absolute control of everything.
Also called Providence and Predestination

Election

God's Sovereignty when it relates to salvation

Free Will

Free will is the ability of agents to make choices free from certain kinds of constraints.

Prologue

The view put forward in this paper is the Reformed (or Calvinistic) view. The counter view which is held by many genuine, evangelical Christians is the Arminian view.

God's Sovereignty is a difficult subject

But we can't go off our emotions – bring God down to our level

We believe the Bible is God's word and therefore we strive to understand what it says NOT challenge it when we disagree

When Paul was teaching on God's Sovereignty and was challenged by someone who couldn't accept what he was saying wrote this:

Romans 9:22-23

So, this is the challenge – what if this is true!

Would you still love and follow this God or would you invent a "nicer" God?

A God that you can understand, a God whose morality is similar to your own?

Are we willing to accept God as he has chosen to reveal himself to us in the Bible?

God's Sovereignty

The OT testimony

Proverbs 16:33 (refer Acts 1:24-26), Amos 3:6, Isaiah 45:7, Lamentations 3:31, Exodus 33:19

The NT testimony

Matthew 10:29, Acts 13:48

Romans 9:10-18

How does Romans 9 make you feel?

Are you willing to accept this or will you rebel against it?

Well, even Paul is expecting some strong disagreement:

Romans 9:19-21

Other Verses

John 6:44, John 15:16, John 17:2-3, John 17:6, John 17:9, Acts 22:14, Romans 8:28-30, Romans 8:33-39, Romans 11:7, Ephesians 1:4-14, Ephesians 2:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15, 2 Timothy 1:9-10, Titus 1:1-3, James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:2

Conclusion - God's Sovereignty is Biblical

I believe that God's Sovereignty is most definitely taught in the Bible and therefore I have no choice to believe it. I am certainly not going to be a man who answers back to God!

Human Free Will

Well you might be saying, the Bible clearly talks about humans having free will and have a responsibility to make decisions.

Clearly we have a will and are called to make decisions

Romans 10:13, Joshua 24:16

The Problem - How can God be in control yet we have free will and called to make decisions?

Do you have a problem with this?

Jesus and Jewish culture didn't have a problem:

Matthew 11:27

This is a God's Sovereignty verse – to do with God's (Jesus) choice.

But the very next verse is a Free Will verse – a challenge to make a decision

Matthew 11:28

Cultural Problem

So, maybe, our big problem with this is to do with our cultural background. Other cultures don't have a problem.

However it is probably true that

- a majority of scientists believe that everything in the universe is determined by cause and effect therefore there is no such thing as free will.
- Others believe that the universe is not determined and that we have free will and make decisions.
- Yet others agree with the Biblical view that the universe is determined and humans have free will and make real decisions – there is no incompatibility. Also one of the most influential philosophers, David Hume, held to this view. See the Appendix for more information

So, the Biblical perspective isn't as barmy as we think!

So, how do we reconcile these two aspects

We cannot reconcile - J I Packer

Antinomy – apparent contradiction.

We can't with our finite minds reconcile this.

We accept it because that is what the Bible teaches

We can reconcile - Jonathan Edwards

Point 1. We are all enslaved to do choose what we consider most desirable (what we want to do most) in any given moment of decision. Eg:

I know that you love Tizer pop. If I offer you a glass of Tizer in one hand and a glass of smelly pond water in the other, it's not rocket science to know which you will take. The one you find most desirable!

Point 2. God arranges all things (Eph. 1:11) so that in any moment of decision when we choose to do what we consider most desirable, we make the choice ordained by God from all eternity.

In other words God's predestined plan takes into account our free will decisions

The Donkey Illustration

An obstinate donkey lived in a field with two adjacent fields. Every now and again the farmer wanted to move the donkey into one of the other fields but the donkey, because it was obstinate, would always walk into the field the farmer didn't want it to. The farmer got wise to this and one day put a big pile of carrots in the middle of the field he wanted the donkey to go into. This time it was different!

So, the question is: Why did the donkey go into the correct field? Was it because the farmer arranged things (loaded the dice, or carrots!) or was it because of the donkey's free will? Or was it both??

Similarly in the illustration above – did you take the Tizer because I loaded the dice or because of your free will?

Examples of Jonathan Edwards view from the Bible

Acts 2:22-23, Acts 4:27-28

Summary

- God is in control of everything
- Yet humans are free to make real and genuine decisions for which they are held responsible.

So what?

- I believe this teaching is Biblical and, therefore, what God wants us to understand.
- I believe it helps us to lead mature and effective lives. It avoids the extremes:

Determinism

If God is Sovereign then everything is determined so why bother doing anything?
Bring out the couch, foot stool, wine, beer, chocolate and switch on the TV!
Leads to boredom and lack of self-esteem.

Libertarianism

If I have complete free will then it's all up to me 😬
Leads to arrogance and too much self-esteem (I did it my way – Frank Sinatra)
Or can also lead to defeat and lack of self-esteem.

Evangelism becomes a process of frantically rushing around trying to talk everybody into becoming a Christian.

Compatibalism – the Biblical View

But if we hold both to be true (God's Sovereignty and Human Free Will) it leads to a life that is at peace with God yet a life that is active in God's mission but always rests in and depends on God. In evangelism we are God's junior partner searching out the people He is already working on.

This is the only perspective that gives us peace with God and also joy from doing His work.

Suffering

The Christian Compatibalist view helps us deal with suffering better. Do we suffer because He isn't powerful enough to stop it, or He enjoys watching us suffer, or because He is punishing us? Or do we suffer because of God's infinite plan and He is using it to bring about His good purposes? Consider these verses concerning the incident when Joseph's jealous brothers sold him into slavery –

Genesis 45:4-8, 50:19-20

Last word to the Apostle Paul

We see the arguments put forward in this paper carried through the life of Paul. When on a ship in a storm he is assured by God that nobody will lose their life. But that doesn't stop him from springing into action and making decisions that will prevent the loss of life.

Acts 27:17-32

Appendix

Similar arguments rage in the secular world (mostly taken from WIKIPEDIA)

Libertarianism is one of the main philosophical positions related to the problems of **free will** (the ability of agents to make choices free from certain kinds of constraints) and **determinism**. In particular, libertarianism, argues that free will is logically incompatible with a deterministic universe and that agents have free will, and that therefore determinism is false

Determinism is the general philosophical thesis that states that for everything that happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen. Determinism is often taken to mean simply Causal determinism: an idea known in physics as cause-and-effect. It is the concept that events are bound by causality in such a way that any state (of an object or event) is determined by prior states. Determinists argue that given a deterministic universe libertarianism is false

Compatibilism is the belief that free will and determinism are compatible ideas, and that it is possible to believe both without being logically inconsistent. Similar arguments are use by religious Compatibilists to reconcile free will with predestination of all events specifically to allow for a God's Sovereignty.