



**First Bible Church**

DECATUR ♦ MADISON

# **God's Sovereignty *and* Man's Free Will**

GLORIFYING GOD BY  
HELPING PEOPLE  
KNOW, LOVE, OBEY  
AND EXALT  
JESUS CHRIST



# **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S FREE WILL**

A Position Paper  
First Bible Church of Decatur

## Introduction

One of the more divisive intramural debates in Christian history has revolved around the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man. This is an advanced discussion for more mature believers, and most Christ-followers will be unfamiliar with many of these terms. But these are doctrines that every Christian must eventually feed on if he is to grow in his knowledge of God.

Furthermore, many Christians have adopted one view and rejected others even though they have not spent much serious time in personal study on this subject. They only know what others have told them. The issue is complicated by believers using the same terms but with different understanding of those terms.

To many of us, Paul could not be clearer:

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves....But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **made us alive** (regenerated us) with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. Ephesians 1:4-6; 2:4*

## God's Sovereignty

To say God is sovereign is to say God is free. He is free to do whatever he wants to do and he is in no way dependent on his creation. He knows everything he has done in the past and he knows everything he will do in the future. And everything he knows he will do in the future will surely come to pass. There is nothing God knows he will do that he will not, or cannot, do. He will not be surprised. He will not be derailed. He will not be denied. He will not be deceived. God knows exactly what will happen in the future because God controls the future.

But, some will say, are we not free also? Do we not have “freedom of the will”? And to some degree that is true. We are free. But our freedom is limited. We do not know nor can we recall all that we have done. We do not know all that we will do. And even most of what we plan to do in the future is thwarted. We are free. But freedom is commensurate with ability. And it is our ability that is the issue. We are not free to do what we are not able to do.

Christians have wrestled with these questions for centuries. Some Christians stress the sovereignty of God and so their theology and worship is God-centered. Some Christians stress the sovereignty of man and so their theology and worship is man-centered. Those who stress the sovereignty of God tend to exalt God and debase man. They are optimistic about God's power and pessimistic about human nature. Those who stress the sovereignty of man tend to exalt man and (even

unconsciously) debase God. They are more pessimistic about God's power and more optimistic about human nature.

The Senior Pastors of First Bible Church from 1965 until the present have all been graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). DTS was founded by Lewis Sperry Chafer, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. Although DTS is known in the theological world for its Dispensational theology with its emphasis on the study of Biblical prophecy, from the beginning until now, the seminary has stressed the sovereignty of God over the sovereignty of man. This will be reflected in the quotes from DTS authors below like Charles Ryrie and Chafer himself.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God comes to its glorious apex in our salvation. God's sovereignty in our salvation is discussed below in a brief overview of the doctrine of election. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that on this subject, First Bible Church is in line with historic, apostolic Christianity.

## 1. The Doctrine of Election Stated

- 1.1 *...election may be defined as the action of God in choosing those who will be saved as members of the body of Christ. Ryrie, Survey of Bible Doctrine, 117*
- 1.2 *God by his election has chosen some but not all to salvation. The fact of divine election is clearly stated in the Word of God. The fact that man can only partially understand it does not change the certainty of the truth....In the very act of divine election or choosing some are obviously not elected or chosen. (Chafer, Systematic Theology, 2:101)*
- 1.3 *The verb 'elect' or 'choose' (eklegomai), expresses the idea of picking out, or selecting, something or someone from a number of available alternatives....God's gracious election is thus free and unconditional, for it does not depend upon, nor is called forth or constrained by, anything whatever in those who are its subjects. It is a spontaneous resolve on God's part, just as were his decisions to create and to redeem. (Packer, God's Words, 159.)*
- 1.4 *From all eternity, before we ever live, God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven and others he chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment in hell. (Sproul, Chosen, 22)*

## 2. Examples in Scripture

2.1 **Jesus:** *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day....You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed*

*you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. John 6:44; 15:16*

2.2 **Luke:** *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. Acts 13:48*

2.3 **Peter:** *They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 1 Peter 2:8*

2.4 **John:** *The beast , which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when see the beast...Revelation 17:8*

2.5 **Paul:** *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2:13*

### **3. Historical Development and Acceptance of the Doctrine:**

3.1 **Augustine vs. Pelagius:** Augustine taught that because original sin made man totally unable to choose good, it is absolutely necessary for God's special grace to intervene and make man able to choose Christ. Pelagian, a monk, denied original sin and taught that man is able to take the initial steps toward salvation by his own efforts, apart from special grace. (about 420 AD)

3.2 **Luther vs. Erasmus:** Luther published *Bondage of the Will* in which he followed Augustine and asserted that man's will is not free to choose good. It is in bondage to sin. Erasmus opposed Luther and wrote *Diatribes on Free Will* in 1524.

3.3 **Calvin vs. Arminius:** Calvin followed Augustine. James Arminius chose a middle position between Augustine and Pelagius. He accepted original sin and man's inability but added that God gives prevenient grace to all so they are enabled to choose Christ. God has predecided to save all who repent and believe (foreknowledge view). This is semi-Pelagianism. Since it all hinges on man's choice, the believer can lose his salvation. His teaching was adopted by John Wesley.

Those who identified with Arminius' view (Arminians) wrote *the Five Remonstrances* in opposition to those who identified with Calvin's view (Calvinists) who responded at the Synod of Dort. The Calvinist response later became known as *The Five Points of Calvinism* (TULIP).

3.4 **Synod of Dort vs. Five Remonstrances:** *What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election is the express testimony of sacred Scripture, that not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the*

*grace of conversion; but permitting them in his just judgment to follow their own way; at last for the declaration of his justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins. (Canons of the Synod of Dort, Article 1:15, 1615, in Schaff, 3:584)*

**3.5 Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (Anglican, Episcopal):** *Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. (Article 17).*

**3.6 Westminster Confession (Congregational, Presbyterian):** *God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established...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. (Articles III:1,3, written in c. 1643)*

**3.7 Charles Spurgeon (Baptist):** *It is no novelty then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine. I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines, that are called by nickname Calvinism, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus....Were I a Pelagian, or a believer in the doctrine of free-will, I should have to walk for centuries all alone. (In a sermon on 2 Thessalonians 2:13,14 about 1857, Spurgeon's Sermons, 169)*

**3.7 Lewis Sperry Chafer (Dallas Seminary):** *Much in the doctrine of divine election transcends the limitations of finite understanding, but it is obvious that both God and man have the power of choice and that God's will is infinitely greater than human will. Accordingly in the study of the doctrine of divine election, the human mind must submit to divine revelation which should be accepted by faith even though it may not be entirely understood. (Systematic Theology, 2:98)*

## **Reasons To Believe the Doctrine of Unconditional Election**

### **1. Anyone who takes the Bible seriously has to have some kind of doctrine of election.**

#### **There are three options:**

*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified....If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen (God's elect)?* Romans 8:29-32,33.

- 1.1 Conditional Election: Based on man's foreseen good works.
- 1.2 Conditional Election: Based on man's foreseen faith. (foreknowledge view)
- 1.3 Unconditional Election: Based on God's mercy and free grace.
- 1.3.1 *Clearly people are foreknown, not faith. Clearly too foreknowledge as mere perception is not the basis of election, for 1 Peter 1:2 includes a decision on God's part....God's election was not based on foreknowledge (meaning foresight). To foreknow is not a neutral concept but involves some sort of relationship. (Ryrie, Basic, 313,314)*

## 2. Reasons To Believe The Doctrine of Unconditional Election

2.1 It is the best solution for the problems presented in previous doctrines, especially the doctrine of total inability. (Paul's argument in Romans 1-8)

- 2.1.1 *All have sinned and are guilty. Thus, God would be justified in condemning everyone. He does not owe anyone anything. 3:23*
- 2.1.2 *All deserve to perish regardless of how relatively good they are (James 2:10). God is never unjust. Romans 2:12*
- 2.1.3 *All are born spiritually dead and unable to choose or seek Christ on their own. 3:10-12; 5:16*
- 2.1.4 *Some who deserve to perish will escape it by God's mercy and grace. No one will be in hell who doesn't deserve to be. No one will be in heaven who does deserve to be. Romans 5:20,21*

2.2 It is the teaching of Scripture. (Does Paul's argument in Romans 9 best support conditional election or unconditional election?)

### Unconditional Election

Leaves no room for boasting.

*Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand; not by works but by him who calls. 9:11*

Depends on God

*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...it does not therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.*

God is free to choose

*Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy.*

### Conditional Election (foreknowledge)

Leaves some room for boasting.

Depends on Man

*9:15,16*

God's freedom is limited by man

*9:18*

## God-centered

## Man-centered

*But who are you O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, Why did you make me like this? Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* 9:20,21

Man's will is free to do what he desires but is unable to choose Christ

Man's will is free to do what he desires and is able to choose Christ.

*See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble...and the one who trust in him will never be put to shame.* 9:33

God receives all glory

God shares his glory

*What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us whom he also called...* 9:24,25

2.3 It is the best explanation for the resistance Paul encountered in Romans 9:11. Since the foreknowledge view seems so fair and acceptable to us, why would Paul anticipate such harsh reaction?

- *What shall we say then? Is God unjust? Not at all! (14)*
- *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us?"*
- *"Why did you make me like this" (20)*
- *Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? (11:34)*

2.4 It is the best Biblical guarantee of eternal security.

2.4.1 *but you do not believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. John 10:26-30*

2.4.2 If I have the freedom apart from God's electing grace to choose Christ now, then I have the freedom to refuse Christ later.

### 3. Closing Thoughts

*All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and **whoever comes to me** I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day....**No one can come to me unless** the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.* John 6:37-40,44

- ❑ It is impossible for anyone to come to Christ unless the Father draws him.
- ❑ It is impossible to believe in Christ and not be chosen.
- ❑ It is impossible to be chosen and not ever believe in Christ.
- ❑ It is impossible for Jesus to reject anyone who accepts him.
- ❑ It is impossible for a believer to lose eternal life.

## Objections to the Doctrine of Unconditional Election

### 1. Unconditional election contradicts Scriptural evidence of man's free will.

#### 1.1 John 3:16. *So God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

This simply says that whoever believes will not perish. Whoever: Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, male or female, moral or immoral, educated or uneducated, etc.

This verse is in the context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus on being born from above. Who has ever chosen to be born?

Jews like Nicodemus, were used to thinking God loves Jews, but is Jesus making the point that he loves Gentiles too?

Does John always use "world" (kosmos) to include every person on the planet? (12:19, 47; 15:19; 17:6; 17:9; 18:20; 21:25). The point: The reason God gave his son is that he loved people (notice past tense). All kinds of people.

#### 1.21 Tim. 2:3,4: *This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

This is the same author who wrote that "*in him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*" Eph. 1:13.

Is it possible that, given the context, that Paul is telling us that God wants "all kinds or classes" of men to be saved? Even kings and politicians!

Does "all" (*pas*) always mean "every single person" in the Bible or can it mean "all kinds of people"?

*Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan. (Matthew 3:5, NASB, literal translation of a figure of speech)*

*People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region*

*of the Jordan. (Matthew 3:5, NIV, accurate interpretation of a figure of speech)*

*If “all” always means “every single person”, then everyone is going to heaven (universalism).*

*Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for **all** men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for **all** men.* *Romans 5:18*

1.3 “Whosoever Will May Come” by Philip Bliss, 1838-1876. This does not contradict unconditional election. The question is not “Who will?”, but “Who will *will*.”

## **2. It contradicts God’s character by making him unjust.**

2.1 All people deserve damnation and if God chose none of us he would still be just. The question is not, Why did he choose some?, but Why did he choose any? Romans 9:14

2.2 Some people get justice. Some people get mercy. But no one is treated unfairly except Jesus Christ. He got what we deserved. Do we really want what we deserve?

2.3 *Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?* Matthew 20:14,15

## **3. It destroys man’s free will.**

3.1 Calvinists do not deny that man is free to choose what he desires, but they make two points: 1) freedom is commensurate with ability; you won’t do what you can’t do; 2) natural man will not desire God because he can’t desire God.

3.2 We choose according to the strongest inclination of the moment. God never violates this. Sinners choose against God because they are inclined to do so.

## **4. It destroys the missions and evangelism motive.**

4.1 The first motive in missions is obedience to God and concern for his glory. A burden for the lost, is a good, but secondary motive. Jesus, is our example (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, Philipians 2:8)

4.2 Calvinism is a greater motive for missions since we are guaranteed results. We preach with confidence. He will see to it that someone from “every tribe and language and people and nation” will be in heaven. Revelation 5:9

4.3 Calvinism relieves us of the pressure to pressure people. Calvinists use nets and

let God send the fish (Mt. 4:19; Luke 5:6). Arminians use bait to lure the fish.

4.4 Why pray, witness, send missionaries? Short Answer: God told us to. And if we love him we will obey him. Long answer: The God who elects people, also elects the method by which they are drawn to Him.

## **6. It makes our invitation to the lost illegitimate and dishonest.**

6.1 We do not know who the elect are until they profess faith in Christ. Therefore we issue our invitation with good conscience: *Whosoever will may come*.

6.2 God is the *First Cause*. Nothing happens by mistake or accident, and he is big enough to make all things work for good (Ro. 8:28; Gen. 15:20).

The *Second Causes* are the instruments God uses to bring about his purposes. (What we are responsible to do: prayer, witnessing, missions, live holy lives, love each other, love unbelievers, etc. What God orchestrates: circumstances, weather, blessing, disease, etc.)

6.3 We do not discuss unconditional election with the lost because God doesn't. "Election is the family secret of the sons of God" (Packer, *God's Words*, 167). God never told Moses to tell Pharaoh about God's sovereign plan.

6.4 In Acts 13, Paul invites everyone to receive forgiveness through Christ (38). He never mentions election. Yet we are told that *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed* (48).

## **7. It destroys our incentive to have children.**

7.1 This ignores the plain teaching of Scripture to "multiply" and the unanimous teaching of Scripture that encourages parenthood.

7.2 Arminianism is no comfort here. Only that which he foreknows is what will come to pass. There are no other alternatives.

## **8. It causes arrogance, self-righteousness, and exclusiveness. (*Frozen Chosen Syndrome*)**

8.1 If a doctrine can be abused that is no reason to reject it. The question is not: Is the doctrine an occasion for pride?, but, Is the doctrine true?

8.2 Any so-called Calvinist who feels smug about his election has missed the point: Election is not based on anything in the man! We have nothing to feel smug about.

8.3 Arminianism is more likely to foster pride than Calvinism, since so much depends on the person. Whether Calvinist or Arminian, all of us are constantly looking for ways to exalt ourselves! (see Ro. 11:18ff)

8.4 The whole point of Paul's argument for unconditional election is that the gospel is for people who were in the past excluded and looked down on.

8.5 The Calvinist must guard against the foolish error of thinking God chose him because he did something to attract God's favor. The Arminian must guard against the foolish error of compromising to be inclusive.

## 9. Closing Thoughts

*How His electing grace and predestined purpose can stand beside His love for the world and desire that the gospel be preached to all people, still holding them responsible for their own rejection and condemnation, is a mystery of the divine mind. The Scriptures teach God's love for the world, His displeasure in judging sinners, His desire for all to hear the gospel and be saved. They also teach that every sinner is incapable yet responsible to believe and will be damned if he does not. Crowning the Scripture's teaching on this matter is the great truth that God has elected who will believe and saved them before the world began. What a mystery! (John MacArthur, Commentary on 1 Timothy, 70)*

## 10. Recommended reading for the serious student.

*The Pleasures of God*, John Piper, Multnomah Press, 1991.

*Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger, Intervarsity Press, 1986

*Chosen By God*, R.C. Sproul, Tyndale Pub. 1987

*God's Words*, J.I. Packer, Baker, 1981

*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J.I. Packer, IVP, 1961.

*The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work Together For Good?*, R.C. Sproul, Word Pub., 1996

*God Glorified in Man's Dependence*, Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on 1 Cor. 1:29-31, in 1731. Best quote: "So much the more men exalt themselves, so much the less they will surely be disposed to exalt God."