

Divine Sovereignty AND Human Responsibility

a survey of ideas and a plea for biblical unity



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Introduction – why does it matter?

Issues surrounding divine sovereignty and human freedom have been major considerations for Christians for at least the past five centuries and arguably longer. The mere mention of the word “predestination” sends shivers down the spines of many sincere Christians, while the same word seems to rouse the passions of others. Doctrinal disputes have led to divisions between Christians and the drawing of denominational lines. Many believers struggle even to understand the terms that some use freely, while others seem to want to talk about little other than election and predestination. In recent years there has been a resurgence in interest in these issues, and in particular many enthusiastic young Christians have been attracted to Calvinism through the teaching of influential preachers and writers. This development causes a certain degree of unease amongst other believers who feel that it often leads to an unhealthy dogmatism and threatens broader evangelical unity. The apprehension is greatest when presentations of the “gospel” assume a particular perspective on an issue that is disputed (for example, irresistible grace or imputed righteousness), especially if there is no acknowledgement that there is an alternative view held by sincere believers within the evangelical camp. Is this an attempt to redefine orthodoxy or at least the boundaries of evangelical belief? Are Arminians and others who are not convinced Calvinists theologically uniformed, biblically illiterate or, worse still, heretical? Can there be an open and serious debate around these issues without a descent into hostility and the kind of division that has all too often characterised this issue?

This article is not intended to present a theology of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I apologise if that is what you expected to find, but I really don't think the world needs another systematised theological formulation in this area and I doubt if I could provide one in any case! Rather my intention is to summarise the key issues surrounding these aspects of belief in way that informs the reader without overloading them with too much information and that allows the reader to reach his or her own conclusions. If at times I stray into a personal stance on these matters, with the obvious exception of my plea in the “Conclusion”, then I apologise. Clearly these are issues of such significance in the history of theology and with such significant areas of difference that it is difficult to discuss them without at least appearing to take a certain stance. In reality I do have my own perspective on these matters, for which I make no apology even if I choose not to present it in this article, and this may at times be apparent to the discerning reader. What would, however, necessitate an apology is if I have misrepresented the views of others, an issue that has plagued debates surrounding this topic. I can only apologise sincerely if I have done so and request that the reader enlighten me so that I can amend future editions of the article.

How, then, will I approach this endeavour? Firstly I will attempt to outline the main perspectives within Christian thinking on the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. I will discuss these in prose form and then present a table summarising them in a more visual format. Having laid this foundation I will attempt to provide a brief overview of the historical development of the two perspectives that have dominated evangelical thought, namely Calvinism and Arminianism before outlining the areas where these two theological systems agree and differ as well as some of the differences within both camps. Having done that, I will outline the main ways in which God's foreknowledge has been understood by Christian thinkers, since this question is central to theories about sovereignty and responsibility. I will then list the key Bible passages that tend to be referenced in writings on these matters and that should, therefore, be studied by those who wish to come to their own view. In that section I include some questions to ask as these passages are studied. Next I will consider a passage that is of particular importance, namely Romans 9-11, before considering what the references to a man called Hymenaeus in Paul's two letters to Timothy can tell us about a pastoral approach to these issues. Finally I will make a personal plea for a way forward in unity. At the end of the article you will find three sections that are intended to help your understanding of this article and to guide you in further study. Firstly, a glossary of key terms for ready reference, secondly, some suggested further reading, and ,thirdly, a template for a group study session to help small groups or groups of leaders to think around the issues.

I hope you find this article helpful and worthwhile. If you have any feedback or notice any mistakes, please let me know by email to paul@paulcoulter.net. Thank you, and may you know God's joy and peace as you live for Him!

Where do we begin? – understanding the issues

The pieces in the jigsaw

Bruce Reichenbach has helpfully identified six “pieces of the puzzle” surrounding the subject of this article: human freedom, God’s sovereignty, God’s omnipotence, God’s omniscience, God’s relation to time, and the nature of God’s involvement in human affairs (providence).¹ This list is helpful because it shows the complexity of the issue and provides a framework through which different perspectives can be described and differentiated. Let us consider each of these in turn, although in a different order from Reichenbach’s list.

Firstly, **God’s sovereignty**. Christians have historically been united in their belief that God is sovereign and, indeed, this is a fundamental biblical theme. By sovereignty we mean God’s ability and right to rule over his creation, which arises from the fact that he created it from nothing and that he alone is eternally existent and self-sufficient. He is not dependent upon anyone or anything for his own existence and the nature of the created universe arose from the way in which he chose to create it. In this choice he was unconstrained by anyone or anything. God, therefore, possesses a truly free will. Two ideas that are closely related to God’s sovereignty are his omnipotence and his omniscience.

God’s omnipotence means his power to do whatever he wills. Of course, it does not mean that God can do absolutely anything he chooses to do as he cannot act in a way that is inconsistent with his nature and character. God is, however, “all powerful” in the sense that he is free to act according to His will in any way that is consistent with His nature and with His prior decisions about reality and that He possesses the necessary power to make His will happen. At this point we must mention a view that does not accept this definition of God’s power, namely *process theology*.

God’s omniscience means his perfect knowledge of all things, past, present and future. It, therefore, includes the concept of foreknowledge. The diversity of opinions on divine foreknowledge is such that a later section of this article is devoted to discussing the main perspectives. We must note at this point, however, that the school of thought known as *Open Theism* does not accept this definition of God’s omniscience.

God’s relation to time is a fourth piece in the jigsaw. The key question around God’s relation to time is whether God exists within time or external to it. Some theologians argue that God cannot be constrained by time (He is atemporal) and that every moment is therefore simultaneously present for him while others claim that this kind of thinking is not in keeping with the biblical evidence and entered Christian thinking from Greek philosophy. Since this question has a bearing on our understanding of foreknowledge we will return to it in the section of this article on that theme.

God’s providence refers to the way in which he guides and cares for his creation. The key question here is how he exercises his sovereignty and, in particular, his omnipotence. Does He exercises his sovereign power to the full by determining everything that will happen (determinism) or does he choose to limit the exercise of his power by allowing some of his creatures (specifically human beings) to have the freedom to make decisions that actually decide issues (a non-deterministic view). The difference between these two views of providence separates the *Augustinian-Calvinist* and *Arminian* perspectives. In both cases there is agreement that God’s providence means that the ultimate outcome for the universe is certain and that God’s ultimate purpose will be fulfilled – the division is over how people are included or excluded from it.

Finally we can consider **human freedom**. Free will can be defined as the kind of freedom to choose that makes us morally responsible for our actions (notice that the term does not imply, as it may appear to suggest, that human choices can ever be completely free from limitation or influence). The majority of Christians accept that Bible implicitly teaches that human beings have free will in this sense, although *Hypercalvinists* would disagree. The *Augustinian-Calvinist* and *Arminian* perspectives are divided, however, over the implications of this freedom. The former takes a compatibilist view of free will since it holds that free will is compatible with a deterministic view of God’s providence. This view of free will believes that human beings can be morally responsible even though there was no possibility of the individual making a different choice. *Arminianism* takes a libertarian view of free will since it holds that free will is not compatible with a deterministic view of God’s providence. This understanding of free will maintains that it must include the freedom to make an alternative choice and the control to choose without being constrained by any external factors to make one particular choice

¹ Reichenbach, B. 1986, ‘God Limits His Power’ in Basinger D. and Basinger R. (eds), *Predestination and Free Will: four views of divine sovereignty and human freedom* (IVP), p.102.

Other related theological issues

There are a few other issues that tend to be related to these six core pieces of the jigsaw:

- The nature of God's grace** – because *Calvinists* believe that God actively determined all things and that He chose those who would be saved based on nothing he foresaw in them they logically conclude that God's grace must only be shown to the elect (otherwise it would be wasted). In fact, they argue, God's grace is irresistible so that anyone to whom God's grace is shown will and must be saved (this idea is also known as 'efficacious grace'). Verses from John 6 that speak about God's 'drawing' of people (v37, 44, 65) are the usual scriptures offered in support of this view. *Arminians* dispute this reading of John 6, claiming that John 12:32 shows that it must be possible to resist this drawing otherwise all will be saved (although *Calvinists* claim that verse means all kinds of people, rather than all people without exception) and pointing to examples of people who apparently resisted God's Spirit (Acts 7:51) and rejected His plan for them (Luke 7:30). *Arminians* point to Titus 2:11, which speaks of God's grace being shown to all people, and argue that 'prevenient grace' (or 'preceding grace') has been shown by God to all people, overcoming the effects of sin to a degree that allows the individual to decide. *Calvinists* agree that God's grace has been shown in some way to all people (they call this "common grace" and argue that it is the basis of any good thing a non-believer possesses and any good thing they do) but that this is distinct from efficacious grace which is shown only to the elect.
- The meaning of saving faith** – *Calvinists* see saving faith as a gift granted by God only to the elect. They quote Ephesians 2:8 in support of this view. *Arminians* understand saving faith to be nothing more than a decision of the will to accept God's gracious offer of salvation. They claim that the gift in Ephesians 2:8 is salvation, not faith. *Calvinists* often accuse *Arminians* of adding a human 'work' as a basis for salvation while Paul denies that works are involved – they feel that the *Arminian* view makes human beings partly responsible for their own salvation. *Arminians* counter that their understanding of faith is that it is not a work at all – they liken it to an open hand held out to receive a gift – and that it is only possible for people to exercise faith because God has first shown them His grace.
- The order of salvation** – many *Calvinists* claim that regeneration (the new birth) must happen prior to the exercise of faith. They argue that spiritually dead people (as Ephesians 2:1 says we were) cannot exercise saving faith, therefore God must regenerate us before we can respond to His grace in faith. *Arminians* argue that there is no clear scriptural basis for this suggestion and that regeneration occurs after the individual has responded to God's grace in faith.
- God's intention regarding salvation** – *Arminians* frequently point to Bible verses that apparently speak of God's desire that all people would repent and be saved (2 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 are key texts) as proof for their view that God's desire is that as many people as possible should be saved (God's salvific intent is universal) and so therefore he has given the real possibility of salvation to all people, who are free to respond in faith to his prevenient grace. They also point to verses that speak of God's love for all people and the universal appeal of the gospel for further support of their position. *Calvinists* disagree, claiming that God's salvific intent is limited to the elect. They distinguish between God's revealed will, which says that he wants all to be saved, and His secret or actual will, which says that only the elect should be saved. This distinction rests on a discrimination between God's 'will of disposition', meaning what God desires or what is pleasing to him (which is that all should be saved), and his directive will, meaning what he directs to happen (that the elect should be saved). They accept that God loves all people but draw a distinction between this love and his special love for the elect, which is like the love of a husband for his wife and therefore excludes those who are not elect. They accept that the appeal of the gospel should be universal (that is that preaching should call all people to repent and believe) since the preacher does not know who is elect and proclamation is the means that God has ordained through which to draw people to Himself, although only the elect can and will respond to the appeal.
- The scope of Christ's death** – *Arminians* claim that Christ died for everyone and that His death has made possible the salvation of all who will believe in Him. Some *Calvinists* agree that Christ's death was for all people (known as *Amyraldians*), but many argue that this is not possible. Their reasoning is that if Christ died for all but only the elect will be saved then his death did not truly accomplish anything – it is faith or lack of it that saves. If God elected some people unconditionally to be saved then it is logical that he should have restricted the scope of Christ's death only to the elect. This view is commonly called 'limited atonement', although many proponents prefer the term 'particular redemption'. Those who hold it often claim that it is necessary for belief in the penal substitution theory of the atonement (that Christ took God's punishment for sin in our place), but four-point *Calvinists* (*Amyraldians*) and many *Arminians* also accept this understanding of the cross whilst rejecting particular redemption.

Where does the line of orthodoxy fall?

In the table in the next section I have suggested that *process theology* (the view that God cannot decide any matters in the universe directly and can only operate to accomplish his will indirectly through influencing other free agents) and *fatalism* (the idea that God Himself is restricted to acting in certain ways and cannot be separated from the operation of the universe) fall outside the realms of Christian orthodoxy, since both limit God's sovereignty. Other theologians may claim that *Hypercalvinism* and *Open Theism* also fall outside orthodoxy.

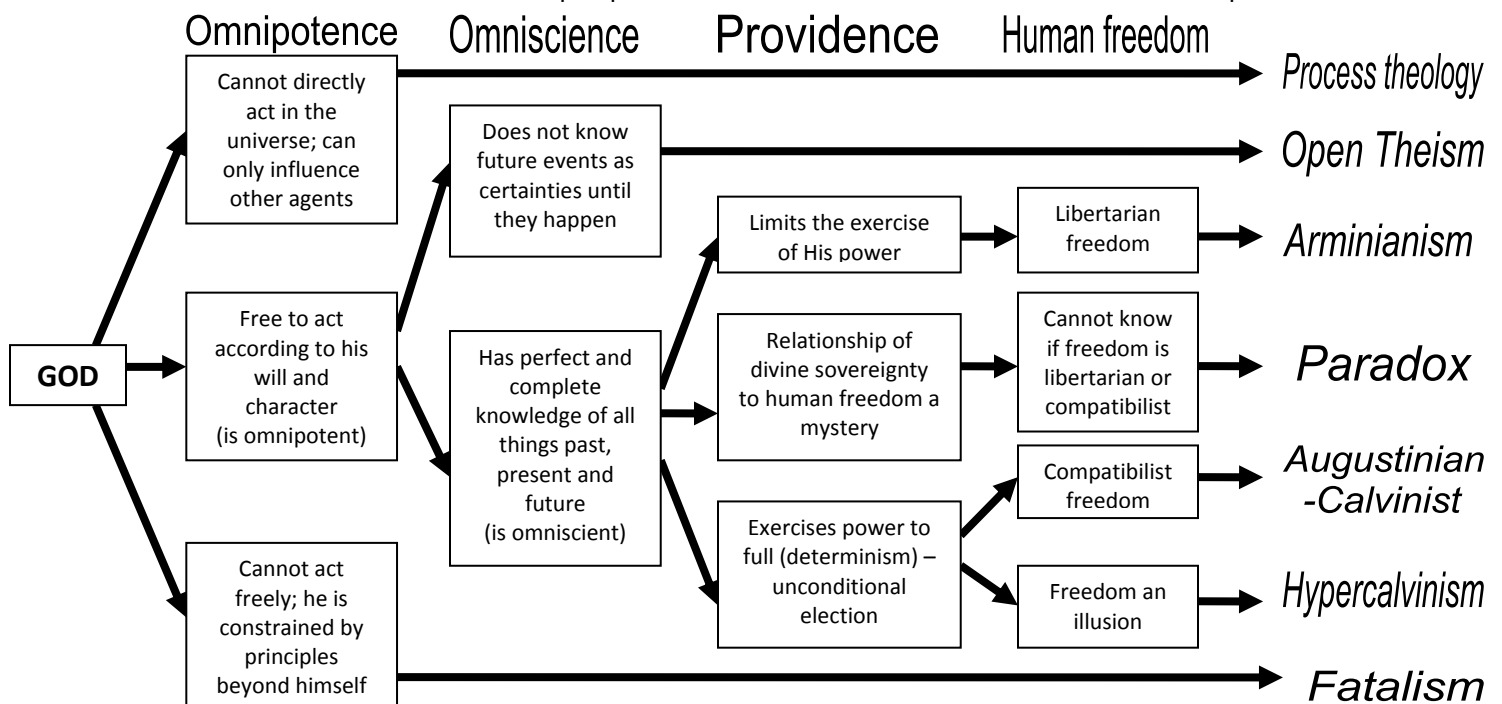
Should we even be having this debate?

Philosopher David Ciochi writes about three reasons why people have traditionally suggested that the debate about divine sovereignty and human freedom should not be entered into:²

1. *It should be rejected because it is impious* – the claim is that any attempt to reason towards a solution to the problem is intellectual pride. Ciochi points out, however, that the decision not to use our reason to address the issues is itself a use of reason and that the debate may be motivated by a genuine desire to know God more.
2. *It should be rejected because it is futile* – the claim is that the two concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom exist in Scripture as a paradox that cannot be resolved (similar to the facts that God is three and one and that Christ is both God and man). This view is held by many Christians and, although Ciochi is confident that it is unsustainable, his arguments against it are weak and unclear.
3. *It should be suspended because we can never know what kind of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility* – this is Ciochi's own proposal. He claims that a sound case can be made for both compatibilist and libertarian views of free will and that the scriptural evidence cannot lead to a conclusion in favour of one view over the other (e.g. 2 Corinthians 8:16-17 could be read in either way). Proponents of both views claim that their definition of free will is sufficient to make human beings morally responsible. Since this cannot be resolved we should suspend the debate until consensus is reached over this issue. Even if we reject Ciochi's conclusion that the debate should be suspended and that the true meaning of free will cannot be decided, he does helpfully emphasise that this issue is central to the debate.

What are the main perspectives?

The flow chart below identifies the different perspectives on this issue. The table in the next section provides more detail.



² Ciochi, David M. 2008, "Suspending the Debate About Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 51(3):573-90

Overview of Perspectives on God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom

Fatalism	Deterministic		Mystery	Non-deterministic		“Process theology”
<i>All things, including God’s actions, are determined – God could not have created any other universe than the one that exists</i>	God determines all things		God determines all things People are free to choose	God does not determine all things People are free to choose		<i>God cannot be separated from the universe – He contains the universe and is changeable in response to it. He cannot cause any action directly but can only exercise influence.</i>
God’s sovereignty compromised	People have no freedom to choose	People are free to choose although they could not have chosen otherwise (they are influenced, not coerced)	Often suggest that the mystery lies in God being atemporal (outside time) – His foreknowledge would then be contemporaneous with human choices	God limits the exercise of His power – He chose to create a world in which human beings have freedom to determine some outcomes	God limits His knowledge – he chose to create a world in which He does not know future events until they happen	God’s sovereignty compromised
	Hypercalvinism	Augustinian-Calvinist	Paradox	Simple foreknowledge (classical Arminianism)	Open Theism	
	Predestination / election means that God chose some individuals to be saved (and, for hypercalvinists and some Calvinists, others to be lost) on the basis of nothing but His sovereign will. Saving faith is a gift from God.		Predestination / election means that God chooses people and sees their response simultaneously	Predestination / election means that God chose to save those who believe in Christ and persevere in faith. Saving faith is a response of the individual to God’s grace that simply accepts His gift of life with open hands.		
	Foreknowledge is effectively synonymous with election – it means that God set His love on those individuals He chose for salvation		Foreknowledge means that God sees all future events as present	Foreknowledge means that God knows who will respond in faith	Foreknowledge is God’s love in advance for His corporate people	
God’s sovereignty means that he was free to create the world as it is but that He could have created it differently (although the world as it exists is an expression of His perfect wisdom) and that His ultimate purpose of bringing a people to salvation must be fulfilled.						

Orthodoxy

Historical Development of Calvinism and Arminianism

Early church fathers

The earliest Christians did not attempt to formulate a systematic theory of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. In his book *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Calvinist author Loraine Boettner wrote:

the doctrine of Predestination was not made a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century ... They of course taught that salvation was through Christ; yet they assumed that man had full power to accept or reject the gospel. Some of their writings contain passages in which the sovereignty of God is recognized; yet along side of these are others which teach the absolute freedom of the human will ... They taught a kind of synergism in which there was a cooperation between grace and free will.

Origen (185-254), for example, taught that election meant God's choice of those He knew would one day choose Him.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) – bishop of the church in Hippo Regius in northern Africa (modern Algeria)

Augustine responded to the teachings of a British monk called Pelagius (c.354-420), who denied the concept of original sin, taught that the human will is entirely free, that grace simply means God teaching us what is right and wrong (God's grace is therefore helpful but not essential for salvation), and that salvation is based on merit. By contrast, Augustine taught that human beings do have "free will", but that it is heavily biased towards sin and captive to sin. Human beings are born with original sin and we are therefore totally depraved, meaning that sin has corrupted every part of our being so completely that we are rendered incapable of responding to God without His grace. Augustine emphasised that grace is God's free unmerited favour towards mankind and that salvation is by grace received through faith. His emphasis on grace as a gift, not a reward, led him to claim that for grace to be a gift God must be able to give or to withhold it. Grace, therefore, is particular (i.e. only given to some individuals) rather than universal. The end conclusion from Augustine's idea of particular grace was that some people are elected by God for salvation. Augustine said that the remainder are not actively chosen for damnation; they are simply not chosen for salvation.

Second Council of Orange (529)

This gathering of church leaders in the city of Orange (in southern France) was the most significant of a number of synods which considered the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius. It rejected the Pelagian heresy but did not fully support Augustine's understanding of predestination. It said that grace is not irresistible and that condemnation results from the individual's resistance to God's grace.

John Calvin (1509-1564) and Theodore Beza (1519-1605) – Protestant church leaders in Geneva, Switzerland

The association of Calvin's name with the theological system of *Calvinism* has led to a false belief that he placed predestination at the foundation of his theology. In fact, he was more concerned with a correct understanding of grace and justification through faith alone and his theological writings follow a pattern of biblical study rather than a systematic theological theory. He did, however, follow Augustine in his ideas about predestination, describing it as:

the eternal decree of God, by which he determined what he wished to make of every person. For he does not create everyone in the same condition, but ordains eternal life for some and eternal damnation for others.

Calvin was in firm agreement with Augustine in the concepts of total depravity and unconditional election, and he also clearly taught that God's grace was irresistible. He was less equivocal on the question of whether Christ died for all people or only for the elect (limited atonement), and some of his writings have been interpreted as suggesting that it may be possible for believers to lose their salvation, although other scholars suggest that Calvin did hold to a firm concept of the perseverance of the saints and that he was simply distinguishing between true believers and those who made a false profession of faith but whose lack of perseverance proved their faith not to be genuine.

After Calvin's death, his successor, Theodore Beza, produced a systematic theology in which his starting point was God's unconditional decree of election to salvation and to damnation (i.e. a supralapsarian Calvinist view). Everything else in theology flowed from this decree of God, with the result that his conception of reality was highly deterministic.

The Belgic Confession (1566)

In 1561, a Dutch Calvinist preacher named Guido de Bres drafted a confession that summarised his understanding of the Reformed faith. It was revised at a synod in Antwerp in 1566 and gained influence among many of the Dutch Reformed churches. This confession remains an important document for many Calvinist denominations today.

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) – Protestant professor of theology in Leiden, the Netherlands

Having studied for a period of time under Beza in Geneva, Arminius later reacted against aspects of Beza's theology and the Belgic Confession. He rejected a deterministic view of reality, focusing instead on God's perfect knowledge of the future. He concluded that election for salvation is not unconditional, but depends on God's knowledge that these individuals would

respond to Him in faith. God's grace was available to all (in fact it was essential for anyone to believe in Him) and could be resisted. Arminius also rejected the idea that Christ died only for the elect.

The Quinquarticular Controversy – The Remonstrance (1610) and the Synod of Dort (1618-19)

The ideas of Arminius and Beza became the subject of debate within the Dutch Reformed church, leading to two important statements that clarified five distinctive points on which their theology varied. This debate is known as the quinquarticular controversy as this term relates to five points. After his death, supporters of Arminius's views decided to state their objections to the theology of the Belgic Confession to the rulers of the Netherlands. The resulting document was called the *Remonstrance*, and those who produced it became known as Remonstrants. The Dutch ruling body called for a synod to be held in Dordrecht (also known as Dort) in response. At least in part due to political interference, the Synod of Dort was dominated by "Contra-Remonstrants", who held to the ideas of the Belgic Confession, with the result that it took a clear Calvinist line. The following tables outline the distinctive positions of the two documents on the five disputed matters. The five disputed points have been re-ordered to follow the pattern of the well-known 20th century acronym TULIP.

Arminianism – <i>The Remonstrance</i> (1610)
Article 3 – that sinful man cannot think, will or do anything good unless he is born again and renewed by the Holy Spirit in understanding, inclination and will.
Article 1 – God determined before creation to save those who will believe in Jesus and persevere in the faith and to leave the "incorrigible and unbelieving" in their sin and subject to His wrath.
Article 2 – Christ died for all men and every man, but only believers receive forgiveness and redemption on the basis of his death.
Article 4 – that man needs God's grace for any good thought, will or deed, but that this grace can be resisted.
Article 5 – believers have power to overcome and persevere, and no external power can cause them to lose their salvation, but it cannot be dogmatically shown from Scripture that it is impossible for a person to lose their salvation by forsaking their own faith.

Calvinism – <i>The Synod of Dort</i> (1618-19)
Total depravity – sinful human nature is totally corrupted by sin.
Unconditional election – people are not predestined for salvation on the basis of any foreseen merit, quality of achievement.
Limited atonement – Christ died only for the elect. [<i>"Particular redemption" is preferred by some Calvinists</i>]
Irresistible grace – the elect are infallibly called and redeemed by God's grace. [<i>many Calvinists prefer the term "effectual calling"</i>]
Perseverance of the saints – those who are truly predestined by God cannot in any way defect from that calling.

Moses Amyraut (1596–1664) – French Protestant theologian

Amyraut (also known by the Latin version of his name, Amyraldus) could not accept the idea of limited atonement. Although he held to the Calvinist ideas of total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints, he did not believe that Christ's death was only for the elect. His view is often called Amyraldism, or four-point Calvinism.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

This document was produced by an assembly of the Church of England at a time when it was heavily influenced by Calvinism (during the Puritan period). About God's sovereignty it says: "*God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass*". About predestination it says: "*By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death*". This confession is subscribed to by most Presbyterian denominations.

John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770)

Wesley and Whitefield were leading lights of the evangelical revival that swept through the British Isles in the 18th century. Both were gifted preachers and saw many conversions but, although they were firm friends, they were diametrically opposed on issues relating to predestination. Wesley held Arminian convictions. He believed in total depravity but rejected the ideas of unconditional election and irresistible grace and maintained that it is possible for believers to lose their salvation. Whitefield held to a classical Calvinist position. Although at one stage the relationship between these two men was strained because of their difference of views in these matters, they were later reconciled and maintained a high regard for one another over many years until Whitefield's death.

Denominational distinctives

The Arminianism/Calvinism debate has been influential within Protestantism, with many denominations taking an official stance. Methodists, Pentecostals and most Charismatic churches are Arminian, while Presbyterians and Reformed Churches are Calvinist. There is diversity of opinion amongst Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists and non-denominational churches.

Arminianism and Calvinism – agreement and differences

Of the positions on divine sovereignty and human freedom detailed in the earlier table, three have dominated among evangelicals: the paradox position, Arminianism and Calvinism. The following table is intended to summarise the areas of agreement and disagreement between Arminians and Calvinists regarding key theological concepts. It is neither exhaustive (some other aspects of theology tend to be connected, for example Covenant Theology and beliefs about the church and baptism) nor definitive (many believers would not fit neatly into either column). The degree to which Calvinism and Arminianism divide us depends on the degree to which we see the differences in this table as core gospel issues.

	Arminianism	Calvinism
God's Sovereignty	That God is all-powerful and the nature of reality has been determined by his sovereign will.	
	That within God's sovereign rule he has allowed human beings a degree of libertarian freedom, including the ability to choose to reject Him.	That God has exercised his sovereignty to its full extent by determining everything that will happen. Human freedom is compatibilist.
God's Foreknowledge	That God has perfect knowledge of all things, past, present and future.	
	That God's inclusion of individuals in the elect is on the basis of his foreknowledge that they would exercise their freedom to choose by repenting and believing.	That God's foreknowledge of who would be saved is because he has already decided who will be saved. Foreknowledge is seen as synonymous with election.
Election	That God, because of his mercy and grace, has chosen to save people.	
	That God decided that a group of people would be saved and that all who repent, believe and persevere in the faith will be included in it.	That God chose individuals to be saved based purely on his own choice and not on anything he foresaw in them.
Predestination	That God has predetermined that believers in Christ will not be condemned but will have eternal life.	
	That God has predestined that all who repent, believe and persevere in the faith will be saved.	That God has predestined some individuals to be saved and receive eternal life.
Total depravity	That all human beings are sinners and that sin has damaged our nature so that we are incapable of thinking or doing good without the grace of God.	
	That fallen human beings are able to choose whether or not to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith because of God's prevenient grace.	That fallen human beings are incapable even of responding to the gospel in repentance, and that only the elect are enabled by God to respond.
God's grace	That it is only by a free gift of God's grace that we can be saved, and that this grace is received through faith alone, not earned by works.	
	That God's prevenient grace is shown to all people, but that it can be resisted. Human beings exercise a choice whether to repent and believe or not.	That God's grace cannot be resisted and is only shown to the elect. Saving faith is itself a free gift from God that is given to the elect.
The atonement	That Christ's death is the atoning sacrifice for sins and the only basis on which God can forgive sins. It is untrue to say, as some do, that <i>Arminians</i> do not accept the penal substitution explanation of the atonement. Although this explanation of the cross is probably more uniformly believed by <i>Calvinists</i> , it is also accepted by many <i>Arminians</i> .	
	That Christ died for all people, although only those who believe receive the benefits of his sacrifice.	That Christ died only for the elect. "Four point" Calvinists do not accept this point.
Eternal security	That it is impossible for Satan or any other power to cause a believer to lose their salvation.	
	Some (but not all) Arminians believe that it may be possible for believers to walk away from their own faith.	That it is impossible for a person who is truly one of the elect to lose their salvation under any circumstances.
Perseverance	That God is able to empower those who believe in Him to persevere in their faith.	
	That perseverance may depend on the individual continuing to walk in relationship with Christ and faithfulness to the truth.	That perseverance is evidence of election, and that those who are truly members of the elect will persevere.

It is hoped that the reader will recognise the significant areas of agreement between both camps in each area. This table may also help to avoid unfair accusations that sometimes surface in the debate between the two perspectives, including:

- *Arminians deny God's sovereignty* – in fact they believe that God is completely sovereign but that He chose to exercise His sovereignty in a restricted way by creating people who are free to choose to accept or reject Him.
- *Calvinists believe that people have no free will* – most will argue that humans are free to choose how they respond to God, although they could not do otherwise (there is a difference of definition of “free will” between the two camps).
- *Arminians reject penal substitutionary atonement* – although there is a diversity of opinion among Arminians as to this view of the cross, which finds almost unanimous support among Calvinists, many Arminians do affirm it.
- *Calvinism undermines the basis for mission* – most Calvinists would strongly deny this (they argue that since only God knows who is elect the gospel should be preached to all with a universal call to respond) and, in fact, church history shows that Calvinists have often been passionately committed to evangelism and world mission.
- *Arminians do not believe in predestination* – they do, although they reject the idea of unconditional election, seeing predestination as based on God's foreknowledge of faith.
- *Calvinists alone value God's grace* – some Calvinists speak of Calvinism as the “doctrines of grace”, implying that Arminians are not so fully committed to grace. Arminians believe that salvation is wholly dependent upon God's grace and through faith alone. Where they differ from Calvinists is that they understand saving faith to be simply an open-handed reception of God's gracious provision, whereas Calvinists describe this faith itself as a gift from God.

Perhaps the key difference between these two theological systems is a definitive stance as to what aspect of God's nature is predominant in theology. Calvinists begin with God's sovereign power and claim that He is only glorified to the full if He exercises His sovereignty to the full in determining all things. Arminians argue that God's love is the defining quality of His nature and that His love for all people is incompatible with a deterministic view of predestination and election.

Diversity of views within Arminianism

Within classical Arminianism (excluding Open Theism, which differs in its view of God's foreknowledge) there are two main significant areas of difference:

- a) *Eternal security* – Arminians have always been divided over whether a true believer can become apostate, rejecting their faith and so falling from grace. This diversity of view is even reflected in Article 5 of the *Remonstrance*.
- b) *Corporate or individual election?* – some Arminians (following Arminius himself) agree with Calvinists that predestination and election operated at the level of individuals (i.e. God chose certain individuals for salvation on the basis of His foreknowledge that they would believe). Others think of election and predestination as a corporate affair (i.e. God chose to save a group of people and fore-ordained that all who repent and believe in Christ would be included in this group).

Diversity of views within Calvinism

Calvinists are united in their belief that God unconditionally elected individuals for salvation. Some hold to “double predestination”, meaning that God also predestined those who would be lost for condemnation. Although Calvinists are all determinists, meaning that they believe that God has pre-determined all that will happen in our universe, there is a difference of opinion over whether this precludes any idea of human free will (the “hypercalvinist” position) or whether it is still possible to speak of human beings having freedom of will (the Augustinian-Calvinist position). The later view maintains that people are free so long as they are not coerced to act in a certain way. Those who hold it believe that God achieves His purpose not by forcing people to obey but by influencing the factors affecting their decision in such a way that they could not have chosen otherwise.

The other major difference of opinion amongst Calvinists depends on different understandings of the logical order of God's decrees concerning his world (five of these decrees are identified by Calvinist theologians). It is important to emphasise that the difference is not as to when these decrees were made (all are agreed that every decree was made before the creation of the world) but over the logical ordering of the decrees in the mind of God. There are four main positions:

Amyraldian (4-point Calvinism)	Infralapsarian ("after the fall")	Supralapsarian ("before the fall")	Alternative Supralapsarian view
1. Decree to create the world and all people	1. Decree to create the world and all people	1. Election of some people to salvation in Christ	1. Election of some people to salvation in Christ
2. Decree that all people would fall in sin	2. Decree that all people would fall in sin	2. Decree to create the world and all people	2. Decree to apply Christ's redemption to the elect
3. Decree to redeem (all) people by the cross	3. Election of some fallen people to salvation in Christ	3. Decree that all people would fall in sin	3. Decree to redeem the elect by the cross
4. Election of some fallen people to salvation in Christ	4. Decree to redeem the elect by the cross	4. Decree to redeem the elect by the cross	4. Decree that all people would fall in sin
5. Decree to apply Christ's redemption to the elect	5. Decree to apply Christ's redemption to the elect	5. Decree to apply Christ's redemption to the elect	5. Decree to create the world and all people

Theories of God's Foreknowledge

One of the key factors in different views of God's sovereignty and human freedom relates to the way in which God's foreknowledge is understood. Consider the following verse, where Peter speaks to the leaders of Israel (Acts 2:23):

This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

This verse clearly says that it was God's set purpose that Jesus would be handed over to the Jewish leaders, and they, with the help of the Romans, were responsible for putting him to death. What it does not say however, is:

- That **all** things (as opposed to only some) are predetermined by God's set purpose.
- That the Jewish leaders and Judas had no choice about their involvement in the matter (i.e. it leaves open the possibility that God could have used other individuals if Judas and the Jewish leaders had chosen otherwise).
- How God's "set purpose" and "foreknowledge" interact (i.e. when God knows the future and whether he simply knows it or whether his foreknowledge is based on his predetermination of outcomes).

Christians are generally agreed that God is infinite in his intelligence and wisdom, and that God possesses knowledge in advance. Scripture speaks often about God knowing future events, and this is the basis of prophecies about the future. There is, however, significant disagreement about what God's foreknowledge means. The main views are summarised below. I have given a brief explanation of each point of view, including some of the main arguments advanced in support of them, and, by way of example, have then applied each theory to the calling of Abraham:

Open Theism

There are a number of Bible passages that speak about God reacting to events in a way that seems to suggest that he does not know the outcomes of human choices before they are made. For example:

- He speaks about some events as if they may or may not happen (Exodus 4:7-9; 13:17; Jeremiah 26:3; Ezekiel 12:3)
- He appears to express regret (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11,35) and frustration (Ezekiel 22:29-31)
- He seems to change his mind depending on human repentance (Jeremiah 18:7-11; 26:2-3,13,19; Jonah 3:10)
- He seems to test people "to know" what they will do (Genesis 22:12; Exodus 16:4)
- He seems to experience surprise at human failure (Isaiah 5:1-5; Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20)

There are four possible ways to interpret these passages:

- a) That they represent misunderstandings about God on the part of the human authors of the Bible. This view is not consistent with a high view of Scripture as the inspired word of God.
- b) That they are not literally true, but are "anthropomorphisms" – human beings, or God himself, using language about human emotions and behaviour to describe God. This view is common among Calvinists.
- c) That at least some of these verses refer to a limited number of situations in which God has given people freedom to choose, and where outcomes therefore depend on human choice. This view is held by most Arminians.
- d) That they actually say something about the true nature of God's foreknowledge – that He does not know the future in terms of certainties but possibilities.

The final option reflects the *Open Theism* view, which claims that God has created mankind in such a way that we have genuine free agency within the limits he has set, and that God cannot be said to know the outcome of our choices until we have actually made them. God knows all possible choices we may make before we decide, but not which of those available options we will actually choose.

Illustration: God planned to raise up a nation for himself starting with one man. He called Abraham to follow him, but did not know until Abraham had responded in obedience whether this man or another would be the founder of that nation.

Simple Foreknowledge

God knows everything that will happen in the future, including the actions of human beings. This does not mean that we are not free to make choices, but simply that God knows what choice we will make before we make it. Most Arminians hold to a simple foreknowledge view. This view does not deny God's sovereignty, but claims that God has chosen to limit the application of his sovereignty. He has foreordained some things (e.g. his historic purpose with Israel), but does not interfere with the choice of individual human beings to respond to him or reject him. Proponents of this view point for support to the literal meaning of the Greek word translated "foreknown" in the New Testament, which is to know beforehand, and to the fact that this word is used in Acts 26:5 and 2 Peter 3:17 of human beings knowing something at an earlier time. According to the simple foreknowledge view, the predestination of people to eternal life is based on God's prior knowledge that they would respond to the gospel in faith.

Illustration: God chose to raise up a nation for himself. He identified Abraham as the forefather of that nation on the basis that he knew that Abraham would respond in faith to his call.

Molinism (the “middle knowledge” view)

It has been argued that God’s foreknowledge can be divided into three categories:

- a) *Natural knowledge* – knowledge of what *could* be. God’s knowledge before creation of all necessary truths, in other words all things that must be one way only. God knew before creation what possible worlds he could create.
- b) *Free knowledge* – what *will* be. God’s knowledge of what will happen in the world that actually exists.
- c) *Counterfactual knowledge* – what *would* be. God’s knowledge of what would happen if circumstances were different.

Molinism is named after Luis de Molina, a 16th Century Jesuit theologian, but has more recently been advocated by William Lane Craig. It places God’s counterfactual knowledge between His natural knowledge and his free knowledge and places creation after this “middle knowledge”. In other words, before creation God knew all possible worlds **and** what would happen in each of them. He then decided on one particular world in which his purposes would be fulfilled. *Molinism* sees human choices as being real but foreseen by God, but sees God’s sovereignty as having been applied to a greater extent than the simple foreknowledge view since he chose which world to actualise from many possible options.

Illustration: God decided before creation that he would raise up a nation for himself. He looked at all possible worlds that he could create and chose to create one in which Abraham would respond in faith to his call.

Augustinian-Calvinist

This view sees God implementing his sovereignty in the world to a greater degree than simple foreknowledge or *Molinism*. God’s foreknowledge is equated with his sovereign election. Either before creation (the *supralapsarian* view) or after the Fall (the *infralapsarian* view) God chose certain individuals to be saved. Throughout history he has worked out his purposes according to his will alone. Human beings remain responsible before God for their sin, and the freedom of the human will is not entirely denied, but God’s purposes are not dependent on the choice of people. Many *Calvinists* describe “foreknown” as synonymous with “foreloved” and by, comparing Romans 8:29 and Ephesians 1:4, say that God’s foreknowledge equates with election (i.e. that it is His active choice to set his love upon certain people and to choose them according to his purpose). They also point to the use of the word in Romans 11:2 and 1 Peter 1:19-20 in support of this interpretation.

Illustration: God decided before creation that he would raise up a nation for himself. He chose Abraham to be the founder of this nation, based on nothing but his free choice, and so called Abraham and enabled him to respond in faith.

Determinism

This perspective claims that God has exercised his sovereignty to its full extent in determining everything that will happen. According to this view, all things are foreknown by God because they were pre-determined by him, and human beings have no free will. Those who are not chosen by God for faith have, therefore, no responsibility to respond to the call to repent, and the elect have no responsibility to proclaim the gospel to them. This is the basis of *Hypercalvinism*.

Illustration: God decided before creation that he would raise up a nation for himself. He chose Abraham to be the founder of this nation, based on nothing but his free choice, and so called Abraham and enabled him to respond in faith. Abraham could not have refused to obey this call.

Another consideration – *God’s relationship to time*

Another angle to consider when thinking about foreknowledge is the way in which God relates to time. The Bible makes several statements that suggest that God is not constrained in time as we are. Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8 both say that a thousand years are like one day to God. Isaiah 46:10 speaks of God making “known the end from the beginning”. Psalm 93:2 says that God is (present tense) “from all eternity”. We live in one moment of time – the present, which is, perhaps, best defined as the point where past certainty and future changeability meet. What if, for God who lives outside the created order and without physical form, every moment is simultaneously the present? In other words God lives in the “eternal now”. Critics of this concept argue that it entered Christian thought from Greek philosophy, but proponents claim that it is inferred in God’s covenant name, *Yahweh*, which derives from “I AM” meaning the one who exists eternally (Exodus 3:14).

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis wrote, “If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn”. If this is an accurate description of God’s relationship to time, it would radically change our understanding of predestination and foreknowledge. Predestination would then simply be our way of explaining from a time-limited perspective a reality that is not time-limited and which we can never, therefore, fully comprehend. God’s foreknowledge would, likewise, be a way of describing His perfect knowledge of all that will happen, but for him it would be more accurate to say he already knows the future as he knows the present. It is as we try to conceive of the nature of God’s relationship to time that we begin to realise how limited our understanding is and how great he is. Our response ought to be worship and a humble recognition of the limitations of all our theology and philosophy.

Key Bible Passages

Both classical Arminians and Calvinists claim to be committed to Scripture as the inspired word of God and the authority for matters of faith. Each will, therefore, have their own explanation of the Scriptures that seem on first reading to support the opposing view. I would encourage you to study these passages for yourself and ask the following questions as you do so:

- What does it mean in the context in which it is located (within the book and in this genre of biblical literature)?
- Who is the passage speaking about (individuals or groups, professing believers or not)?
- What does the passage NOT say and why not (i.e. don't jump to conclusions by filling in the gaps)?
- Is the passage speaking from a human perspective (what we see) or the divine perspective (what God sees)?
- To what degree can we reconcile apparently contradictory passages and to what degree should we accept that we can't?

Passages apparently speaking about God's foreknowledge and predestination

Psalms 139:16; Isaiah 46:10-11; Daniel 4:35; John 6:37; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 13:48; Romans 8:29-30; 9:1-29; 11:32; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 1:3-11; Ephesians 2:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:2; 2:8; Revelation 13:8

Passages describing God's people as the "elect" (chosen)

Matthew 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Romans 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1-2

Passages suggesting that people can choose to reject or accept God

Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21; Matthew 23:37; Luke 7:30; Acts 7:51; Romans 1:18-20; 6:16; 2 Peter 3:5

Passages suggesting that God desires all people to be saved

Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34; 1 Timothy 2:4; 4:10; Titus 2:11; 2 Peter 3:9

Passages suggesting that Christ's death was for all people

John 3:16; 12:32; Romans 5:18; 8:32; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:2 (contrast "many" in Mark 10:25; 14:24)

Passages speaking about God's universal call to repent and believe

Matthew 10:32-39; 11:28; 16:25; 23:12; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 12:8; 17:33; John 3:36; 10:9; 11:26; Romans 10:9-13; Titus 2:11

Passages referring to the possibility of false professions of faith

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8); Matthew 7:21-23

Passages challenging professing believers to test or prove themselves

1 Corinthians 15:1-2; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Peter 1:10-11

Passages seeming to imply the possibility of losing salvation by rejecting the faith

John 15:1-6; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 3:6; 2 Timothy 2:10-13; 2 Peter 2:20-22; Hebrews 6:1-12

Passages seeming to promise eternal security to believers

John 10:27-29; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Jude 1, 24

Passages speaking about the need to persevere

Luke 13:24; John 8:31; 1 Timothy 2:12; 2 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 10:35-39; James 1:12; Jude 21

For a list of passages which speak about God in terms that raise the question whether or not he has complete knowledge of future events see the section on Theories of God's Foreknowledge, under the heading Open Theism.

Of Potters and Olive Trees – Romans chapters 9-11

Romans 9-11 are generally acknowledged to be among the most difficult chapters of the New Testament. However, once we understand that Paul's major concern in these chapters is with God's purposes for Israel they become somewhat easier to understand. The three chapters speak about God's working with Israel in:

- **The Past** (Ch 9) – Israel as a chosen people containing a faithful remnant
- **The Present** (Ch 10) – both Jew and Gentile can be saved by calling on the name of the Lord
- **The Future** (Ch 11) – God will complete His covenant promises to Israel

Paul's focus on God's dealing with groups of people means that he says some things that may confuse us if we try to apply them to individuals, but may also leave us frustrated by what he does not say. Chapter 9, in particular, contains some challenging statements. The following table summarises some of what Paul did and didn't say in Romans 9:

What Paul did say	What he didn't say
That God chose Jacob and lifted up Pharaoh to fulfil His historical purposes (v10-17)	That God determined their eternal destiny – The election Paul is concerned about in these verses is about their place within God's unfolding purposes in history, not their individual "salvation" from sin.
That God decides who He shows his mercy and compassion to (v15)	Who God's saving mercy is available to or on what basis God has determined to save people from their sin – Mercy can refer to blessings during their lifetime not only salvation from sin.
That God chooses who He hardens (v18)	How or why God decides to harden a person's heart – In the Old Testament it seems that God hardened the hearts of those who had already hardened their own hearts (Pharaoh in Exodus 9-10). It is human pride that first hardens the heart (Daniel 5:20). God's hardening may only be a confirmation of the person's decision.
That no one should argue with God about how He has made them (v19-21)	That God has made some people for salvation and some for condemnation – Again remember that this is in the context of God's purposes with nations or groups, not individuals. The issue at hand is how God has created us and what privileges that entails, not whether or not we can respond to Him.
That the objects of God's wrath are "prepared for destruction" (v22)	Who prepared them for destruction, or how they became objects of wrath – This verse does not say that God prepared some people in advance for destruction, but simply states that those who are under God's wrath will face destruction.
That the objects of God's mercy have been prepared by Him for glory (v23)	How a person becomes an object of God's mercy – The focus here is on God's preparation of glory for a group of people who are called from both Jews and Gentiles. How an individual person is called and responds to that call is not explained here (we need to study Romans 8:29-30 and 10:9-13 to understand God's calling and our response).

Some Calvinists point to these chapters in defence of their beliefs about election and predestination. As we have seen, however, Paul falls short of the kind of statements that five-point Calvinists make. It is certainly true that Paul presents a sovereign God, and that there do not appear to be any limits to His sovereign power (see also Romans 11:33-36 on this theme), but we cannot conclude from chapter 9 alone how much freedom God has chosen to give to human beings or on what basis He decides who to call. Indeed, chapter 10 suggests a universal offer of salvation to anyone who calls on the name of the Lord (Romans 10:9-13):

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

In fact, the whole focus of chapter 10 is on the human response of faith, which is necessary for salvation. Paul does not seem to see any contradiction between this human responsibility and the strong statements about God's sovereignty in election that he has made in chapter 9. These two concepts sit side by side in Paul's thinking.

Furthermore, in chapter 11 Paul warns Gentile believers that if they do not continue in God's kindness they will be "cut off" (v22). At first reading this seems to create problems for the Calvinist idea of the perseverance of the saints! Again, however, we must understand that Paul is speaking of groups of people rather than individuals. The focus of God's historical purpose has shifted from the Jews to the Gentiles, but in the future it may once again turn to the Jews (11:25-32). The Gentile believers must not grow complacent, but must continue in faithfulness to God and must realise their responsibility to take the message about Jesus to all people, including the Jews. The picture of the olive tree and the pruning of some of its branches is not intended to represent the eternal destiny of individuals, but God's purposes with groups of people. We cannot come to a conclusive position regarding the doctrine of eternal security based on this passage alone.

A Pastoral Perspective – the case of Hymenaeus

The character of Hymenaeus appears twice in Paul's letters to Timothy, and a consideration of his case may be helpful for us in thinking about the pastoral implications of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The first appearance of Hymenaeus is in 1 Timothy 1:18-20:

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

Here Paul challenges Timothy to hold on to the faith and a good conscience – in other words to hold firmly to what he believes, the truth of the gospel, and to obedience to it. He contrasts this with Hymenaeus, who has rejected both of these and so shipwrecked his faith. How are we to understand this shipwreck? Many Arminians will see this as an example of someone who was saved but, by willfully rejecting the faith, has lost his salvation. Calvinists, on the other hand, will argue either that he had professed faith but that his profession was proven to be false by his later rejection of the faith, or that this shipwrecking concerns his profession of faith rather than his actual salvation. These are two alternative explanations of what was happening at a spiritual level beneath the surface level of what could be observed (that Hymenaeus had rejected the faith). As Paul writes to Timothy with the aim of encouraging and training him in church leadership his concern is not to give a detailed explanation of what was happening in spiritual terms (perhaps even Paul was not qualified to say), but to remind Timothy of what response should be made to a man like this by those with oversight of the church. Paul's statement that he has handed him over to Satan is enigmatic, but at least must mean that Hymenaeus had been put out of regular fellowship in the church and that Paul no longer related to him as a brother in Christ. So, from this passage we cannot argue conclusively for either an *Arminian* or *Calvinist* perspective, but we can say that local churches should not allow people who have rejected their own profession of faith or whose lifestyle is not in keeping with a clear conscience to continue as members of the fellowship as if nothing had changed.

Hymenaeus reappears in 2 Timothy 2:17-18, where we discover that he has progressed from simply rejecting the faith himself to actually teaching his false ideas (which centred around the resurrection of believers) to others, with the result that he has destroyed the faith of some. Once again Arminians and Calvinists will be divided over whether this means that these others have lost their salvation or the faith that has been destroyed is their profession of faith. Once again Paul does not explain which it is (although 2 Timothy 2:10-13, which immediately precedes this section, has much to say about these matters and deserves careful study), but he does surround this comment about Hymenaeus with practical advice to Timothy as a church leader. He reminds Timothy that:

- He must keep reminding the believers of the truth (v14)
- He must warn them against engaging in fruitless quarrels about words and godless chatter (v14, 16)
- He must present himself as God's workman with a clear conscience (no "need to be ashamed") and continue to handle the word of truth correctly (v15) – see again here the dual challenge to right beliefs and right behaviour.

Most significant of all in the context of this study is verse 19, which says:

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

Whether we tend towards *Calvinism* or *Arminianism* we can surely agree on the two points Paul makes in this verse:

- a) **God knows who belongs to Him** – in fact, only God knows this. Often we are unable to say with absolute certainty whether someone is genuinely saved or not. The reality of some who initially profess faith but later grow cold, wander away or actively reject the faith, is often confusing for us. We cannot always determine what is happening at a spiritual level, but we can trust that God does know.
- b) **All who profess faith must demonstrate its reality in their lives** – this is a command from God, and is similar to Paul's challenge to Timothy in the earlier passage where Hymenaeus is mentioned (1 Timothy 1:19). Everyone who professes faith in Christ must turn away from wickedness and live a life of obedience to him. As James writes, faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26). Where a person professes faith but there is no change in their life we have no right to encourage them to be assured of salvation. On this point Christ's teaching is consistent (Matthew 7:20) as is the apostle John's first letter (1 John 3:3, 14). The duty of those who teach the word and lead the church is to challenge all who profess faith to continue to live in Christ and to grow in him. In purely practical terms it doesn't matter whether a person who grows cold or walks away from their faith has lost their salvation or was never genuinely saved. Our challenge to them must be the same: that they must repent and return to the Lord.

Conclusion – a personal plea

It should be clear from the table on page 5 that even in disputed areas of theology there is much common ground between Arminians and Calvinists. Furthermore, many people from both groups are even closer in their commitment to other core doctrines such as the nature of God, the person of Christ, the authority of Scripture and the atonement. It is, however, my view that divergence of views on these issues has more often led to division. What then are we to learn from the lessons of history and from our brief foray into this tangled theological landscape? Firstly, we simply cannot say that a definitive stance on these issues is necessary for orthodoxy, godliness and commitment to mission. Historically there have been both Arminians and Calvinists at the forefront of evangelistic efforts – most notably in the 18th Century when George Whitefield and John Wesley led the Methodist revival while holding very different perspectives. Secondly, although we have not examined the biblical evidence in detail, we may accept that Scripture contains two parallel emphases, on divine sovereignty and human responsibility, which cannot be fully reconciled except in the infinite wisdom of God. Both are necessary for our faith. The 19th century preacher CH Spurgeon recognised this truth when he wrote:

These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.

If God's ways were fully comprehensible to us then either he would cease to be God or we would be exalted to be his equals. I fear that attempts to neatly systematise all of our theology stray dangerously close to re-creating God in our own image, confining him to the limits of our own understanding. Can we not remain content to stand firm on what God has revealed clearly to us in his word and to use biblical language to describe it? The danger with investigating the concepts of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is that we move progressively from reading Scripture, to discussing what people have said about Scripture, to debating what theologians have systematically presented on the matter, to wrestling with what philosophers have theorised about it. Before we realise it we can find ourselves three steps removed from the Bible! We may find ourselves being swept away from the solid rock of God's truth into the tempestuous seas of human imagination.

I am not suggesting that these issues are unimportant or that we should not seek to understand scriptural truth as far as we can, I am simply suggesting that we should recognise that even our best efforts to do so are no more than a dim reflection in a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12) and so should be held lightly and with humility. I believe that Scripture reveals a sovereign God who has created a universe in which human beings have responsibility before him. I simply maintain that our human intelligence can never probe the depths of these truths or understand how they interact. We can affirm that both God's sovereignty and human responsibility are true and necessary. Perhaps the parallel lines can be imagined to be train tracks. Both are necessary if the train is to stay on the line and to move forward towards its destination. For the passenger on the train the tracks are vital, but they are hardly intended to be the focus of his attention. He is aware that they exist, and can be thankful that they are in such good order, but he need not understand what it is that holds them together for him to continue on his journey. Indeed, if he were to become obsessed with them to the point of insisting on the closest of inspections he would find himself in danger of either being left behind at the side of the line or, worse still, crushed under the train. So we, as travellers on the journey of faith, may be thankful that the line is in good order and that the driver knows what he is doing, but we must not presume to be able to understand what God has not revealed to us.

Permit me, then, to make a number of pleas to my fellow evangelicals:

- *For unity in the core of the biblical gospel* – let us strive to be firm where Scripture is clear, but to admit the limitations of our understanding where it holds truths in tension. Let us unite around the core of the gospel (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:1-7).
- *For humility in theologising and philosophising* – let us avoid the temptation to fill in the gaps in our understanding with a theological system that goes beyond what Scripture actually says and becomes a framework through which Scripture is interpreted.
- *For a non-judgemental attitude* – let us not allow our personal position on these matters to become a yard-stick by which we judge the faith or orthodoxy of others who differ from us.
- *For a non-exclusive approach to networking* – let us avoid making subscription to formulations on the disputed matters of these doctrines a requirement for membership in our churches or in networks. Such restrictions are unnecessarily divisive.
- *For a spirit of grace and humility in dialogue* – let us not close off these matters from dialogue for the sake of supposed "unity", but let us seek to discuss them in a spirit of love and unity so that we can move together towards a clearer understanding of Scripture.
- *For a proper response to God's mercy* – let us acknowledge the limitations of our understanding and respond to the God whose ways are "beyond tracing out" yet who, in His mercy, has revealed Himself to us and redeemed in the way that He calls us to – by offering our bodies as living sacrifices to Him (Romans 11:33-12:1).

Glossary of Terms

The following is an attempt to define succinctly the most important terms in discussions of divine sovereignty and human freedom. In each definition terms that are themselves defined in this glossary appear in italics.

- Amyraldism** a form of *Calvinism* that does not accept the idea of “limited atonement”, claiming instead that Christ died for all people although only those unconditionally elected by God for salvation will be saved. Also known as “four-point *Calvinism*”, “hypothetical universalism” or “moderate *Calvinism*”.
- Arminianism** a theological system that arose in reaction to *Calvinism* although proponents would claim that it is a return to a pre-Calvinist way of thinking that more faithfully explains the biblical testimony. The name is after Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian. Arminianism is the dominant theological basis for Methodism and is followed to varying degrees by many Anglicans, Baptists, Pentecostals and other evangelicals.
- Calvinism** a theological system that emphasises the *sovereignty* of God and is known for its particular view of *predestination*. The name is after Swiss Reformer John Calvin but its development as a system owes more to his successor Theodore Beza and subsequent theologians. Calvinism is the dominant theological basis for Presbyterian and Reformed churches and is followed to varying degrees by many Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists and other evangelicals.
- Compatibilism** the view of *free will* that claims that it is compatible with *determinism*. This perspective is integral to the *Calvinist* perspective on divine sovereignty and human freedom.
- Determinism** the idea that God has predetermined every circumstance and event in accordance with his will (this is similar to *fatalism* with the important distinction that God’s active will, rather than blind forces, is at work in predetermining history). This view, therefore, maintains that God exercises his *sovereignty* to the full degree. Some *Calvinists* deny that their theology leads to determinism, but *Arminians* often claim that it is the logical conclusion of *Calvinism*.
- Election** God’s act of choosing people. The “elect” are, therefore, his chosen people. In Scripture election may be for service or for salvation and there is some debate regarding which type of election certain passages refer to. The questions of the basis on which God has chosen people for salvation, whether election applies to individuals or merely to groups of people are at the heart of the debate between *Arminians* and *Calvinists*. There is also a divergence of views amongst *Calvinists* as to whether people who are not elected for salvation can be said to be elected for condemnation.
- Fatalism** generally, in non-Christian philosophies, fatalism means that everything that happens is the inevitable result of blind processes over which we have no control. *Calvinism* is sometimes criticised as leading to a form of fatalism, but *Calvinists* reject this on the basis that events are determined by divine providence, and that God’s will is not a blind force but is good and rational.
- Foreknowledge** most Christians, with the exception of those who hold to *Open Theism*, are agreed that God’s foreknowledge at least means that he has perfect foresight of all future events, but there is considerable debate about how this knowledge interfaces with human moral responsibility. *Calvinists* believe that God’s foreknowledge arises from the fact that he has foreordained (predestined) all that will happen including his election of people for salvation, but they generally still view human beings as being morally responsible and having a duty to repent and believe the gospel. They see more in the New Testament references to God’s foreknowledge than simply advance knowledge of future events and claim that what is in mind is actually God’s prior commitment to love these individuals as His own. Foreknowledge, therefore, becomes effectively synonymous with *predestination* for the *Calvinist*. *Arminians* generally hold a simple view of God’s foreknowledge, seeing it simply as God’s awareness in advance of what would happen, although the idea of *Open Theism* has gained an increasing degree of acceptance more recently. For a more detailed discussion see the section entitled *Perspectives on God’s Foreknowledge*.
- Free will** the belief that human beings are morally responsible for their decisions. Free will should not be understood to mean that human choices can ever be free of limitations or influences, simply that we have the kind of freedom in some choices that makes us accountable (to others and ultimately to God) for their consequences. Within this definition of free will there are two divergent theories of what this kind of freedom entails: *compatibilist* and *libertarian*.
- Hypercalvinism** an extreme form of *Calvinism* that rejects even a *compatibilist* view of *free will* and therefore denies that the call of the gospel is universal. Since only the elect can respond in faith to the gospel, and all of the

elect will be saved, there is no responsibility on those who are not elect to repent and believe the gospel. The basis for mission is thus removed. The term is sometimes unfairly and unhelpfully used by critics of *Calvinism* to describe people who would not accept this extreme view.

- Infralapsarian** a form of *Calvinism* that claims that God's decree of election logically followed His decrees to create the world and that mankind would fall into sin, so that election for salvation was from among sinful humankind.
- Libertarianism** the view of *free will* that believes it to be incompatible with *determinism* and that in at least some of our choices human beings have a degree of leeway (our choices genuinely might not have been made) and control (our choices arise from ourselves rather than someone or something else). This view is also known as incompatibilism or "counter-factual" free will.
- Open Theism** a view of the nature of God that suggests that he limited his knowledge when creating our world so that He does not have complete knowledge of future events (see *Perspectives on God's Foreknowledge*).
- Predestination** the idea that God has pre-determined the eternal destiny of people. This concept is understood very differently in the two broad schools that may be called *Calvinism* and *Arminianism*. *Arminians* generally explain predestination in terms of God's decision that the group of people who would believe in Christ would be saved, whereas *Calvinists* generally explain it as God's decision that certain individuals would be saved while others would not. Some *Calvinists* take this further by claiming that God has actively predestined some people for eternal punishment (often called "double predestination"), although others say he simply has not chosen these people for eternal life.
- Preterition** God's act, according to *Calvinists* who do not hold to "double predestination", of passing over those who will be lost when He chose the elect for salvation.
- Prevenient** Arminius and subsequent Arminians spoke about God's prevenient or preventing grace that is shown to all people, enabling them to respond in faith. This grace does not save unless met with faith.
- Reformed** often used synonymously with *Calvinist*. This terminology can, however, be confusing, as Arminius and his followers were also part of the Protestant Reformation.
- Sovereignty** broadly speaking God's sovereignty means his rule over all that he has created. Christians are generally agreed that God is all powerful (omnipotent), meaning that he can do everything that is not inconsistent with His character and the nature of reality as he has created it. This leaves room for debate concerning the degree to which God has determined that human beings have freedom of will within the limits that God has set. *Calvinists* generally believe that God has exercised his sovereignty to its full extent, and hence that it is misleading to speak of human free will. *Arminians* generally believe that God has set limitations on his own sovereignty by allowing human beings a degree of freedom of choice within limits.
- Supralapsarian** a form of *Calvinism* that claims that God's decree of election logically preceded His decree of creation, so that election for salvation was from among sinless humankind as originally created.

Recommended Books

One danger in recommending books concerning these matters is that the list may be imbalanced. Many books are written firmly from within one camp, and sometimes believers tend to read only books from within their own perspective or tradition. The following books are recommended because, rather than presenting just one view, they bring together contributions from authors writing from a number of perspectives, allowing the reader to understand different ways of thinking and judge for him/herself:

Basinger, David & Basinger, Randall (eds.) 1986, *Predestination & Free Will: four views of divine sovereignty and human freedom*, IVP Academic (Downers Grove)

Beilby, James K. & Eddy, Paul R. (eds.) 2001, *Divine Foreknowledge: four views*, IVP (Downers Grove)

Brand, Chad O. (ed.) 2006, *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, B&H Academic (Nashville)

God's View and Ours – *group study material*

God's view – what God has planned

Romans 8:29-30 speaks of five stages in God's plan for those who love Him. These are shown in sequence below:

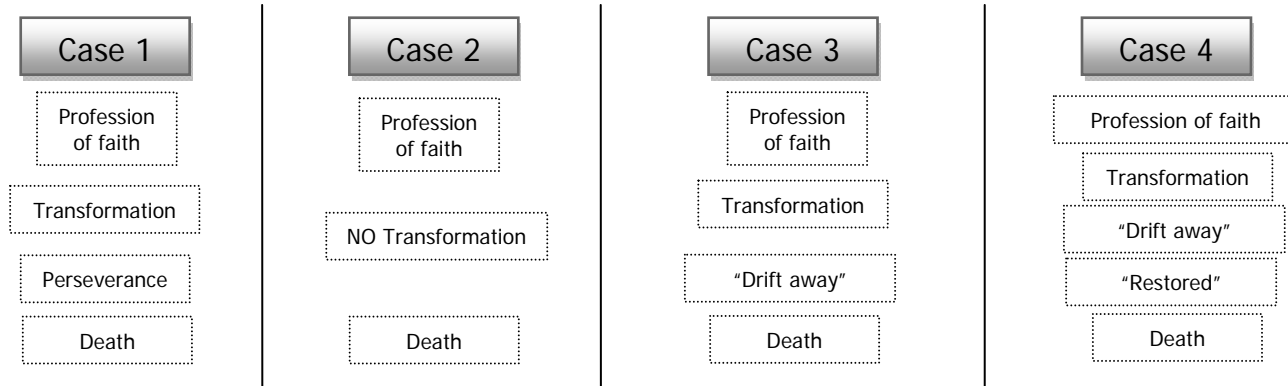


Questions:

1. What does each of these stages mean?
2. Where does an individual's birth and death occur on this scheme?
3. What, if anything, fills the box marked "???"? If you think something fits here, why might Paul have left it out?
4. What is Paul's purpose in saying these things in the context of Romans 8?

Our view – what we see

Each of these diagrams represents the story of the faith of an individual as we might describe it based on what we can see:



Questions:

1. Do you agree that all of these four cases are possible? Can you identify other possibilities?
2. Which of these individuals is "saved"? On what basis do you say that?
3. Is it ever possible to say with certainty that someone is "saved" or to have assurance yourself? If so, on what basis?
4. What implications does this have for how we preach the gospel and how we counsel people who profess faith?