

SCOTT CHRISTENSEN

WHAT ABOUT FREE WILL?

Reconciling Our Choices
with God's Sovereignty



Foreword by D. A. CARSON

“Scott Christensen has done a splendid job of explaining what’s at stake in the debate over free will and presenting a compelling biblical case for a compatibilist view of human freedom that honors God’s absolute sovereignty over his creation. One particular virtue of the book is that while it recognizes the value of philosophical analysis, Scripture is given the first and the last word.”

—**James N. Anderson**, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina

“Christensen very practically and persuasively develops a case for compatibilism. But whether you want to call it compatibilism, Calvinism, or something else, Christensen shows that it is just biblical Christianity. This book is an excellent resource, therefore, for those trying to make sense of divine sovereignty and human freedom from a biblical perspective.”

—**Matthew Barrett**, Tutor of Systematic Theology and Church History, Oak Hill Theological College, London; Executive Editor, *Credo Magazine*; Series Editor, The 5 Solas Series

“Scott Christensen has performed a valuable service in writing a clear and accurate book on the question of free will. He presents intelligent and intelligible definitions of such key terms as libertarianism and compatibilism, and answers clearly from Scripture the questions that we all ask about them. The reader emerges with a good understanding of these terms and the impact of this doctrine on the Christian life. I do hope that the book gets a wide distribution and readership.”

—**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“The issues of praise and blame, human freedom and divine determinism, culpability and responsibility have long been discussed in the church. What we have in Scott Christensen’s compact volume is a discussion of these issues from the perspective of the maintenance and prioritization of divine sovereignty without minimizing or reconfigur-

ing the biblical witness to divine determinism. It is quite well written, deals equitably with opponents, and presents a balanced argument. It is a handy tool for an introduction to the issues. In this regard, I found it a wonderful addition to the conversation from a practical and informative perspective, with a forthright presentation of the argument for Christensen's point of view while showing the weakness of opposite opinions. I can recommend it highly as a worthy presentation of the argument that neither culpability nor human freedom need be surrendered to embrace praise, blame, and sovereignty."

—**John D. Hannah**, Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology; Research Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

"Just as there seems to be no end of books (so the Preacher in Ecclesiastes), so there seems to be no end to the discussion about human free will and divine sovereignty. Pelagius and Augustine, Erasmus and Luther, Wesley and Whitefield—the discussion is certainly not a new one. But this simply means that every generation needs to wrestle afresh with what Scripture teaches on this subject. This new popular work by Scott Christensen helpfully lays out the major positions and seeks to show what Scripture teaches on this enormously important subject. A good primer!"

—**Michael A. G. Haykin**, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville

"The perennial debate over free will and divine sovereignty often gets off on the wrong foot. More popular treatments can verge on caricature, while more serious treatments are often inaccessible to the average believer. This book is different. Careful in description and argument, it is also eminently readable. Scott Christensen doesn't take anything for granted, but defines the major terms as he goes. Most important of all, it breathes a spirit of wonder and gratitude before the face of a God who is not only all-powerful but good."

—**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“This concise little volume is a clear, intelligent, immensely helpful overview of one of the most confusing conundrums in all of theology: the perennial debate over divine sovereignty and human free will. While avoiding the dense philosophical prose found in most works on this subject, Scott Christensen doesn’t sidestep the hard questions. The answers he gives are thoughtful, biblical, satisfying, and refreshingly coherent. Lay readers and seasoned theologians alike will treasure this work.”

—**John F. MacArthur Jr.**, Pastor-Teacher, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

“Many think that free will is the silver-bullet answer to some of theology’s most difficult questions. But do we have a free will? Short answer: It depends on what you mean by free. Long answer: Read this book.”

—**Andy Naselli**, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis

“Christensen has provided an admirably clear and succinct defense of the compatibilist view of human freedom and divine sovereignty. Scholars and laypersons alike will benefit from this well-researched and carefully argued book. I recommend it highly!”

—**James S. Spiegel**, Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Taylor University, Upland, Indiana

“Compatibilism is not a word with which most Christians are familiar, but it represents a truth apart from which neither the Bible nor the Christian life can be properly understood. Can God be sovereign and man still be free? Can God foreknow our choices without undermining our accountability to him? These sorts of questions have troubled souls for centuries. Scott Christensen’s treatment of compatibilism, the notion that divine determinism and human freedom are harmonious, speaks to this issue with biblical clarity and practical wisdom. I am thoroughly persuaded that God knew infallibly from eternity past that I would freely and without reservation endorse this excellent book!”

—**Sam Storms**, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

“Scott Christensen has made an important contribution to the perennial conversation in Christian theology about God’s sovereignty and free will. He pushes beyond the mutual stereotypes that so often derail this important conversation, charitably engaging the major objections raised against Calvinism. Scott fuses clearheaded philosophy with helpful everyday life examples and significant insights for Christian living, all under the final authority of Scripture. *What about Free Will?* is an important work for anyone who seeks to champion God’s awesome sovereignty over the full scope of reality without reducing humanity to the level of meaningless robots.”

—**Thaddeus J. Williams**, Assistant Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, California

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Reconciling Our Choices
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SCOTT CHRISTENSEN



P U B L I S H I N G

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To my wonderful wife, Jennifer, who is a
helpmate beyond compare.

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Foreword

For some time I have been toying with the advisability of committing myself to writing two books on compatibilism. That possibility has now been reduced to one, for Scott Christensen has written the other. And you are holding it in your hand.

Many of the theological disputes of almost any day, including ours, revolve around compatibilism—that is, the view that God’s sovereignty on the one hand and human freedom and responsibility on the other are mutually compatible. Veer too much to one side and it is difficult to avoid fatalism (a mechanical form of determinism) and, apparently, the destruction of meaningful human responsibility. Veer too much to the other side and it is difficult to avoid serious loss of confidence in God’s sovereignty and goodness: the future laid out in Scripture seems assured only to the extent that the statistical probabilities make room for it. In the West during the last two centuries, these theological issues have often been associated with the name of Calvin on the one hand and with the names of Arminius and of Wesley on the other. Each side has been known to dismiss the other with considerable zeal and enthusiasm.

Both sides discern how much pastoral theology is at stake: the debate focuses not only on theological issues of considerable complexity, but on a plethora of practical issues with which all Christians wrestle: Does prayer change things? If not, why pray? If so, why should we believe that God’s plan is already fixed? If God is sovereign, why doesn’t he intervene a little more dramatically and clean up the mess? Or is he sovereign, but not reliably good? Or if he is invariably good, how can we believe that he is doing the best he can—unless, of course, we hold that

he is not quite sovereign after all? Is it possible to believe that everything is determined, without being driven to what is commonly meant by (a pretty mechanical) determinism? How does this topic bear on such massive and biblically unavoidable topics as election, the freedom of grace, the assurance of faith, even questions about what the cross achieved?

Enter Scott Christensen. This fine discussion, written in the Reformed heritage of Jonathan Edwards, is characterized by several outstanding virtues. First of all, considering the complexity of the subject, this book is wonderfully accessible. I do not mean to suggest that a reader can skim it: that is not possible, for the flow of the argument is often tight and requires alertness to details. Nevertheless, the illustrations are contemporary and pointed, and the demands made of the reader are considerably less challenging than what is expected of readers of Edwards, who is widely recognized as being a rather “user-unfriendly” author. Second, Christensen is immaculately fair with his opponents. He valiantly attempts to present their positions in the categories and with the empathy that they would use to present their own cases. And third, he has come as close to doing this subject justice—that is, to handling it in a way that is both faithful to and submissive to Scripture—as anyone else who has written on the subject in recent memory. Only those who know the literature will appreciate how many traps and misconceptions he has skillfully avoided in constructing his argument.

This is a serious book for serious Christians, whether they initially agree with Scott Christensen or not. Best of all, the cast of the book is not to turn readers into theological pundits who can gain points over opponents in theological debate, but to engender deeper faith in the God of sovereign goodness, while avoiding the temptation to abuse God’s sovereignty by blaming him for sin. Rightly used, this book will not foreclose on future discussion—indeed, each chapter ends with useful questions for group study—but will build up many believers in their most holy faith.

D. A. Carson
Research Professor of New Testament
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, Illinois

Preface

It was never my intention to write this book. It just sort of happened. Well, maybe not. That would undermine my thesis. The fact is, I had been wrestling with and writing about divine sovereignty and the notion of free will for a long time. It seemed only natural to organize my thoughts into a book.

My own head-on collision with the problem occurred in 1984 on a beautiful spring day in the parking lot of Union County College in Cranford, New Jersey. For some time I had cautiously pondered this new doctrine called *divine election* that a friend had introduced to me. Even though I had been a Christian for many years, I had never encountered such teaching before; and like many others, I was immediately repulsed by it. I was convinced that the Bible never taught such a radical and reprehensible doctrine. But there I sat in my Plymouth Horizon, transfixed by the words of Romans 9:15–16: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Divine sovereignty hit me squarely on my frontal lobe. But I was perplexed. If my salvation is wholly dependent on a merciful God, then what happens to my choices? Am I a listless marionette who descends silently through the relentless cogs of divine fate?

One reality reached a crescendo of certainty. I was gripped with the truth of God’s meticulous determination of all that transpires in time, space, and human history, including my salvation. I have never turned back from the light that shined squarely on my Bible through the window of my vehicle on that bright day. But something was

still amiss, and a new quest unfolded before me. I had to make sense of the other side—the human act of willing, desiring, purposeful choosing. And I just couldn't be satisfied with a wall of isolation separating God's actions from those of his creatures. There was no resignation to chalk up the two ideas to impenetrable mystery or what the venerable theologian J. I. Packer calls "antinomy."¹ Thirty years later I am still peering deeply into this theological enigma, but the thick dust darkening the opposite window in my car has gotten a lot clearer. I hope to reveal now what I didn't see then.

Much of my thinking on God's sovereignty was solidified during my seminary years, but questions about free will remained. I continued to grapple with them for years. Around 2004 I was compelled to start collecting my thoughts about these issues on paper—actually, in a Word file on my hard drive. The file started out as a modest collection of verses, quotes, and my scattered personal reflections. Slowly it grew and became a little more organized. Every time I read a passage from my Bible or something from a pertinent book on the subject, I entered the data into the running file. Eventually the file splintered, and I created separate documents looking at the issues from slightly different angles. Soon a rough outline of my more articulate thoughts began to emerge.

In December 2011, I began a series of sermons from Ephesians 1 on the doctrine of election. Of course, the matter of free will became an issue of importance. I turned to my files and the outline I had developed, which was given a little more polish for the sermon series. To date, those sermons have been the most well received messages I have preached. It was a year and a half later that the thought occurred to me to write a book on the subject. I soon embarked on the quest to make this conundrum a little more comprehensible—first for myself, and maybe for a few others as well.

1. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 18–25.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without a great deal of help from a great number of people. I want to thank Rick Kress for giving me the initial encouragement to tackle this project and the elders of Summit Lake Community Church, who graciously supplied me with a five-week sabbatical in which I completed the first draft. I want to thank Jay Wegter, Josh and Gretchen Rank, Paul Russell, Daniel Cameron, and Dan Phillips, who read portions of the initial draft and made many helpful suggestions. I owe a special thanks to John D. Wilsey, Leonard G. Goss, Irv Busenitz, Jade Greenfield, Phil Johnson, and Jeff and John Crotts for their help, advice, and encouragement at different stages of the project.

I want to thank the fine scholars Matthew Barrett, Thaddeus J. Williams, and James S. Spiegel, who each reviewed later versions of the manuscript and made many invaluable suggestions for improvement. I especially thank James N. Anderson, who thoroughly read the final manuscript. His keen eye for careful arguments and minor details has been indispensable. The time and energy that these generals have given to such a lowly foot soldier has been a kindness that I could never repay. Any errors in my work that remain are, of course, my own. Thinking biblically and soundly about such a difficult and complex topic as divine sovereignty and human free agency is a daunting task. For that reason, I am grateful for my professors and the solid biblical training I received at The Master's Seminary.

I am extremely grateful to D. A. Carson and his willingness to write the foreword to this book. Dr. Carson's writings have been

immensely influential in my thinking on this topic. It is a privilege to have him honor me in this way.

I thank the wonderful folks at P&R Publishing for taking an interest in this project. I am especially indebted to John J. Hughes for his expert guidance throughout the publishing process and his many kindnesses to me. Likewise, Karen Magnuson is a fantastic editor, and it has been a pleasure to work with her.

I appreciate the prayers of my church family as I labored to write this book. It is a privilege to serve as their shepherd. I also thank my beloved wife, Jennifer, and my four boys, Daniel, Andrew, Luke, and Matthew, who endured long hours while I was holed up in my office chained to my computer. My son Daniel deserves credit for helping me with the illustrations in the book. My family is a blessing from the Lord. Finally, I thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for the indescribable gift of salvation and his providential direction and care.

Introduction:

The Free-Will Problem

Biblical Christianity makes two indisputable affirmations, yet not without generating fierce controversy. First, God controls in some sense all that transpires in time, space, and history, including the course of human lives. Second, human beings are responsible moral agents who freely choose the direction that their lives take. Our ability to make meaningful choices that impact history as it unfolds is what separates us from every other creature.¹ On the surface, these two truths appear to be in conflict with each other. How can God direct the path of human history and yet humans remain free to choose their own course of action?

This question has plagued philosophers and theologians throughout the ages. The problem perplexes us no less today. Even popular culture has tuned in to the vexing question. Anyone who has watched the *Matrix* trilogy or *Groundhog Day* is confronted with daunting notions about free will and whether events are predetermined. The comic strip *Foxtrot* by Bill Amend tackled the matter with a dry wit befitting the ponderous nature of the subject. In the first frame of a strip composed in 2003, the main protagonist of the comic, ten-year-old Jason Fox, holds a football over his head. He calls out to his best friend, Marcus Jones, to “go deep.”²

1. Mark R. Talbot, “All the God That Is Ours in Christ,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 56.

2. FOXTROT © 2003 Bill Amend. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

Marcus deadpans, “How can free will coexist with divine preordination?”³

In the next frame, Jason silently ponders the question. In the third frame he replies, “Too deep.”⁴

Marcus then alleviates the moment with lighter fare: “If Batman died, would the Joker be happy?”⁵

Is Reconciliation Possible?

Since free will and divine sovereignty seem irreconcilable, one or the other is usually denied or limited in some degree. Historically, some Christians say that God has purposely limited his sovereignty in order to uphold man’s free will. This is most often associated with Arminianism and the teachings of the theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609). Other Christians have emphasized God’s sovereign determination of what transpires while either limiting human freedom or denying it altogether. This is generally associated with *Calvinism*, a term derived from the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–64). Of course, both views date to the early history of the church.⁶

The matter seems straightforward. Either man has a free will that limits God’s sovereignty or God is absolutely sovereign and man is not really so free. But is it possible to somehow reconcile God’s sovereignty with human freedom? It is my quest to answer that question in the affirmative.

This is no easy task, for several reasons. First, the issue has generated no small amount of controversy within the history of the church, including the present. Second, confusion is often generated by the controversy because of caricatures on both sides of the debate. Third, the issues can get complicated, especially because of the apparent contradictory nature of the two basic propositions. Fourth, the claim that we have free will is usually assumed to be true and its meaning

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.; also reprinted in Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 222.

6. For the history, see R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

self-evident. But if pressed, few are able to articulate a definition. The idea of free will becomes muddled very quickly. Finally, Scripture itself doesn't provide straightforward answers to questions about free will.⁷ For that reason alone, one must approach the subject with great care.

My purpose is to try to clear up some of the murkiness that is commonplace and to provide biblical answers to the questions that free will raises. Most Christians have no problem accepting God's control over the big picture of history. When it comes to God's preordaining our actual choices, however, we often entertain a different perspective. Many assume that God's actions have little bearing on our personal choices. We like to reserve a degree of autonomy for ourselves. God's sovereignty provokes nightmares "that we are like puppets being jerked around against our wills by a malevolent master puppeteer."⁸

For many, to deny free will is anathema—we have no choice (!) but to believe in free will. This is understandable. It appears intuitively obvious that we make our own independent choices.⁹ They are usually made unhindered and seemingly apart from any outside causes other than our own freedom to choose. This is where confusion sets in. Many readily accept that God chooses us for salvation and directs our lives for his purposes, but don't we freely choose what we want as well? How can both notions be true? The burden of this book is to answer such questions.

Why Bother?

Does it really matter what one believes about such a contentious subject? Why is it so important? Well, it certainly generates lively debate, but there are reasons why believers need clarity about the matter. A biblical view of divine sovereignty and human freedom highlights a host of important matters in the Christian life. It helps us in the following ways:

7. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 679.

8. Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 31.

9. Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 104; Clark H. Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom and the Flow of Biblical History," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 95.

- Sorting out God’s role and our role in matters of salvation.
- Making sense of how regeneration, conversion, and sanctification work.
- Understanding how we should engage in evangelism and discipleship.
- Building greater confidence in God’s providential purposes for both history and our individual lives.
- Navigating crucial questions about the existence of evil and whether God or man or even Satan is responsible for it.

The questions can be quite personal:

- If God determines the course of events in my life, how can I be responsible for my actions?
- How can I have a meaningful relationship with God? Doesn’t his sovereignty undermine my choice to freely love him?
- Why should I pray, if God has already determined the future? Can my prayers change God’s mind? Do my choices have any bearing on the course of the future?
- Do God’s commands really matter? If he is sovereign, can’t I do whatever I want?
- Isn’t divine determinism—another way of speaking of God’s absolute sovereignty—really fatalism, so that it doesn’t matter what choices I make? Shall I resign myself to “what will be will be,” since I can do nothing about it?
- How can I know whether my choices are in or out of the will of God?

The questions are endless, and the unbridled speculation about the answers threatens to wreak havoc on our limited brain capacity.

I am not writing another book about the doctrine of predestination or the problem of evil and suffering. It will become necessary to touch on these topics, but full treatments of them are to be found elsewhere.¹⁰

10. Good accessible treatments of the doctrine of predestination include R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986); Sam C. Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); and David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The*

Yet few books treat the issue of free will exclusively, especially from a distinctively biblical perspective. Older treatments on the topic are so ponderous that they leave the average reader bewildered—works such as Augustine’s *On Free Choice of the Will* and Martin Luther’s *The Bondage of the Will*. Other treatments of free will engage in discussing heavy philosophical concepts that make matters worse.

Compatibilism and Libertarianism

I approach this subject from what I believe the Scripture, rightly interpreted, teaches. Nonetheless, it corresponds historically to what Calvinism has taught. Furthermore, the approach taken here is often labeled *compatibilism*. Although the term *compatibilism* is part of the parlance of modern philosophical discourse on this issue, it accurately reflects what the great American colonial pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards taught. He was the first to thoroughly articulate the ideas of compatibilism in his magisterial tome *Freedom of the Will*, written in 1754.¹¹ The common alternative view to compatibilism held among theologians is known as *libertarianism*, which is in no way related to the political ideology of the same name. This is the view held by Arminians and open theists.¹² This subject matter is not confined to the domain of theology. Secular philosophers engage

Five Points of Calvinism (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004). Good accessible treatments of suffering and evil include chapters 6 and 7 in John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015); D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). For a more advanced philosophical and theological treatment, see John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

11. Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957). On Edwards as a compatibilist, see Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 164–71; Paul Helm, “Edwards and the Freedom of the Will,” available at <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2011/02/edwards-and-freedom-of-will.html>. Compatibilist beliefs are not monolithic. One need not follow all that Edwards taught to be a compatibilist.

12. Open theism is a radical brand of Arminianism that has been rejected as unorthodox by Calvinists and many Arminians. Open theists virtually deny God’s sovereignty as clearly spelled out in Scripture, including his omniscience and other attributes accepted by orthodox Christianity. See the treatment of this movement by Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

in these discussions as well, and the viewpoints span a wide and complicated spectrum.¹³ Generally, I will not concern myself with non-Christian viewpoints, even though some significant overlap in ideas occurs.

A distinctly biblical form of compatibilism holds that there is a dual explanation for every choice that humans make. God determines the choices of every person, yet every person freely makes his or her own choices. Thus, divine sovereignty is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. In this model, people are free when they voluntarily choose what they most want to choose as long as their choices are made in an unhindered way. In either case, what people actually choose, whether hindered or not, is determined by a matrix of decisive causes both within and without. Biblical compatibilism says that our choices proceed from the most compelling motives and desires we have, which in turn is conditioned on our base nature, whether good or evil. The more voluntarily and unconstrainedly our choices are made, the more freedom and responsibility we have in making them. Sometimes this is called the *freedom of inclination* because a person is always inclined to make particular choices.

Conversely, libertarianism teaches that free will is incompatible with divine determinism (i.e., God's meticulous decreeing of all things), since this undermines human freedom and responsibility. It should be noted that Arminians do not espouse the incompatibility of human freedom with divine sovereignty. Rather, they hold that divine sovereignty is exercised so that God does not *causally determine* human actions.¹⁴ Libertarian freedom of choice comes about when we have the ability to choose contrary to any prior factors that influence our choices, including external circumstances, our motives, desires, character, and nature, and, of course, God himself. If these prior influences decisively determine choices, then the freedom and responsibility of those choices are hindered. God is in control of history, but he exercises that control

13. See Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joseph Keim Campbell, *Free Will* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011).

14. Steve W. Lemke, "A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 150–51.

so as not to interfere with man's free will. Libertarian free will is often called the *freedom of contrary choice*.

If the libertarian definition of *free will* is correct, then God is limited in his sovereignty. On the other hand, if the compatibilist view of man's will is correct, then it not only is compatible with a robust view of divine sovereignty, but also preserves human freedom and responsibility. I will seek to show how the libertarian view of free will falls short of making sense of human experience and what Scripture teaches. Throughout the book, the main object of my critique is classic Arminianism and its appropriation of libertarian arguments. In contrast, I will devote the larger part of the book to defending a compatibilist perspective on the human will, which I believe is more faithful to Scripture and makes far better sense of our actual experience.

In making the case for compatibilism and against libertarianism, I run up against some unavoidable philosophical concepts and arguments. But my primary goal is not to assess all the complex philosophical arguments, but to show that a broad compatibilist framework better fits the scriptural evidence. The Bible is our decisive authority for judging ultimate truth claims.¹⁵

The organization of this book is as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 will lay out the libertarian viewpoint and its shortcomings. Chapter 3 will examine what the Bible teaches about God's absolute sovereignty in determining human affairs, including our choices. This chapter precedes the overview of compatibilism in chapter 4, since God's sovereignty is foundational to understanding biblical compatibilism. Chapters 5 and 6 will look at two prominent sets of compatibilistic patterns in the Bible to demonstrate the truth of this perspective. The chapters that follow will seek to flesh out the compatibilist view of the human will, freedom, and responsibility. Along the way, I will discuss how this perspective makes sense of many theological and practical issues that affect our everyday lives. The book is designed to facilitate further study of the topic. With that in mind, I close each

15. Many philosophers believe that the arguments for various views on free will and determinism have reached an impasse. But philosophical argumentation is not our final recourse—Scripture is (John 17:17; Col. 2:8).

chapter with a chapter summary and study questions. Most chapters also include a glossary of terms¹⁶ and resources for further study. There is also a full glossary of terms at the end of the book, as well as two appendices. The first appendix is a chart that compares libertarian beliefs with compatibilist beliefs. The second appendix is a review of Randy Alcorn's recent book *hand in Hand: The Beauty of God's Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice*, which tackles the same topic. Although Alcorn promotes a compatibilist position, I seek to point out that his perspective differs considerably from traditional biblical compatibilism.

To sort through all the thorny questions and befuddled ideas that surround this topic is daunting, but the rewards are worth the effort. When we enhance our understanding of God's role and our own roles as his plan unfolds for history and our personal lives, it gives us confidence and hope that God is good and wise and powerful and that our choices have meaning and purpose. We are a vital part of what he does in the world. Our choices matter, and what makes this true has everything to do with the manner in which his sovereignty manifests itself in our lives. I trust that this book will be a faithful guide in understanding this truth.

Glossary

Arminianism. A theology associated with the teachings of Jacob Arminius (1560–1609). Arminianism teaches five basic ideas. First, God has predestined to save those whom he foreknows will exercise faith in Christ. Second, Christ's death was an atonement for all mankind regardless of who believes on Christ for salvation. Third, humans in their natural state do not have *free will* or the capacity for saving faith. But, fourth, God has supplied *prevenient grace* to all humans so that they can recover free will and exercise saving faith. This prevenient grace enables them to either cooperate with God's saving grace or resist it if they choose.

16. When unique terms first occur in this volume, they are usually italicized, which means that they are defined in the glossary at the end of the chapter where they occur. Furthermore, most italicized terms in each chapter's glossary are cross-references to other entries, either in the chapter glossary or in the full glossary at the end of this volume.

Fifth, the grace of God assists the believer throughout his life, but this grace can be neglected. Subsequently, the believer can incur the loss of salvation.

Calvinism. A theology that embraces a broad spectrum of ideas associated with the teachings of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–64). Calvinism, however, is often identified by the five points of Calvinism, traditionally represented by the acronym *TULIP*. The *T* stands for *total depravity*, which indicates that humanity is in bondage to sin. The *U* stands for *unconditional election*, which indicates that God chooses people for salvation wholly apart from anything they do. The *L* stands for *limited atonement*, which indicates that Christ's death secured atonement only for the elect. The *I* stands for *irresistible grace*, which indicates that God draws chosen sinners to salvation irresistibly. The *P* stands for *perseverance of the saints*, which indicates that the elect will certainly persevere in their salvation until the end.

compatibilism. The biblical view that divine *determinism* is compatible with human *free will*. There is a dual explanation for every choice that humans make. God determines human choices, yet every person freely makes his or her own choices. God's causal power is exercised so that he never coerces people to choose as they do, yet they always choose according to his sovereign plan. People are free when they voluntarily choose according to their most compelling desires and as long as their choices are made in an unhindered way. While God never hinders one's choices, other factors can hinder people's freedom and thus their responsibility. Furthermore, moral and spiritual choices are conditioned on one's base nature, whether good or evil (i.e., regenerate or unregenerate). In this sense, one is either in bondage to his or her *sin nature* or freed by a new spiritual nature. See also *soft determinism*.

divine sovereignty. The biblical doctrine that God controls time, space, and history. Calvinists usually hold that God meticulously determines all events that transpire, including human choices. Arminians teach that God limits his sovereign control of events, giving humans significant freedom of choice, which is defined as *libertarianism*. See also *determinism*.

free will (free agency). The idea that humans are designed by God with the capacity for freely making choices for which they are responsible. Most Calvinists and Arminians agree that some kind of free agency is necessary for *moral responsibility*. But each branch of theology defines it differently. Arminians embrace a libertarian notion of free agency. Many Calvinists embrace a compatibilist notion of free agency. See also *compatibilism* and *libertarianism*.

human responsibility. See *moral responsibility*.

libertarianism. The view that *free will* is incompatible with divine *determinism* (i.e., God's meticulous decreeing of all things), which undermines human freedom and *moral responsibility*. God's sovereignty is exercised so that he does not causally determine human actions. Freedom of choice comes about when one has the ability to choose contrary to any prior factors that influence the choice, including external circumstances, one's motives, desires, character, and nature, and, of course, God himself. If these prior influences decisively determine choices, then the freedom and responsibility of those choices are undermined.

moral responsibility. Humans' culpability for their moral choices. A person who does good deserves praise or reward. A person who does evil deserves blame or punishment. Most Calvinists and Arminians believe that some kind of human freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. Also termed *human responsibility*.

Resources for Further Study

- F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House, 2011). A very readable defense of Arminianism.
- Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). One of the better defenses of Arminianism.
- R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986). A classic defense of the Calvinist view of election.
- . *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). A survey of the debate over free will in the history of the church.

- David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004). An excellent source for Scripture's defense of the five points of Calvinism.
- Sam C. Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). An engaging defense of the Calvinist view of election. Also treats libertarian and compatibilist views of free agency.
- Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). A popular defense of Arminianism and critique of Calvinism.

A Road Map for Libertarianism

Walk down Main Street and conduct an informal survey: “Do you believe in free will?” The answer is axiomatic: “Of course; who doesn’t?” The rich and the poor, the schooled and the unschooled, the famous and the forgotten, the pretty and the pedestrian—nearly everybody believes in the freedom of choice.

But what does this really mean?

The default answer usually lies along the lines of what is commonly known as *libertarianism*. The word sounds delightful, enlightening, positively liberating. But how many know what it means? What does this elusive ideology about the human will espouse?

Mapping the Debate over Free Will

In order to answer that question, we need to unfold a bigger map of the debate over free will (see fig. 1.1 below). Libertarianism falls within a broader landscape of ideas about freedom and determinism. These ideas can be categorized as *incompatibilist* and *compatibilist* theories.¹ Incompatibilist theories state that freedom and responsibility are incompatible with *determinism*. *Determinism* refers to the idea that all things that occur in our world are necessarily and causally determined by prior conditions. Thus, given specific prior conditions, only one outcome could possibly take place. We live in a cause-effect universe. This is particularly true in the natural world. Gravity causes apples to

1. For overviews of these theories, see Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 226–41; J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 265–83.

fall. The right combination of oxygen, fuel, and heat causes fires. When the temperature cools to 32 degrees Fahrenheit, it causes water to freeze.

Few people deny that the natural world follows this strict cause-effect principle.² But when it comes to human choosing, there is not so much agreement. In this case, many accept that the act of choosing isn't part of the material world of natural laws. This is true of both libertarians and compatibilists. We should interject here that the sort of determinism that Calvinists hold to is not a physical determinism because God is not a physical being. Furthermore, all Christians hold that our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, conscience, imagination, and so forth reside in the immaterial realm. This comports with Scripture, which speaks of the souls or spirits of persons as being distinct from their material bodies (1 Thess. 5:23). For the Christian, to be "away from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8; cf. 1 Cor. 5:3). At the resurrection, our bodies will be rejoined with our spirits. Accordingly, the act of choosing is not the result of material processes, as a materialist or naturalist might conclude.

Now, among these incompatibilist theories are *hard determinism* and *libertarianism*. Hard determinism holds that human choices are causally determined but incompatible with human freedom and responsibility, which are regarded as illusions. Secular hard determinists (including some materialists) hold that human choices are the result of environmental factors, genetics, brain chemistry, psychological and social conditioning, and so forth.³ Conversely, libertarianism holds that humans must be free and responsible, which means that our choices cannot be causally determined by forces outside our own control. Libertarianism denies determinism (i.e., choices are indeterministic). See fig. 1.1.

2. Some theorists point to the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics, which seems to support indeterminism at the level of subatomic particles, as support for libertarian free will. See Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132–35. It is unclear whether physicists know enough to say that the uncertainty principle supports indeterminism. Furthermore, it is a leap to suggest that this has anything to do with human choosing.

3. The popular atheist author Sam Harris argues that our choices are the result of mysterious "neurophysiological events" in the brain. We *feel* that we have freedom, but we don't. See *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

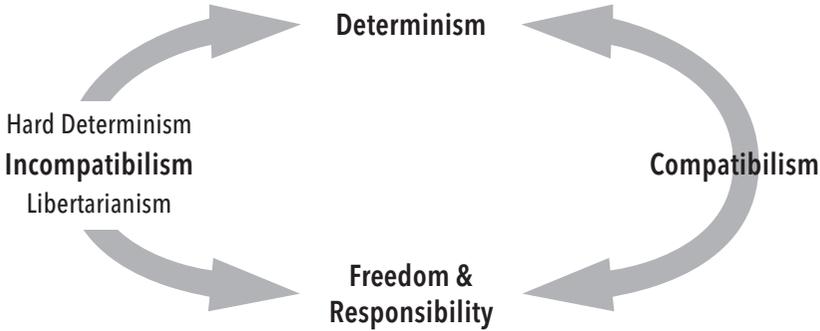


Fig. 1.1. Incompatibilist and Compatibilist Theories of Free Will

This, then, leaves us with the *compatibilist* theory, which states that determinism is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. Sometimes compatibilism is called *soft determinism*, in contrast to *hard determinism*. In this regard, both hard determinism and soft determinism are deterministic theories, while libertarianism is an indeterministic theory. Human moral responsibility is a matter that virtually all Christians have affirmed and that the Bible clearly teaches. Furthermore, both libertarians and compatibilists would agree that some kind of freedom is necessary in order for human responsibility to make sense. Christian brands of hard determinism affirm human responsibility but reject human freedom. Very few Christians have explicitly embraced this perspective, but some of its thinking creeps into otherwise inconsistent beliefs.⁴

While libertarians and compatibilists agree on the necessity of human freedom, they have fundamental differences about what sort of freedom is necessary for human responsibility. Furthermore, while both Arminians (who are libertarians) and Calvinists (who are compatibilists) affirm the sovereignty of God, they differ in how God exercises his sovereignty in the providential governance of the world. Calvinists believe that God causally determines all that transpires in

4. Many strong Calvinists could be categorized as hard determinists. Hyper-Calvinists would fall into this category as well, but hyper-Calvinism denies not only any sort of human freedom, but also human responsibility. See Phillip R. Johnson, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism," available at <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm>; Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Pursuit, Our Response* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 103–6. For a thorough critique, see Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995).

the world, whereas Arminians believe that God's providence does not employ causal determinism except in rare cases.

With the scope of the debate set forth, let us now focus our attention on libertarianism. This model of human freedom embraces many nuances, and philosophers advance sophisticated arguments in support of it. Furthermore, not all libertarians agree on the particulars. I will not canvass the thicket of these differences.⁵ Rather, I will seek to lay out the basic parameters of what the majority of libertarians hold to—particularly Christian libertarians, who are generally Arminians. Reduced to its core, this concept of free will teaches two fundamental ideas.

Contrary Choice

First, libertarianism teaches that humans are fully capable of making choices contrary to the choices they actually make. This is called the *power of contrary choice*. Arminian theologian Roger Olson declares, “Free agency is the ability to do other than what one in fact does.”⁶ Norman Geisler states that morally free creatures are able to respond in more than one way in a given situation: “When we did evil we could have *not* done it.”⁷ Good and evil are both fair game, and each alternative makes itself an equal-opportunity employer for the liberated will.

A person can choose to do what he wants to do, but he can equally choose to do what he *doesn't* want to do. Little Jimmy really doesn't want to eat his broccoli, but he can also choose to go against this prevailing desire and eat it anyway. Libertarianism is far less concerned than compatibilism about the specific reasons *why* Jimmy makes one choice over another. Libertarianism prefers to focus on the rainbow of options in the pantry of human choices. It champions one's power to explore any color he chooses and its multiple variations without being hampered by particular prevailing reasons.

5. See Kane, *Free Will*. For an advanced survey, see Randolph Clarke and Justin Capes, “Incompatibilist (Nondeterministic) Theories of Free Will,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014 Spring ed., available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-theories/>.

6. Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 71.

7. Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999), 30 (emphasis in original).

My brother-in-law's family lived in New Zealand for a time. What a life of limitations. When you go to the store in New Zealand to buy shampoo, you don't have long aisles of options to choose from. Selecting shampoo is made simple. By virtue of its extremely narrow options, your purchase is virtually determined for you already. If you like freedom of choice, you don't live in New Zealand; you live in America.

You want to buy shampoo? What kind? Aveda or Aveeno? Maybe Nexxus or Neutrogena will suit you? If not, try Pert or Pantene. The options are bewildering by design, and you get to choose whatever you like—or don't like. That is the triumph of libertarian free will.

Self-Determining Choice

Second, libertarianism teaches that when we have the ability to make alternative choices, they cannot be determined by anything outside the person making those choices. "The essence of this view is that a free action is one that does not have a sufficient condition or cause prior to its occurrence."⁸ Olson states that free will is the power of self-determining choice and that "it is incompatible with determination of any kind." This idea amounts "to belief in an uncaused effect—the free choice of the self to be or do something without antecedent."⁹ In other words, a self-determining choice is not sufficiently caused by anything prior to the agent who makes a choice. Each person is the "unmoved mover"¹⁰ who alone puts his choices in motion. We might say that he is the first cause (originator) of his own actions.¹¹

It is important to note that libertarians don't deny that reasons stand behind our choices. Many things can influence those choices, including both internal and external conditions. For example, we have internal beliefs, values, desires, preferences, motivations, and any number of odd inclinations that can influence the choices we make.¹² But in the end, our strength of will has an unequalled power

8. Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 103.

9. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 71.

10. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 270.

11. Geisler calls our choices "self-caused." *Chosen but Free*, 30. Philosophers refer to this as *agent-causation*. See Kane, *Free Will*, 44–47.

12. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 270.

to overrule all our inner dispositions. Jacob Arminius observed that humanity enjoys “a freedom from necessity, whether this proceeds from an external cause compelling, or from a nature inwardly determining absolutely to one thing.”¹³

As strong as Jimmy’s hatred for broccoli is, in the end that hatred cannot be said to determine his refusal to eat the dreaded vegetable. He could act against this most powerful desire, slaying it like a dragon, and devour the broccoli with defiance—if he chooses to do so. Thus, human freedom is a fiercely independent enterprise. If Jimmy chooses to eat the broccoli that he doesn’t want to eat, his decision isn’t determined by anything other than the power and freedom of Jimmy’s own will.

We are also affected by external conditions, such as our upbringing, our education, people who exert psychological power, favorable or unfavorable circumstances, rules or laws to govern behavior, persuasive arguments in defense of a particular choice, the lure of the culture, and so forth. While all these internal and external influences can serve as reasons for the choices we make, libertarianism states that no particular reason or set of reasons is *sufficient* to *determine* our choices. Libertarian Bruce Reichenbach notes, “Freedom is not the absence of influences, either external or internal,” but “we can still act contrary to those dispositions and choose not to follow their leading.”¹⁴ In most cases, compelling reasons might appeal to a person, who then chooses to follow its leading. What cannot happen is that a set of reasons becomes “strong enough to move the [person] decisively to choose one thing over another. Even if a person agrees in light of various reasons and arguments presented that one course of action is preferable, that in no way guarantees that it must be followed.”¹⁵ Free will means that we always have alternative choices at our disposal and that we exercise complete control over which alternative we choose. Christian libertarians believe that God endows his creatures with this freedom and that he steadfastly refuses to interfere with it except in rare cases.

13. Quoted in Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: A Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 226.

14. Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Freedom, Justice and Moral Responsibility,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 286.

15. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 630.

It is important to note that many libertarians distinguish between reasons and causes. We can have reasons for the choices we make, but those reasons cannot be causal in nature.¹⁶ In either case, if a libertarian agrees that reasons can be construed as causes, we can still act contrary to any such causes. Furthermore, if libertarians maintain that desires, preferences, and so forth determine one's choices (as compatibilists say), then those internal dispositions cannot themselves be determined by any prior conditions, either internal to the person (genetics, nature, etc.) or externally (circumstances, people, etc.). In other words, such desires and inner inclinations must themselves be freely conceived by the choosing agent and able to go in alternative directions. Thus, both our inner inclinations and our subsequent choices are indeterminate. We have the power to exercise control over both.¹⁷

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

In order to clarify matters, it is useful to explain the difference between *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions in understanding the libertarian notion of free will. A necessary condition is a prior condition that is necessary in order for something to come about. For example, it is necessary for your car to have gasoline in order to run. Without it, the car will not run. But gasoline is not sufficient to make your car run. Many other conditions must be met as well.

On the other hand, a sufficient condition is that which guarantees that something will come about, but this condition may not be necessary. For example, rain that pours from the sky is sufficient for your front yard to get wet, but it is not necessary. You could turn on your spigot and hose down your yard with water until it is wet, or you could buy hundreds of gallons of gasoline intended to make your car run and pour it out on the yard instead; but that wouldn't be recommended, especially on a hot, dry summer afternoon.

Now, in some cases, for something to come about, the conditions are both necessary and sufficient. For example, how do I know that my brother is in fact my brother? It is a necessary condition that he

16. *Ibid.*, 629.

17. *Ibid.*, 630.

be a male. If he is not a male, he can't possibly be my brother, since the notion of what a brother is includes maleness. His being a male, however, is not a sufficient condition for him to be my brother. There are billions of males in the world, and most of them are not my brothers. It is also a necessary condition that my brother be my sibling. But again, that is not a sufficient condition. Females can be siblings as well, but I have no female siblings. In order for my brother to be my brother, it is necessary that he be both a male and my sibling. These two conditions are both necessary and sufficient in order to secure the fact that my brother is indeed my brother.

How do these matters relate to libertarian freedom? Libertarianism argues that some conditions (reasons, causes) may be necessary for a choice to be made, but they are never sufficient for that choice to be made; otherwise, we are not free. Nonconstraining circumstances, internal desires, available options, persuasive actions of others, and so forth may be necessary conditions for a choice to be made, but they are not sufficient. Only our own power of willing is sufficient to guarantee freely made choices. Even if certain necessary conditions are present, it does not guarantee that a choice will be made.

Same Past, Different Futures

With choices that are indeterminate, given exactly the same conditions, which exist before the point of choosing, multiple futures are possible, depending on the course of action that a person takes.¹⁸ The past in no way determines the future. We cannot change the past, but our free will shapes the future by opening whatever door lies before us.

Suppose that Jane wants her husband, Terry, to buy her a bottle of shampoo at the store because she has run out. She wants to present herself in as good a light as possible in her upcoming job interview. Jane's hair can get really frizzy, and she prefers not to take any chances. Before she lost her job, she bought an expensive brand of shampoo at the hair salon. She has found that nothing works better to tame her hair. But now the money is tight, so without appearing anxious, she

18. See Robert Kane's "garden of forking paths" in *Free Will*, 7.

leaves the choice of which shampoo to buy up to Terry. Terry knows that Jane is on edge about her appearance for the interview, and he has always struggled to please her.

What will Terry do?

All these conditions (in addition to others) form contributing factors in whatever choice he might make. With free will, he can allow all, some, or none of them to influence his decision. The settled conditions of the past and all its powerful forces that shape present circumstances cannot hold a free person hostage. Whatever Terry decides to do is not *necessitated* by his circumstances, his wife's feelings, or even his own feelings. He can make whatever choice *he* decides on. There may be any number of reasons why Terry makes the choice to buy Jane her shampoo. One obvious reason may be her request. Another may be the fact that she asked him to buy shampoo specifically for frizzy hair. Finding the closest store for shampoo may be another reason. Looking for the least expensive shampoo may be yet another reason.

Now, even though these may be regarded as necessary causes for choosing the shampoo, none of them are sufficient for Terry to make the choice. For example, he may decide to drive to a different store from the one he first considered. After discovering three different types of shampoo for frizzy hair, he may decide to buy the most expensive brand. Or he might ignore his wife's request and buy shampoo for dry hair. Perhaps he feels constrained to make another choice because there are no shampoos for frizzy hair. Libertarianism says that Terry doesn't need to act on any of these reasons. For that matter, he could forget the shampoo and decide to buy spaghetti sauce instead. He is not chained to any particular choice for any particular decisive reason. Nothing is allowed to compel or determine the choice he makes.

Two points need to be made in light of this. First, libertarianism doesn't entail the idea that people can actually do *whatever* they want. The laws of nature constrain us. You can't lift a two-ton truck above your head. Standing in the open prairie won't stop that tornado from putting you into the next county. Furthermore, sometimes other forces hinder one's freedom. If your bank goes belly-up, you may not get your money back. You surely desire that pretty girl's attention, but she won't

give you the time of day. You strive to understand what a difficult Bible passage means, but ferreting out the complications overwhelms you. And may God forbid that you should be a captain of a freight ship off the coast of Somali when pirates kidnap you and hold you for ransom. Thus, there are occasions when freedom is constrained or denied altogether. In that case, some antecedent conditions such as these do have varying degrees of power to *determine* what choice a person makes. People are free only when they can escape these constraining conditions.

Second, libertarians affirm that a person's character and even circumstances generally indicate the sorts of choices that the person is likely to make. Terry is likely to choose based on the internal and external conditions that push him toward what is best. A girl whose life has been shaped by parents who taught her to remain chaste will likely choose to remain chaste in future situations. She has the option to rebel, of course, but that is less likely. In either case, she made the choices that led to the development of her chaste character in the first place. She could have resisted the outside influence of her parents, but she didn't. Now, even though choices are shaped by one's character, this doesn't limit such choices to only one option. A person who has a proclivity for acting horribly has many horrible options. Likewise, a person who is known for kindness has many kind options to freely choose from. Nonetheless, such a person could choose unkindness, and nothing prevents that from happening.

God's Providence and Our Freedom

How does this conception of free will relate to the Arminian view of God's providential power? Arminians embrace libertarian freedom, but they also affirm God's sovereignty. Arminian theologian Roger Olson says that God exercises sovereign control of events by means of his strong persuasion or influence. But he claims, "Free and rational creatures have the power to resist the influence of God. This power was given to them by God himself."¹⁹ The thrust of the libertarian

19. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 131; F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House, 2011), 47–51, 78–86.

argument here is simple. God cannot be in control of our choices while at the same time we are in control. Since it is intuitively obvious that we are in control of our choices, this rules out any notion that God controls what we do. This is not to say that God lacks the power to control our choices. It simply means that he doesn't, for the sake of maintaining our liberty.²⁰

This is especially true in the matter of salvation. Arminians claim that the influence of God is a *necessary condition* for a person to exercise saving faith. Leroy Forlines rejects the idea that “man can choose Christ without the aid of the Holy Spirit.” He says that “no matter how much or how strong the aid of the Holy Spirit may be, the ‘yes’ decision [to choose Christ] is still a decision that can be rightly called the person’s decision. Also, he could have said no.”²¹ In other words, although the influence of God’s grace is *necessary* for a person to make the choice of believing Christ for salvation, it is not *sufficient* for that choice to be made.²² God’s grace is critical for salvation in the Arminian view, but it cannot by itself guarantee that sinners will cooperate with it through their power of choosing. The notion of human cooperation with God indicates that salvation is synergistic, meaning “multiple agents (God and man) working (*ergon*) with (*syn-*) one another.”²³ This is in contrast with Calvinism, which teaches that salvation is monergistic, meaning “one (*mono-*) agent working (*ergon*).” In this case, salvation is solely the work of God’s grace.

This has important ramifications in other debates about salvation, sanctification, and eternal security. Classical Arminianism believes in the possibility of the loss of salvation. In order to procure salvation, a sinner must cooperate with God’s grace by exercising his free will. Furthermore, he must continue to persevere in that grace as a Christian. If at some point he fails to do so, he can experience the loss of his salvation. Again Forlines states, “While there is divine aid [grace] for

20. Some Arminians argue that on rare occasions God intervenes so as to disable, as it were, the libertarian freedom of his creatures in order to accomplish some important purpose. For example, some would argue that Pilate was not free to disallow the crucifixion of Jesus.

21. Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 52.

22. Paul Helm, “The Augustinian-Calvinist View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 169–70.

23. The Greek word *ergon* is the source of our word *energy*, which can also mean “work.”

the Christian it is possible for him to resist this aid and make wrong choices. Among these wrong choices is the possibility of turning back to unbelief.”²⁴

Freedom Is the Absence of Coercion

Libertarianism holds that only indeterminate choices can be free of coercion. If external influences were sufficient to determine a person’s choices, then those choices would be coerced, undermining freedom and responsibility. If we are to be free and responsible, then our choices must originate from our own autonomous power of willing unhindered by the force of any cause decisively directing us toward a particular choice. This doesn’t mean that some choices might not be coerced. As mentioned before, many forces constrain freedom. For example, during World War II, many Japanese prison-camp guards and officers exhibited violent psychopathic behavior that left many veterans of these prison camps to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For years after the war, flashbacks, nightmares, and the triggering of panic attacks (called *hyperarousal*) in which one suddenly relives the terror of his experiences became recurring plagues among these former POWs. They were unavoidable no matter how intensely the victims wished to resist them or make them go away.²⁵

Even positively compelling influences constrain the will if they cannot be overcome. Benjamin asks, “Should I marry Joanna or not?” What liberates Benjamin is the power of the will to choose either option—to marry or not to marry. If Benjamin decides to marry Joanna, he must be free to determine that choice unhindered by prior factors. Of course, he may choose to marry her because her beauty and intelligence overcome him. But freedom is enhanced if he marries her *ultimately* because he could have resisted the compelling power of her desirable qualities. If only one option presents itself as the compelling

24. Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 314. See also Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 211–32; Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 144–66.

25. See, for example, the story of the celebrated Olympian and World War II veteran Louis Zamperini in Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010).

choice, then it is not a choice at all. There must be equal alternative possibilities for a choice to be free and meaningful.

Biblical Support

In order to support this theory of free will, Christian libertarians appeal to the host of biblical passages that demand obedience to God's commands, invite responses to offers of blessing when the right choice is made, or warn of impending judgment when the wrong choice is made. When Joshua calls forth, "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15), he appears to assume the power of contrary choice. When Paul encourages financial stewardship among the believers at Corinth, he states, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). This statement suggests that options exist with our choices, and that the capacity to choose alternatives rests within our own self-determining power to will one choice or another. Furthermore, it suggests that if something other than our own power to will determined our choices, then we would be choosing under compulsion and not freely.

Contrary choice also appears to be present in the "whosoever will" texts that implore the indiscriminate masses of sinful human beings to place their faith in Christ for salvation.²⁶ The two quintessential verses in this regard come from the pen of the apostle John. In his Gospel he writes, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jerry Vines tells us that the Greek term for *whoever* (*pas*) is nonrestrictive. It demonstrates the possibility that "anyone . . . anywhere . . . anytime" has the power to believe. He claims, "To say otherwise is to make a travesty of this verse."²⁷ Revelation 3:20 pictures

26. Steve W. Lemke, "A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 122–27; Bruce R. Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power," in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 104.

27. Jerry Vines, "Sermon on John 3:16," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 24.

Christ as exhorting all within earshot: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If *anyone* hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”²⁸ For many, it would appear superfluous for Christ to make such an invitation unless we had libertarian freedom.

More importantly, why would God put forth these open invitations if he had already determined the outcome of all human actions? Libertarianism is unequivocal—God would not issue commands and conditional promises if he had already set the future in stone. Reichenbach notes, “Commands to act properly and sanctions imposed on improper conduct only make sense if humans have freedom. God places before us his obligations and at the same time has created us free to accept or reject them.”²⁹

We also read about people’s resisting God’s commands and desires for us. Stephen cries out in his final sermon before being stoned to death: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always *resist* the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51; cf. Isa. 63:10).³⁰ After the Israelites made the dreaded golden calf, God complained to Moses: “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a *stiff-necked* people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you’” (Ex. 32:9–10). Fearing God’s fierce retribution, Moses prays fervently that God would not act on his word. So powerful was Moses’ effect on God that we read: “And the LORD *relented* from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (32:14). This episode suggests that God does not determine all things and that the force of one’s freely exercised will can change God’s mind and the subsequent course of the future.

Consider how Jesus’ desires are thwarted by the resistance of the Jews when he laments: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have

28. See also Isa. 55:1; Jer. 33:3; Joel 2:32; Matt. 7:24; 10:32–33; Mark 16:15–16; John 4:13–14; 6:40; 7:37–38; 11:26; 12:46; Acts 2:21; 8:36–37; Rom. 9:33; 1 John 2:23; 4:15; Rev. 22:17.

29. Reichenbach, “God Limits His Power,” 104.

30. See also Pss. 78:10; 81:11–13; Matt. 23:37.

gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matt. 23:37). God does not always see his desires fulfilled. He is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), while at the same time he “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Libertarians argue that God never forces anyone to conform to his desires. They must come freely, and this means that God risks their rejection.

Another interesting passage of Scripture used to support libertarianism is 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul teaches, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” The assumption here is that in the midst of temptation, God helps us out by placing a detour in our path. On the one hand, we can succumb to the path of temptation, or we can take the alternative route that God graciously provides. It is up to us which choice we make.

From passages such as these, it is argued that the Bible presupposes libertarian free will; otherwise, they lose their force. C. S. Lewis asked the perennial question: Why would God make his creatures this way? “Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like little machines—would hardly be worth creating.”³¹ Furthermore, in order to maintain such a world, God must purposely limit his sovereignty, intervening only when absolutely necessary.

What are we to make of libertarianism? Is it really the best way to make sense of how God created us and interacts with us? We will consider these questions in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

Libertarianism teaches that free will is incompatible with God’s meticulously determining all things, because this undermines human

31. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 49.

freedom and responsibility. It posits that one has the ability to choose contrary to any prior factors that influence (but don't sufficiently determine) our choices, including external circumstances, our motives, our desires, and, of course, God himself. If divine determinism is true, then human freedom and responsibility are hindered. Choices are self-determined. We are the unmoved movers of our own actions. Our choices can go in alternative directions. Given exactly the same past conditions, different futures could result if we could choose again. God exercises his sovereign control so as not to interfere with this notion of free will. Libertarians believe that the Bible presupposes such free will when it issues commands that include blessings for obedience and consequences for disobedience.

Glossary

contrary choice. A basic idea in *libertarianism* that humans can always choose contrary to any prior influences that might direct their choices. Given exactly the same set of circumstances, no particular choice or outcome is guaranteed.

determinism. The idea that all events and human choices are necessarily and causally determined by prior conditions. The world operates in a definitive cause-effect reality. Calvinists believe that God's sovereignty is deterministic and stands behind all that transpires in the world. Arminians deny that God's sovereignty is deterministic. See also *divine sovereignty* and *hard determinism*.

hard determinism. The concept that all human choices are necessarily determined by prior conditions, which may include God's sovereignty. Hard determinists believe that human freedom is incompatible with *determinism* and that it is therefore an illusion. Some hard determinists reject *moral responsibility*, while others say that human freedom is not necessary for responsibility. See also *hyper-Calvinism*.

hyper-Calvinism. A deviant form of *Calvinism* that denies any human freedom or *moral responsibility*, usually with respect to matters of faith and repentance. Hyper-Calvinists embrace *hard determinism* and discourage open invitations to sinners to believe on Christ for salvation. God's love is restricted only to the elect.

incompatibilism. The idea that human freedom is incompatible with *determinism*. *Hard determinism* and *libertarianism* are incompatibilist views. Hard determinists believe that every human choice is determined and that this is incompatible with human freedom, which is an illusion. Libertarians say that human choices are free and that this is incompatible with determinism of any kind.

monergism. In *Calvinism*, the idea that salvation is the result of “one (*mono-*) agent working (*ergon*).” In this case, salvation is solely the work of God’s grace. See also *synergism*.

necessary condition. A prior condition that is necessary in order for something to come about. While something may be necessary in order to bring about a particular outcome, it may not be sufficient. Gasoline is necessary for a car to run, but it is not sufficient, since other conditions are also necessary. See also *sufficient condition*.

self-determining choice. The idea in *libertarianism* that choices are self-determined or self-caused. Nothing outside the person making the choice can be the decisive cause for choices made. Humans are the sole originators of their own choices.

soft determinism. Another name for *compatibilism*, the idea that choices are necessarily determined, yet compatible with human freedom and responsibility.

sufficient condition. A prior condition that is sufficient in order for something to come about. While something may be sufficient in order to bring about a particular outcome, it may not be necessary. A rainstorm may be sufficient to wet a lawn, but it is not necessary. Gasoline can wet a lawn as well. See also *necessary condition*.

synergism. In *Arminianism*, the idea that salvation is the result of “multiple agents (God and man) working (*ergon*) with (*syn-*) one another.” Humans must cooperate with God’s grace in order to be saved. See also *monergism*.

Study Questions

1. Without consideration to what the book says, how would you define *free will* for human beings? What does it mean to make free choices?
2. What is the meaning of *determinism*?

3. What is the difference between incompatibilist and compatibilist theories regarding determinism and ideas about human freedom and responsibility?
4. What is *hard determinism*?
5. *Soft determinism* is another name for what?
6. What two fundamental ideas does libertarianism teach?
7. What is the difference between a *necessary condition* and a *sufficient condition*? Provide your own examples of each.
8. Given that the same past conditions exist, will the future always be the same? Why or why not?
9. What do Christian libertarians believe about God's determination of human choices? Does God have limited power to control the future? Does God impose self-limitations on his power?
10. What does libertarianism believe about the relationship between choices that are determined and the idea of coercion? Do you agree with this assessment?
11. Does the Bible support libertarian freedom? Why or why not?

Resources for Further Study

- Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 226–41. Good overview of the free-will debate from a Calvinist perspective.
- Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Good overview of the free-will debate from a secular perspective.
- J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 265–83. Good overview of the free-will debate from an Arminian perspective.
- Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). One of the better defenses of Arminianism and libertarian freedom.
- Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). A popular defense of Arminianism and libertarianism.

MOST SAY THAT IF GOD WERE ABSOLUTELY SOVEREIGN, HUMAN BEINGS WOULD BE INCAPABLE OF FREE AND RESPONSIBLE CHOICES. BUT IS THIS WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS?

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