

Research Paper

The Sovereignty of God and the Free Will of Man:

A Critique of the Conflict that Exists Between Calvinism, Arminianism, and Open Theism

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Thesis Statement

This essay presents an analysis of three major perspectives, the conflicts that exists surrounding the process of salvation and their consequent impact upon evangelism. Open theism suggests that God is neither omniscient nor sovereignly omnipotent in salvation. Arminianism proposes that the free-will man is responsible for the choice to believe in Jesus Christ. This writer suggests that Calvinism's presentation of divine predestination is the view most substantiated by the Holy Scriptures.

Introduction

For Christians there has been and remains to be a need for students of the Word to develop a better understanding of God's divine plan of salvation. It is impossible for a new believer to fully comprehend all that takes place in salvation, but in light of that new birth, the child of God will desire to grow and to mature in Christ. With development comes the pressing inherent need to mature in understanding God's plan of salvation in order to become more effective in presenting the gospel clearly to those who have yet to believe.

The doctrine of election provided comfort and confidence to the persecuted Christians of the early church (cf. Rom.8:28-30; James 1; 1 Peter 1; Rev. 3:7-13); however, it has brought unending turmoil and even destructive conflict to many Christians in subsequent generations. If, according to John, the whole world could supposedly not contain the potential books that could be written about everything that Jesus said and did (cf. John 21:25), then perhaps the world must be approaching some level of capacity of articles, essays, and books that have been written to address the controversial subject of predestination versus freewill. Each of the three views here presented, are accompanied with their unique set of problems. This essay intends to accomplish three purposes: 1) Demonstrate the basic tenants, supporters, and problems of open theism, Arminianism, and Calvinism; 2) Provide a brief Biblical evaluation of each perspective to see whether or not the argument squares with scripture; and lastly 3) Consider the potential impact of each view upon world evangelism thereby proposing that only the view with a high-view of God demonstrates a proper faithfulness to the Bible.

The First View: Open Theism

According to Richard Rice, those who subscribe to the view of “open theism” endeavor to avoid “the tremendous difficulties of the conventional view.”¹ Rice writes, “God’s experience of the world is open rather than closed. God’s experience does not consist of one timeless intuition. He does not have one eternal perception of all reality, past and future. Instead He responds to developments and changes in the world as they occur.”² Rice assures that though this viewpoint is a departure from the common concept of God, “God’s openness involves only His concrete experience of the creaturely world.”³ He reassures his readers that “It does not apply to either His existence or to His character.”⁴

Clark Pinnock, another advocate of open theism, provides a further description of God’s relationship to the world as “dynamic, not static.”⁵ Pinnock is perfectly willing to risk historical doctrines for the sake of providing a coherent answer to the problem of evil, especially for the non-believing skeptic. Pinnock states, “Although this will require us to rethink aspects of conventional or classical theism, it will help us relate sovereignty and freedom more coherently in theory and more satisfactorily in practice.”⁶

Gregory Boyd seeks to remove God from the “hot seat” in relationship to the world’s problems by counseling those who suffer great loss with his opinion that God is highly man-centered and should never be blamed for anything resembling evil. His advice to a grieving woman is to reject her view of God that is “untenable” in exchange for Boyd’s view of God that is palatable. Boyd explains, “If God exists, they reason, he would be responsible for all the evil

¹ Richard Rice. *God’s Foreknowledge & Man’s Free Will*. (Minneapolis, MN, 1985), 25.

² Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge & Man’s Free Will*, 25-26.

³ Ibid, 30.

⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁵ Clark Pinnock. *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*. (Downers Grove, IL, 1986), 144.

⁶ Pinnock, *Predestination & Free Will*, 144.

in the world. Everything that happens would be the working out of his plan. And since people can't with integrity accept that, they reject God.”⁷

But do these perspectives of God align with the God that is revealed in Scripture? Does God limit His power and knowledge so that humanity is “free” to do whatever they please? In light of all the problems, pain, and suffering, is God really on par with humanity as impotent to rescue, order, and secure? One must consider this unscriptural, sub-Christian, and low-view of God in light of the God revealed in the Bible. Pinnock claims that “God is sovereign according to the Bible in the sense of having the power to exist in himself and the power to call forth the universe out of nothing by His Word. But God's sovereignty does not have to mean...the power to determine each detail in the history of the world.”⁸ The question that begs to be answered by the open theist is then, if God is not in complete control, how will He be able to guarantee anything with certainty (i.e. prophecy)? Bruce Ware warns of the danger contained in the premise of open theism by stating, “let me suggest here that our *overall conception of God* and our *broad understanding of living the Christian life* are both deeply affected by the openness view.”⁹

The open theist cannot square their argument with a great deal of the historical, literal, and grammatical interpretation of scripture. God promised Adam and Eve that they would “surely die” (cf. Gen. 2:17) if they ate of the forbidden fruit. How would God know this if he was only related to humanity in the present without an accurate understanding of the future?

Another enigma to the open theist must be the Old Testament's account of Job. Job is not portrayed as deserving of divine punishment; however, God is behind the scenes during every

⁷ Gregory Boyd. *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering*. (Downers Grove, IL, 2003), 15.

⁸ Pinnock, *Predestination & Free Will*, 145.

⁹ Bruce Ware. *God's Lesser Glory*. (Wheaton, IL, 2000), 19.

event in Job's life (cf. Job 1:8, 12; 2:3, 6). The whole book is an Old Testament illustration of the New Testament's teaching declared by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28-30. God is clearly not the helpless bystander and when God shows up to meet with Job, the conversation is not man-centered but rather God-centered. When God speaks for Himself it becomes clearly evident that men's opinions should be held in reserve and in humility before the Creator God (cf. Eccl. 5:2). The understanding of man merely "darkens counsel" and offers explanations that are "words without knowledge" (Job 38:2). Job repented of his arrogance before the LORD, and God demonstrated mercy and grace by restoring Job and blessing him with "twice as much as he had before" (cf. Job 42:10). By observing the life of Job, one is able to see that the God of the Bible is more powerful than Satan, compassionate towards the penitent, and responsive to the prayers of His people. The sovereign God was not removed, nor unconcerned with Job's suffering, grief, and loss. God's greatest concern is for His own glory. The view of open theism fails to answer the problem of evil and by elevating the self-esteem of men it effectively diminishes the glory of God (cf. Is. 42:8; 46:10).

Contrary to the counsel that Gregory Boyd offers to his troubled parishioner is the New Testament's account of the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus (cf. John 11). The open theist endeavors to reshape the Old Testament image of God into the more clearly revealed image found in Christ. The death of Lazarus produces another problem for the open theist who has redefined God to be uncertain about future events. Emphasizing a God who intimately desires to see His children delivered (yet impotent to actually accomplish anything) from every form of pain or suffering to the denigration of His attribute of omniscience is not without danger. The argument of the open theist can be heard in the painful rebuke offered to Jesus by both of Lazarus' sisters. Jesus was completely aware of their need and of their situation; however, Jesus

was equally aware of the purpose behind the pain and suffering. Jesus also demonstrated the power to overcome pain, suffering, and even death by simply commanding Lazarus to “come forth” (John 11:43). The power of God was displayed in such a way that demanded Jesus Christ be recognized as someone out of the ordinary who possessed divine authority. The open theist’s position on suffering fails to meet the biblical presentation of the God who knows and controls the future.

The Second View: Arminianism

Arminianism is prevalent in today’s Christian world, bearing the name of its founder, James Arminius. The Arminian view purports that God elects men to salvation upon the basis of foreseen faith. Henry Thiessen stated the Arminian position concisely, “By election we mean that sovereign act of God in grace whereby He chose in Christ Jesus for salvation all those whom He foreknew would accept Him.”¹⁰ The first basic tenant of Arminianism is that God desires all persons to be saved.¹¹ The Arminian viewpoint asserts God’s concern for people to come to faith and not to perish in both Testaments (cf. Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:3-4).

The second tenant is that all persons are able to believe or meet the conditions of salvation because of God’s prevenient grace, given to all humans indiscriminately.¹² Thiessen explains “prevenient grace” by writing, “Since mankind is hopelessly dead in trespasses and sins and can do nothing to obtain salvation, God graciously restores to all men sufficient ability to make a choice in the matter of submission to Him.”¹³

The third tenant of Arminianism is that God had foreknowledge of those persons elected to salvation instead of God electing some to salvation, thereby passing over other men or even

¹⁰ Henry Thiessen. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1949), 343.

¹¹ Millard Erickson. *Christian Theology 2nd Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1998), 932.

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933.

¹³ Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 344-345.

choosing some for retribution.¹⁴ This viewpoint seeks to release God from the ultimate responsibility of being “guilty” for sending men to eternal punishment. Arminius argued against supralapsarianism by summarizing, “The arguments all boil down to one: unconditional predestination makes God ‘the author of sin’.”¹⁵

Norman Geisler seeks to explain God’s foreknowledge that is complimentary to divine election by writing, “Whatever he forechooses cannot be *based on* what he foreknows. Nor can what he knows be based on what he *forechose*. Both must be simultaneous and coordinate acts of God...hence, there are truly free actions, and God determined they would be such.”¹⁶ This view sounds like a potential remedy to the problem of evil and its cause; however, it still renders the reality of the future as being fixed because God already knows what is going to happen. This belief, in theory, does away with the concept of free will in an attempt to support it. Wayne Grudem deducts, “upon reflection, this system [foreknowledge] turns out to give no real freedom to man either. For if God can look into the future and see that person A *will* come to faith in Christ, and that person B *will not* come to faith in Christ, then those facts are already *fixed*, they are already *determined*...but what kind of benefit is this? We have then sacrificed election in love by a personal God for a kind of determinism by an impersonal force and God is no longer to be given the ultimate credit for our salvation.”¹⁷

The final tenant of Arminianism is that it challenges the Calvinistic understanding of predestination as unconditional or absolute.¹⁸ Unlike open theism that denies the omniscience of

¹⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933.

¹⁵ J. Kenneth Grider. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 97.

¹⁶ Norman Geisler. *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*. (Downers Grove, IL, 1986), 71.

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology: an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2000), 679.

¹⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933.

God, Arminianism rejects fatalism while supporting God's complete knowledge. Arminianism seeks to maintain the idea that man alone is responsible for ending up in eternal judgment.

During the fifth century, Pelagius rejected the concept of original sin, and wholeheartedly disagreed with the views of Augustine relating to the predestination of man. One particular saying of Augustine troubled Pelagius, "Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt."¹⁹ Pelagius was a strong advocate for the free will of men and he saw Adam's influence merely being that of a poor example instead of a transmitted depravity of nature. The Arminian viewpoint regards man as fallen because of Adam's sin; however, as Erickson notes, "this inability is physical and intellectual, but not volitional."²⁰

The Arminian effort to square their position with scripture finds a far more substantial basis than the position of the open theist; however, the texts that are frequently used to support Arminianism do not neatly resolve this matter (cf. John 3:16, 36; Rom. 10:13; 2 Pet. 3:9). Far too many texts place God at the helm of the universe without apologizing to anyone for His actions that are declared "good" (cf. Ps. 50:21; 119:68; 139:17; 145:9). The Bible demonstrates that God's favor is not merited by citing individuals who were chosen by God in the Bible before they were born (Jacob and Jeremiah). Two other individuals were chosen before they were even conceived (John the Baptist and Jesus). The difficult problem with the Arminian view also rests in texts that clearly declare that God is the author of salvation and that it is not on the basis of human meritorious efforts (Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Mal. 1:2-3; John 6:37; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4, 11; 2:8-10; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2).

¹⁹ Henry Bettenson. *Documents of the Christian Church*. (Oxford, NY, 1999), 59.

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 650.

The Third View: Calvinism

Calvinism boldly proclaims the sovereignty of God in all aspects related to salvation. John Calvin's name has been attached to the biblical doctrine of predestination and election; however, the teaching was in place long before he arrived upon the theological scene. R. C. Sproul writes, "This identification of Calvinism with predestination is as strange as it is real and widespread... Virtually nothing in John Calvin's view of predestination, however, was not first in Martin Luther, and before Luther in Augustine (and arguably in Thomas Aquinas). Luther wrote more about the subject than did Calvin."²¹ The apostle Paul spoke of the believer being predestined according to the counsel of God's will (cf. Eph. 1:11); so the concept of election and predestination did not originate with Calvin just as the law of gravity did not originate with Isaac Newton. Supporters of God's sovereignty in salvation who arrived after Calvin include men like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Arthur Pink, and Louis Berkhof.

John Calvin defined predestination as "the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death."²² The Calvinist's world-view holds the Creator God responsible for the pre-determined plan of the universe, and within those parameters rests the doctrine of salvation. Loraine Boettner explains, "It is unthinkable that a God of infinite wisdom and power would create a world without a definite plan for that world. And because God is thus infinite His plan must extend to every detail of the world's existence."²³

²¹ R.C. Sproul. *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1997), 139.

²² John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Peabody, MA 2008), 610.

²³ Loraine Boettner. *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. (Philadelphia, PA, 1972), 20.

The Calvinist recognizes that even men make detailed plans prior to any size building project; therefore, would not an all-wise Creator have a far more detailed plan before beginning the creation of a universe (cf. Luke 14:28-30). According to the Apostle Peter, it was God's predetermined plan that was carried out in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, "Him, being delivered by the *determined* purpose and *foreknowledge* of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;" (Acts 2:23,NKJ, italics added). Arthur Pink writes, "The fact is that 'foreknowledge' is *never* used in Scripture in connection with events or actions; instead, it always has reference to *persons*." ²⁴

The subject of predestination is not without great difficulty for the Calvinist. Calvin noted, "The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended with considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths, and climbing to the clouds, determined if it can that none of the secret things of God shall remain unexplored." ²⁵ The relationship of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility ultimately resides in the realm of human incomprehensibility, which is far different than declaring it as impossibility.

Each position reviewed in this brief paper entails peculiar difficulties that must be squared with the Word of God. The question is not whether one is able to comprehend God's divine salvation but rather what must be sacrificed in order to arrive at an acceptable level of understanding of God's salvation. If biblical truth is and the God revealed in the Bible is what must be sacrificed in order to present a palatable argument to believers and non-believers alike, then the cost would be too high according to scripture (cf. Prov. 14:12). Luther responded to

²⁴ Arthur Pink. *The Attributes of God*. (Pensacola, FL, _____), 21.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 607.

Erasmus' denial of predestination by writing, "For your thoughts concerning God are too human."²⁶

The Calvinist must wrestle with the notion that if God is responsible for everything, then He would be the author of sin as well. Is God the cause of evil and of sin? The Bible assures that God is not to be indicted as the author of sin (cf. 1 Jn. 1:5; James 1:13). Latourette summarizes Erasmus' argument against God's sovereignty by writing, "God would be unjust and immoral if He were so to order the universe that man could not of himself fulfill the conditions which He had ordained for salvation and then were arbitrarily to choose some to be saved and by doing so condemn others to hell."²⁷ One must be careful not to exchange the truth of God for a lie (cf. Rom. 1:25) when trying to define and understand God's work and ways in relationship to His created beings. Erwin Lutzer identifies the danger of trivializing God by stating, "Whenever we begin with man and reason upward, we manufacture an idol.... Idolatry is giving respectability to our own opinions of God, formed after our likeness."²⁸

There are two common and crucial objections to divine predestination which focus upon moral responsibility: the agent's and God's. If the agent's actions are predetermined by God then how can they be held responsible for his or her actions? John Feinberg addresses the difficulty by offering his explanation, "People are morally responsible for their actions because they do them freely."²⁹ He further argues for compatibilism by writing, "if the act is according to the agent's desires, then even though the act is causally determined, it is free and the agent is morally responsible."

²⁶ Martin Luther. *The Bondage of the Will*. (LaVergne, TN 2008), 33.

²⁷ Kenneth Latourette. *A History of Christianity*. (New York: NY, 1953), 724.

²⁸ Erwin Lutzer. *Ten Lies About God: And How You Might Already Be Deceived*. (Nashville, TN 2000), 3.

²⁹ John Feinberg. *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*. (Downers Grove, IL, 1986), 37.

The Second objection focuses upon God's moral responsibility in creating a world where evil exists while remaining holy and just in spite of the existence of sin. Feinberg states his conclusion, "The option God chose is of the greatest value and thus is justified even though it makes it impossible for God to remove evil... Creating human beings is of highest value and thus justifies a world in which there is evil."³⁰

Jonathan Edwards produced a treatise on the matter of the will and the necessity for the sovereignty of God as the supreme cause of all life. He summarizes his position, "Hereby, it becomes manifest, that God's moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents, making them the objects of his commands, counsels, calls, warnings, exhortations, promises, threatening, rewards, and punishments, is not inconsistent with a determining disposal of all events, of every kind, throughout the universe, in his providence either by apposite efficiency or permission."³¹ The traditional view of God's sovereignty in salvation upholds a high and glorious view of God. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, atonement, and the virgin birth, the doctrine of predestination is not for men to fully comprehend, but to receive by faith upon the authority of the written Word of God. One can discern that an omniscient God selected the plan of His choosing that brings the most good, honor, and glory to the Giver of all good things. Calvin commented on this mystery that has been revealed to men, "All is wisely and properly arranged. What can be more just than that his purposes, with which men are unacquainted, should be known to God alone, so long as he is pleased to conceal them, -or, again, that it should be in his own will and power to fix the time when they shall be communicated to men?"³²

³⁰ Feinberg, *Predestination & Free Will*, 39.

³¹ Jonathon Edwards. *The Freedom of the Will*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009), 323.

³² John Calvin. *Commentaries*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009), on Ephesians 1:9.

The Impact of Each View upon the Believer in Evangelism

The motivation for the open theist to evangelize the word with the gospel resides in the thought that God desires for everyone to be saved and views humanity with every opportunity to make their own decision being uncaused by another. Humanity must be rescued and it isn't up to God but rather up to humans to do the job. Pinnock states that "The response of faith and love cannot be forced."³³ The need for prayer suddenly becomes void because prayer is in all actuality asking God to intervene in the hearts and lives of people. If God is guilty for overriding the wills of people then one must present a cogent argument for God's election of Abraham, Levi (Matthew), and Saul of Tarsus. Neither of the three were doing anything meritorious to "deserve" God's calling to salvation but upon God's divine call they all surrendered their wills to the Lord and lived lives that were subsequently characterized by obedience.

The open theist also has a dilemma with setting forward a God that is so "human" that He becomes untrustworthy for the future. If God has no advantage over the future, then fulfilled prophecy becomes a nuisance and unfulfilled prophecy remains another enigma. Substantial doctrine is sacrificed upon the altar of setting forth a teaching that is meritorious in the sight of the world. This writer finds open theism to be weighed in the balance and found wanting (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-31; 2:14).

Arminianism's view of God is higher than that of the open theists in this writer's opinion; however, in light of the God that is revealed in scripture, Arminianism maintains a low view of God with a higher view of humanity. Evangelism with a low view of God will adopt methods that are pragmatic in approach rather than biblical. If God is not viewed as the One who changes men's hearts (for that would be coercing them against their "free will," and to the Arminian that is not acceptable) then one must ask the Arminian, "For what are you praying if it is not for God

³³ Pinnock, *Predestination & Free Will*, 148.

to turn the hearts of men and women from error to the truth?” Augustine’s response to the problem of the semi-pelagian denial of prevenient grace addressed this contradiction of theology. Why would anyone give thanks to God for grace in salvation if God were not the One who overruled the depraved heart of man in the first place?³⁴ “In his book on evangelism Packer writes, “Scripture teaches that as King, [God] orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with His own eternal purpose. Scripture also teaches that, as Judge, He holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues. Thus, the hearers of the gospel are responsible for their reaction; if they reject the good news they are guilty of unbelief.... God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are taught side by side in the same Bible; sometimes, indeed in the same text.”³⁵

Evangelism and Calvinism is perceived by some to be a contradiction. The hyper-Calvinist may choose to accept the premise that because God has foreordained all who will come to salvation then the burden rests upon God to secure the redemption of the lost; however, this misconception is at best sub-Christian and nowhere found in the pages of scripture. Jesus ordained that His followers would be witnesses to Him (cf. Acts 1:8). He also commanded the process of discipleship to be carried out until the end of the age (cf. Matt. 18:18-20). Jesus also expected His followers to pray (cf. Matt. 6:5). The motivation for a moderate or biblical Calvinist to evangelize is purely out of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Calvinism recognizes the need for believers to faithfully sow the seed of the gospel (cf. Matt. 13:3; Mark 4:3; Luke 8:5; Rom. 10:17) while trusting God implicitly for every result (cf. Acts 18:10; 1 Cor. 3:6-7; Rev. 6:9-11). The language used in the New Testament of those without Christ, the unredeemed, is the language of death. Paul writes to the Ephesian believers, “And you He made alive, who were

³⁴ Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 60.

³⁵ James Packer. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. (Downers Grove, IL, 1961), 22.

dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1,NKJ). According to the Bible, the unconverted are not in need of a better life, but they are in need of eternal life (cf. John 3:3, 16-17). Those who remain without Christ are described as living with the “wrath of God” abiding upon them (cf. John 3:36).

Conclusion

Believers are commanded to study the Word of God diligently in order to know the truth and be able then to accurately handle it (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:15). While controversy has abounded over the subject of predestination and the free will of man for centuries, it still remains an important doctrine for Christians to humbly study. It is essential that believers be thorough students of the Word to prevent deception that can easily persuade sincere individuals who lack Biblical depth and understanding into all forms of error and sin (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17; Eph. 4:14; Titus 1:14; 2 Pet. 3:3-4). The God revealed in the Bible is holy, just, love, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Embracing this God, the only wise God (cf. 1Tim. 1:17; Jude 1:25), will resemble the humble yieldedness that is necessary for faithful evangelism that focuses upon men’s real need of forgiveness and God’s marvelous plan of salvation through faith in Christ alone. Upon seeing God for Who He is, believers should respond humbly and reverently with Isaiah, “Here am I! Send me” (Is. 6:8).

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