

# HARD QUESTIONS

HOW CAN I RECONCILE GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY?

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## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

The history of the question regarding God's sovereignty/man's responsibility is not new. Philosophers, theologians, and everyone else wrestle with the idea of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. People can take one of two extremes in answering the question. Some emphasize the sovereignty of God to the point that human beings are little more than robots simply doing what they have been sovereignly programmed to do. Others emphasize free will to the point of God not having complete control and/or knowledge of all things. Neither of these positions is biblical.

Timothy George, writing in "A Theology for the Church" says the following:

One of the most important things the Bible says about God is that there is much about him that we do not know, and will never be able to know, for God is infinite; and we are not (and never will be). God dwells in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16); his greatness no one can fathom (Ps. 145:3); his knowledge is too wonderful for us, too lofty for us to attain (Ps. 139:6); "to whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?" Isaiah asks (Isa. 40:18). The answer is: to no one and no thing; for God is incomparably great, absolutely sovereign over, and radically other than, everything that exists outside of himself. This means that God is irreducible to the world's categories. He is explicable only in himself; his judgments are unsearchable and his paths beyond tracing out (Rom. 11:33).

On that note we could end this chapter and say nothing else. In fact, the way of silence is one of three responses made to the ineffable mystery of God in the history of theology.<sup>1</sup>

As we examine the question of how to reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, let us heed Paul's instruction: "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience;<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.<sup>14</sup> Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." Colossians 3:12–14 (NASB95)

### I. AN OVERVIEW OF VIEWS

Dr. Steve Lemke (New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary), has written an article that helps articulate the primary views regarding God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. The following material is taken directly from Dr. Lemke's article.

"Five Theological Models Relating Determinism, Divine Sovereignty, and Human Freedom" by Dr. Steve Lemke<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. Hard Determinism/Causal Determinism –

The strongest challenge to personal human freedom is hard determinism or causal determinism, the view that everything we are and do is determined or caused by prior events. So, though we think that we have a choice in what we eat for lunch or whom we marry, in fact we are deceived. These apparent choices are but an illusion. We had no choice but to eat a particular lunch or marry a particular person – it was embedded in our DNA or brain cells. In fact, all of what we call "choices" are just an illusion – everything is determined by prior events and causes.

<sup>1</sup> [A Theology for the Church, 181.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry, Spring 2013, Volume 10, Number 1, Center for Theology and Ministry.](#)

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Determinism is popular among many materialists, New Atheists, and postmodernists because it portrays the world as a closed system in which everything is completely determined by natural causes.

In a Christian reading of hard determinism, however, it is not physical causes but God's decrees which determine everything that happens. Not many evangelicals endorse this (hard) theological determinism... (but those who do so) are willing to insist that God ordains all things that happen in order to assure a perspective that God is totally in control of the universe, even at the most detailed level. So, again, in hard determinism we have no real choices; everything is predetermined and caused by prior events, and in a Christian hard determinism, God ordains everything that happens; we really have no choice or freedom.

## 2. Soft Determinism/Compatibilism –

Soft determinism or compatibilism asserts that freedom is in some sense compatible with determinism. Having defined what compatibilism is, we must also note what it is not. Unfortunately, some theologians have profoundly confused what compatibilism is, and this confusion greatly muddles the discussion of this topic. They have described "compatibilism" not as the compatibility of determinism and human freedom, but the compatibility of divine sovereignty with human freedom. However, the compatibility of God's sovereignty and human freedom is noncontroversial.

The issue is whether or not Christianity is compatible with hard determinism, or whether God exercises His sovereignty in such a way that allows for meaningful human freedom. Genuine compatibilists, then, believe that human freedom can be reconciled with determinism in some way. However, they do so only at a great price – what they call "compatibilist freedom" is not what we normally mean when we use the word "freedom." By "compatibilist freedom," the soft determinist says that we always act according to our greatest desire. In other words, we are always ruled by desire. We never make a choice between two options, but we do what we do willingly because we are ruled by desire.

## 3. Molinism/Middle Knowledge –

Another proposed solution to the dilemma of freewill and determinism was proposed by Luis de Molina in the sixteenth century and has gained popularity among many evangelical scholars in the last few decades. Molinism affords a conceptual framework in which God chooses everything that happens and humans have genuine freedom. Although space does not permit a more thorough discussion of Molinism, let us briefly delineate in several aspects of God's knowledge, which are fundamental to this perspective. God knows not only all the myriad possibilities of what could happen (His "natural knowledge"), but He also conceives (by His own omniscience, not by His perception of future human choices) what persons would actually do in every possible situation (His "middle knowledge"). Based upon His natural knowledge and middle knowledge of all the "possible worlds" (i.e., each different future series of events in which there is at least one choice that is different from all the other series of events), God actualizes the possible world of free human choices that He desires (His "free knowledge"). Molinism thus allows for both genuinely free human choices and God determining which possible world He desires.

## 4. Decisionism/Congruentism/Soft Libertarian Freedom –

While the somewhat technical term "soft libertarian freedom" is unfamiliar to many people, it is a commonsense view broadly held by many people, as well as nationally known philosophers and theologians. "Libertarian freedom" simply means that in every key decision, we have a choice between at least two alternatives, even if the only alternatives are "yes" or "no." It may be labeled "decisionism" in that we always have a choice, a decision. It is named soft libertarian freedom in order to distinguish it from any who would hold to absolute or total freedom. In soft libertarianism, limited choices are available in almost every aspect. While our decisions are not determined by prior causes and events, our decisions are definitely impacted by forces outside ourselves. We don't make decisions in a vacuum – we often face profound pressures which weigh heavily on our choices. However, at the end of the day, we are still able to decide freely.

Soft libertarianism also denies that human freedom is compatible with determinism, so it is described as incompatibilism. However, soft libertarianism is compatible with God's will and sovereignty, since both are affirmed in Scripture. Divine sovereignty and human freedom must be held in tension, or what might be described as congruentism. Just how human freedom and divine sovereignty are reconciled is bound up in God's transcendence over our finite lives.

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## 5. Strong Libertarian Freedom/Self-Determination –

While soft libertarianism advocates a creaturely freedom that takes into account the limitations of human existence and the powerful forces that bear down on our decisions, a “hard” or “strong” view of libertarian freedom accords a more unfettered version of freedom. Often associated with Openness of God theology, this view asserts that God does not know with certainty the future decisions of persons. Therefore, although God can predict the future with a high degree of probability due to his immense knowledge, He cannot know with certainty what humans will do. The BFM 2000 and most evangelical Christians understand Scripture to deny this view because it portrays God’s omniscience and foreknowledge of future human choices as limited.

## II. GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

### a. Defined

The word “sovereign” literally means to reign over all. God possesses infinite authority, right, rule, and reign. “Sovereign” is a word that means God does everything on purpose. The English word “sovereign” means having unlimited power or authority. It comes from the prefix “sov” which means over and it’s coupled with the word “reign” so when it comes to sovereign, the word means to have total control.” (David Jeremiah)

### b. Biblical evidence

(Daniel 4:35, Lamentations 3:37–39, Isaiah 46:10, 1 Chronicles 29:11, Psalm 115:3, Ephesians 1:11, Colossians 1:16–17)

### c. Questions that arise

1. Do my choices really matter?
2. If God is sovereign, why pray?
3. Does sovereignty make God the author of sin?

### d. God’s sovereignty may be discussed in at least two ways:

1. God’s General Sovereignty

First of all, there is God’s general sovereignty over His creation. God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world through His providential care. As the BFM 2000 affirms, one way that God reigns in His Kingdom is “His general sovereignty over the universe.” How does our omnipotent God exercise His sovereignty over creation? It is important to distinguish between God’s omnipotence and sovereignty. God’s omnipotence concerns what He could do; God’s sovereignty concerns what He wills to do. That God can do anything does not demand that He must do anything. God is free in His sovereignty to act as He sees fit.<sup>3</sup>

2. God’s Sovereignty in Salvation

## III. MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY?

### a. Defined

In the Bible, man’s responsibility means that individuals are accountable to God for their choices, actions, and words, and are expected to live in accordance with His will and commandments. Man’s responsibility and the issue of “free will” are closely connected in scripture. In a limited sense, God has made man free to do as he pleases. Free to make moral choices, etc...

### b. Biblical evidence

(Genesis 1:26, Genesis 2:15–17, Deuteronomy 30:15–19, Ezekiel 18:23, Ecclesiastes 12:13, Luke 6:45)

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<sup>3</sup> [Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry, Spring 2013, Volume 10, Number 1, Center for Theology and Ministry, 13-14.](#)

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## c. Questions that arise

1. Do the choices we make interfere with God's purposes and plans?
2. How do we understand God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in salvation?

## IV. SUMMARY

- a. Any view that diminishes God's sovereignty is not biblical.
- b. Any view that removes man's responsibility is not biblical.

Dr. Danny Akin wrote a concise and impactful article entitled: "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond To This Divine Mystery?" The last section of the article addressed how to find biblical balance, and he then gave "Theological and Practical Considerations." I recommend you read the following:

Grasping the magnitude of this issue is a daunting task for finite sinful humans. A good dose of humility is certainly in order. As we attempt to understand both the Bible's teaching and work with those with whom we may not see eye to eye, what are some theological and practical principles that can guide us?

Though he made six suggestions, three of which were for pastors, I will share three that apply to all believers:

1) In your doctrine of salvation, start with God and not man. The Bible affirms that "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9) and "by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift – not from works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). We should be God-centered in all of our theology, especially the doctrine of salvation. The Bible teaches that salvation is God's work. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). He takes the initiative. He is the true Seeker!

2) Affirm the truth, both of God's sovereignty and human freewill. "The Abstract of Principles" was the founding confession for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was penned by Basil Manly Jr. in 1859. Manly was a Calvinist, and yet Article IV on Providence reveals a healthy, theological balance in our Baptist forefather. Manly wrote,

"God from eternity decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any wise to be author or approver of sin nor to destroy the *freewill* and *responsibility* of intelligent creatures (emphasis mine)."

3) Recognize that extreme positions on either side of the issue are biblically unbalanced, theologically unhealthy, and practically undesirable. Biblically we affirm the truth of all of God's Word. Words like called, chosen, election, foreknowledge and predestination are in Holy Scripture. We should embrace them, examine them, and seek to understand them. Words like believe, evangelist, go, preach, receive and repent are also in the Bible. Biblical balance requires that we embrace and affirm these as well.

On August 1, 1858, Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon entitled, "Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility." The words of wisdom that flowed from his mouth on that day could only come from a capable pastor-theologian with a shepherd's heart and a love for the lost. We would do well to heed the counsel of this Baptist hero upon whose shoulders we stand today.

"I see in one place, God presiding over all in providence; and yet I see and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions to his own will, in a great measure. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no precedence of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource\\_600/Divine%20Sovereignty%20and%20Human%20Responsibility.%20How%20Should%20Southern%20Baptists%20Respond%20To%20This%20Divine%20Mystery.pdf](http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource_600/Divine%20Sovereignty%20and%20Human%20Responsibility.%20How%20Should%20Southern%20Baptists%20Respond%20To%20This%20Divine%20Mystery.pdf)

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see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. 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. . . .You ask me to reconcile the two. I answer, they do not want any reconciliation; I never tried to reconcile them to myself, because I could never see a discrepancy. . . . Both are true; no two truths can be inconsistent with each other; and what you have to do is to believe them both”.<sup>4</sup>

**FOR FURTHER STUDY ON THIS TOPIC, YOU CAN FIND A LIST OF RESOURCES  
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