

Divine Sovereignty AND Human Responsibility

a survey of ideas and a plea for biblical unity



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Why Does it Matter?

Issues surrounding divine sovereignty and human freedom have been major considerations for Christians for nearly 500 years. 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 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, but who struggle to say conclusively exactly what the problem is.

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 theology in this area! Rather my intention is to present the reader with a brief overview of the historical background to the issues, a (hopefully) fair summary of the major theological viewpoints and an introduction to the key Bible passages that should be studied. The goal is to help you, the reader, to reach your own conclusion about these matters. Along the way we will also examine a few particularly relevant scriptures. Finally, I will present my own conclusion, which is essentially a plea for a way forward in unity.

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!

Historical Development

Early church fathers

In his book *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Calvinist author, Loraine Boettner writes:

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.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)

- Defended the faith against the heresy of Pelagius (c.354-420). Pelagius denied original sin, taught that the human will is entirely free, that grace simply means God teaching us what is right and wrong, and that salvation is based on merit.
- Taught that we do have "free will", but that our will is heavily biased towards sin and captive to sin.
- Emphasised that grace is God's free unmerited favour towards us 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.

John Calvin (1509-1564) and Theodore Beza (1519-1605)

The association of John 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, Calvin was much more concerned with a correct understanding of grace and justification through faith alone. He did, however, write 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.

After Calvin's death, Theodore Beza produced a systematic theology in which he started with election and described all the rest of theology as the outworking of God's decision to elect some people to salvation and others to condemnation.

Jakob Arminius (1560-1609)

Arminius reacted against aspects of Beza's theology, especially the idea that Christ died only for the elect.

Arminianism and Calvinism after Arminius and Beza

The ideas of Arminius and Beza became the subject of debate in the Dutch Reformed church, and this led to two important statements that clarified the five distinctive points on which their theology varied:

Arminianism– The Remonstrance (1610)	Calvinism – The Synod of Dort (1618-19)
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.	Total depravity – the belief that sinful human nature is totally corrupted by sin.
Article 1 – God determined before creation to save those who will believe in Jesus and persevere in the faith and to leave those who are "incorrigible and unbelieving" in their sin and subject to His wrath.	Unconditional election – that people are not predestined for salvation on the basis of any foreseen merit, quality of achievement.
Article 2 – that Christ died for all men and every man, but that only believers receive forgiveness and redemption on the basis of his death.	Limited atonement – that Christ died only for the elect. [<i>"Particular redemption" is a better description of this idea, but would spell "TUPIP"!</i>]
Article 4 – that man needs God's grace for any good thought, will or deed, but that this grace can be resisted.	Irresistible grace – that the elect are infallibly called and redeemed by God's grace.
Article 5 – that believers have the power to overcome and persevere, and that no external power can cause them to lose their salvation, but that it cannot be dogmatically taught from Scripture that it is impossible for a person to lose their salvation by forsaking their own faith.	Perseverance of the saints – that those who are truly predestined by God cannot in any way defect from that calling.

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). It became the theological basis for Presbyterian churches. 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*".

Arminianism & Calvinism – *agreement & differences*

This table is intended to summarise the areas of agreement and disagreement between *Arminians* and *Calvinists* regarding key theological concepts. It is not exhaustive (some other aspects of theology tend to be connected, for example *Covenant Theology*, beliefs about the church and about baptism) or definitive (there are many believers who would not fit neatly into either column, and who adhere to a mixture of the points from either column). Evangelical believers can find much unity and should seek to avoid division over non-core theological issues. The degree to which *Calvinism* and *Arminianism* divides us depends on the degree to which we see the differences in this table as core gospel issues.

	Arminianism	Calvinism
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 freedom to choose, although this freedom is compromised by the effect of sin.	That God has exercised his sovereignty to its full extent by determining everything that will happen. Human beings do not truly have free will.
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 still able to choose whether or not to respond in repentance to the gospel because of God's 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 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 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.
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.

Theories of God's Foreknowledge

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 prophecy. 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; I 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 represent anthropomorphisms – human beings, or God himself, using language about human emotions and behaviour to describe God. This view is commonly held 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 some 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 Theist* view of God, 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. 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 II 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 word’s use in Romans 11:2 and I 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 that he foresaw in him, 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 that he foresaw in him, 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*

One of the most interesting angles to consider when thinking about predestination is how God perceives time. The Bible makes several statements that suggest that God is not constrained in time as we are. Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8 both say that a thousand years are just 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 is the eternal now”. This concept is at least inferred in His covenant name, *Yahweh*, which is derived from the name “I AM” (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 the present.

Key Bible passages

Both *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 the passage mean in the context in which it is located (the overall teaching of the book)?
- 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 speaking about God's foreknowledge and predestination

- Psalm 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; I Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 1:3-11; Ephesians 2:10; II Thessalonians 2:13; II Timothy 1:9

Passages mentioning the elect

- Matthew 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Romans 11:7; I Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; I Peter 1:1;

Passages suggesting that God desires all people to be saved

- Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34; I Timothy 2:4; II Peter 3:9

Passages suggesting that Christ's death was for all people

- John 3:16; I John 2:2

Passages speaking about the 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

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

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

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

Passages seemingly promising eternal security to believers

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

Passages speaking about the need to persevere

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

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

God's View & 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:

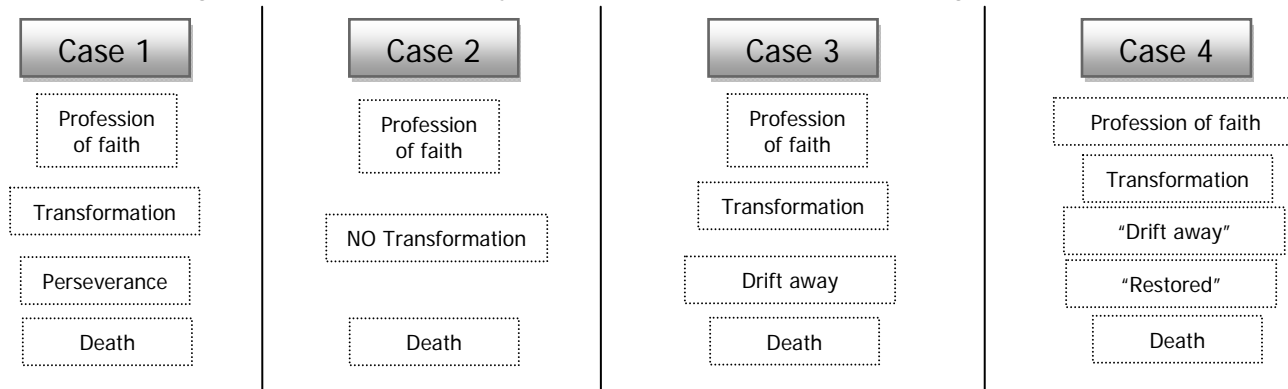


Questions:

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 in 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?

Defining Key Terms

- Arminianism** a theological system that arose in reaction to Calvinism. The name is after Jakob 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.
- 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 is an extreme view of how God exercises his sovereignty. Many *Calvinists* deny that their theology leads to determinism, but *Arminians* often claim that it is the logical conclusion of *Calvinism*.
- Election** election is God's act of choosing people, and the elect are his chosen people. The questions of the basis on which God has chosen people and whether election applies to individuals or merely to groups of people are at the heart of the debate between *Arminians* and Calvinists.
- 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** Christians are generally agreed that God's foreknowledge includes his perfect foresight of all future events, but there is considerable debate about how this knowledge interfaces with human freedom to make choices and human moral responsibility. *Calvinists* believe that God's foreknowledge is based on 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 (with the exception of *hypercalvinists*). *Arminians* generally hold a simple view of God's foreknowledge, although the idea of *Open Theism* has gained an increasing degree of acceptance more recently. For a more detailed discussion of *Perspectives on God's Foreknowledge* see the section of that title.
- Hypercalvinism** an extreme form of *Calvinism* that 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 unhelpful used by critics of *Calvinism* of people who would not accept this extreme view.
- Infralapsarian** a division of *Calvinism* teaching that God's election of some people for salvation occurred *after* the Fall.
- 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 them for eternal life.
- Reformed** generally used synonymously with *Calvinist*. This terminology can 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 division of *Calvinism* teaching that God's election of some people for salvation occurred *before* the Fall.

Of Potters & 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:

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
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 simply salvation from sin.]
That God chooses who He hardens (v18)	How God decides to harden a person's heart. [In the Old Testament it seems that God hardens the hearts of those who have already hardened their own hearts (Pharaoh in Exodus 9-10). It is human pride that first hardens the heart (Daniel 5:20).]
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 is about how God has created us and what privileges that entails, not how we can respond to Him.]
That the objects of God's wrath are "prepared for destruction" (v22)	Who prepared them for destruction. [This verse does NOT say that God prepared people for 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 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, in chapter 10 presents a universal offer of salvation to anyone who calls on the name of the Lord (v9-13):

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.

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 certainly 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 I 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 II 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 II Timothy 2:10-13, which 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 is v19, 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 (I 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 (I 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 – *towards biblical unity*

It should be clear from the table on page 3 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. 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. Having said this, it is this author's view that divergence of views on these issues has more often led to division and inactivity in mission. What then are we to learn from the lesson of history and from our brief foray into this tangled theological landscape?

Let me make a number of pleas:

- Let us strive to be absolutely firm where Scripture is absolutely clear, but prepared to admit the limitations of our understanding where Scripture is not clear or appears to hold different perspectives in tension.
- Let us avoid the temptation to try to fill in the gaps in our understanding by devising a unified philosophical or theological system that tries to explain God's purposes in their entirety and in doing so goes beyond what Scripture actually says.
- Let us avoid taking the labels of belonging to a particular theological camp on these matters. Such labels are unhelpful and divisive.
- Let us never allow our personal position on these matters to become the measure of the faith of others so that we judge or distance ourselves from fellow believers on the basis of these matters.
- Let us recognise our own limitations and praise and worship the God who has revealed Himself to us but whose ways are "beyond tracing out" (Romans 11:33) in the way that he calls us to – by offering our whole beings as living sacrifices to Him (Romans 12:1).

It is my conviction that Scripture contain two parallel lines, of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, which cannot meet except in the infinite wisdom of God. Both are necessary for our faith. The 19th Century preacher CH Spurgeon recognised this truth:

*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. Why can we not remain content to stand firm on what God has revealed to us in his word? Why can we not stick to using biblical language and describing things as Scripture does? The danger with investigating the concepts of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is that we move progressively from discussing Scripture, to discussing what people have said about Scripture, to discussing 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! It is as if we have been 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. In fact, I believe that Scripture upholds 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.