

CHAPTER 1

SOVEREIGNTY AND FREE WILL

An Impossible Mix or a Perfect Match?

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

—Romans 11:33

Prologue

WHEN HE INVITED ME TO SPEAK, the pastor also informed me that almost half of the seven or eight hundred in the congregation would be members of Campus Crusade for Christ. That was encouraging, because Campus Crusaders are especially eager to hear the Word. Speaking to them would be sheer delight. It would also be challenging because it meant that the majority of the congregation that Sunday morning would be relatively young. What would be a suitable topic?

After some prayerful reflection, I settled on the topic and, upon being introduced, announced it to the congregation. In measured words I said, “This morning I would like to speak on the subject, ‘God loves you and has a wonderful plan.’” Then I paused. All Campus Crusaders and most everyone else knew that the first of the “Four Spiritual Laws” is “God loves you and has a wonderful plan *for your life*.” I assured them that I knew that also, but that the phrase *for your life* is practically meaningless unless what we were about to study in Romans 9–11 is eternally true and totally trustworthy.

With that as an introduction, the courteous and attentive audience became even more so—especially my Crusade friends. For the next forty-five minutes we zeroed in on what the apostle Paul had to say about the magnificent missionary plan of our great and mighty God.

No wonder the Serpent's ploy was so persuasive: "You will be *like God, knowing good and evil*" (Gen. 3:5, emphasis mine). Adam and Eve could not have foreseen it, but countless men and women yet unborn would spend a lifetime of study without solving the problem of good and evil to their own satisfaction, much less God's. And there in Eden that knowledge supposedly was available just for the eating of some forbidden fruit.

From a purely human point of view, one of life's greatest problems is that we humans simply do not know everything. It seems easier to accept our inability to *do* everything than to accept our inability to *know* everything. Real or imagined, it is the mysteries, imponderables, enigmas, riddles, conundrums, and antinomies of human existence that prevent many of the world's peoples from embracing divine revelation. To cope with enigma, people invent their own answers. Taoists manage to combine the *yin* and *yang* into the Tao. Buddhists pose the imponderable "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" to facilitate enlightenment. Marxists resolve thesis and antithesis into a synthesis that becomes a new thesis.

Meanwhile, thoroughgoing skeptics remain suspicious of this whole business.

Now none of this should be too surprising to the Christian. After all, people who are ignorant of the true God devise false gods, not just wrong answers. What is surprising is that, much like our first parents, even we believers are often tempted to press beyond both the boundaries of human finitude and the strictures of divine revelation to satisfy inquiring minds—our own or someone else's. Divine revelation may be quite acceptable until what is revealed seems to clash with human reason and logic. Then we go to work to solve the disconnect. In the process, we sometimes succeed in getting revelation and even God himself all bent out of shape.

The problem to be faced in this chapter can be expressed in quite simple terms: *What part does God play, and what part do people play, in all events but especially in those having to do with sin and salvation? What are their respective roles in all of history but especially in salvation history? What parts do God and people play in the whole of Christian missions but especially in the fulfillment of the Great Commission?* Although our present discussion focuses on differences between Calvinism and Arminianism, it does so only because that is where issues having to do with divine sovereignty and human free will constantly and consistently surface in Christian missions.

The Nature of the Question and Categorization of Answers

Questions having to do with the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are at the heart of a debate that has been with us for centuries and give every indication of being with us for a long time to come. Clothed in theological jargon, this kind of discussion may appear to be one in which only theologians and philosophers have either the interest or the capability to participate. This particular discussion, like most all others of last-

ing import, begins as a theological discussion. However, it soon becomes apparent that much more than theological positioning is at stake. For example, if systematic theology is involved, so is biblical theology. If biblical theology is concerned, so is practical theology. If practical theology is involved, our discussion is concerned not only with the way we think but also with the ways in which we pray, worship, serve, and witness.

Put another way, when we inquire into the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free will, we are inquiring into foundational questions having to do with everything from the very nature and attributes of God himself to the meaning and method of Christian missions. What part do sinners play in their salvation? Do saved sinners "elect" God, or has he already elected them? Do they exercise saving faith, or is faith as well as salvation a gift of God? Does God determine not only the course of human history but also personal histories—yours and mine? Or are humans free to write their own ticket and reap the results, whether good or bad?

Christian apologists and missionaries alike will find it impossible to avoid questions such as these if they are responsible to their calling. Answers given throughout Christian history have been so diverse and divisive that otherwise responsible missionaries are sometimes driven to despair. But they should take heart. They should be ready to give reasons for their hope in Christ. At the same time they should remember that we all see through a glass darkly. Even responsible and reputable Christians known for their scholarship, integrity, and devotion to Christ are sometimes at odds with one another on these matters. After all, we are not obliged to agree with one another on all matters—just to love and attempt to understand one another.

As they have tried to reconcile sovereignty and free will and answer related questions, Christian scholars have come up with very different and even contradictory ideas. In a recent book on the subject, and one to which I refer several times in this chapter, C. Gordon Olson deals with three views, to which I add two moderate views—moderate Calvinism and moderate Arminianism. Olson himself has come to espouse what he calls a "mediate theological view" (Olson 2002, 50–52). It will be left to readers to determine whether Olson's view is tenable and sufficiently different from moderate Calvinism and moderate Arminianism to occupy a special position between them. Be that as it may, building on Olson's work, our modified categorization is as follows:

1. Augustinian deterministic Calvinism—God alone determines all events independently of man's will, including those having to do with salvation and lostness.
2. Moderate Calvinism—Man's free will is limited and God's sovereignty and foreknowledge operate in such a way that saving grace is restricted to the elect.

3. A mediate theological view—God’s sovereignty and man’s free will are somehow synergistic, working together in ways that accomplish his plan and purpose, including those matters having to do with salvation and lostness.
4. Moderate Arminianism—God has limited his sovereignty and shown his love in such a way that his grace is extended to all on the condition of repentance and faith in the gospel of Christ, with the expectation that all are free to accept or reject it.
5. Open theism or extreme Arminianism—God’s sovereignty is subject to the limits of his foreknowledge and the largeness of his love so that man’s freedom is unimpeded in any way or to any degree.

I will not so much attempt to make a case for or against any of these positions as to shed light on some of the basic issues involved that have an impact on our understanding of the nature of God and Christian missions.

Missions in the Light of Calvinism and Arminianism

Later in this chapter we look specifically at some of the things that Scripture, and especially the book of Romans, has to say about these matters. First, however, we begin with an affirmation of God’s great plan of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. We begin with promises made to Adam as the head of our race, to Abraham as the father of faith, and to the faithful in Israel and the church. We begin with Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world, Messiah of Israel, and Head of the church. Then we examine two opposing viewpoints on sovereignty and free will, Calvinism and Arminianism, to take note of the impact these theological systems have on our understanding of the God of the Bible and the mission of the church.

John Calvin and Calvinism

Deeply devoted to Augustine (354–430) as well as to his own understanding of Scripture, John Calvin (1509–1564) held that God rules and overrules human affairs in such a way that nothing happens apart from his own counsel and will. *All* events, including evil events, are ordained by him. Nevertheless, he held that God is not at all unjust and man is responsible. Following Augustine, Calvin seems to have been quite willing to leave this mystery unresolved because he believed that it squared with the teachings of the Bible.

As for human redemption, Calvin taught that, though God hated sin in man, he also found in man that which he loved. He therefore devised a plan according to which Christ would bear sin and provide salvation in the fullness of time. Calvin’s teaching seems to have implied double predestination—that is, that some people are predestined to be saved and

others are predestined to be lost. Salvation is a gift of God, given wholly by his grace and through faith—faith which itself is a divine gift. In his foreknowledge, God knew those who would be saved and sends his Holy Spirit to engender in them the kind of faith that accepts what has been done for them in Christ. Concerning both the elect and the reprobate, Calvin wrote,

[Paul] concludes that God hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth (Rom. 9:18). You see how he refers both to the mere pleasure of God. Therefore, if we cannot assign any reason for his bestowing mercy on his people, but just that it so pleases him, neither can we have any reason for his reprobating others but his will. When God is said to visit his mercy or harden whom he will, men are reminded that they are not to seek for any cause beyond his will. (Calvin 1953, 224)

Both of the great Reformers, Calvin and Martin Luther (1483–1546), were impressed with the majesty and sovereignty of God. Both held to the historic creeds of the church and to the authority of the Scriptures. Both believed in predestination and in salvation by faith. Both believed that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) was given to, and fulfilled by, the apostles.

All of the first wave of Reformers have been faulted for not seeing the need or urgency to send missionaries to the “heathen.” More so than Luther, Calvin seems to have viewed mission primarily in terms of societal transformation. From 1541 to 1564, Calvin devoted considerable effort to making of Geneva a truly Christian society. As for Luther, he thought primarily in terms of expanding the influence of the church so as to encompass more territory and peoples.

In 1555, Calvin did send a group of French Huguenots with four clergymen to found a colony for persecuted Protestants on the Bay of Rio de Janeiro. And Luther sent his pastor and colleague, Jan Bugenhagen (1485–1558), on expeditions to the low countries, Pomerania, and Scandinavia, much as we send out short-term missionaries today.

Therefore, although none of the leading first-generation Reformers, Luther, Calvin, or Huldreich Zwingli (1484–1531), looked at missions and the Great Commission in the way we do, they and some of their most prominent followers, including Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) did exhibit a larger evangelistic concern. And later on in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hadrian Saravia (1530–1612), John Eliot (1604–1690), Justinian von Welz (1621–1688) and others within the Lutheran and Reformed churches came to reflect a view that was more like today’s conception.

Still, the fact that Protestant missions made such little headway for two hundred years after the Reformation did have theological reasons. When in about 1664, von Welz issued a call to the churches to assume

the responsibility of evangelizing the world, almost all of his colleagues thought him a dreamer at best and a heretic at worst.

“The holy things of God are not to be cast before such dogs and swine,” was one reaction, as quoted by J. Herbert Kane in *A Global View of Christian Mission* (Kane 1971, 76). Much later in the 1790s, hyper-Calvinists in Scotland refused to support William Carey (1761–1834) in his mission to India, declaring that the “conversion of the heathen” would have to wait until God did it. The title of Carey’s work, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792), indicates the difficulties Carey had with certain Calvinists (Neill 1965, 261). And when, a little over a decade later in 1806, American students were driven under a haystack by rain and spent the time praying for the world, they kept records in code because they were persuaded that Calvinists would think of their ideas as absurd (Olson 2002, 384).

There is another side to this predestinarian coin, however. In discussing Calvinism’s contribution to nineteenth-century Protestant missions, Roger Greenway notes that Calvinist missionaries played a major role in missions to Africa, Asia, and Latin America in particular. He credits in part the emphases on God’s sovereignty in missions and God’s lordship over all places and every aspect of life. He also insists that the importance of the glory of God in Calvinist theology was a motivating influence for carrying out evangelism. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever” (Greenway 2000, 155–56).

Jacob Arminius and Arminianism

In the late sixteenth century a student of Beza, Jakob Arminius (1560–1609), became a Reformed pastor in Amsterdam. Well-educated and eloquent, he attracted large audiences. At the time, certain Dutch Reformed ministers known as the remonstrants took issue with the view that God decreed certain men to be lost and others to be saved. They held:

- that Christ died for all and not just for the elect;
- that salvation is by faith alone given from God’s grace and through rebirth; and
- that God does not predestine any person to be either lost or saved but
- that all who accept God’s grace are saved, and those who reject it are lost.

When Arminius left his pastorate and became a professor at the University of Leiden, he set out to refute these remonstrants. Instead, he was persuaded by them. Arminius died before the controversy eventuated in the calling of a synod of Reformed church leaders at Dordt or Dordrecht in the Netherlands (1618–19). At the Synod of Dordt, a five-point Calvinism was set out to refute the ideas popularized by Arminius. The remonstrants were excommunicated.

Arminius and others who held to more moderate Calvinist doctrines came to be known as Arminians. Many who were basically of that persuasion played important roles in launching the modern missionary movement from the Continent in the seventeenth century; from England at the end of the eighteenth century; and from America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Included were the Pietists Philip Spener (1635–1705) and August Francke (1663–1727) of Halle; Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) and the Moravians of Herrnhut in Germany. William Carey (1761–1834) moved to this position after his rejection by some members of his own presbytery and it became the theological position of his Baptist missions board.

According to Charles Van Engen, Arminianism has made five major contributions to Protestant missions thinking and activity.

1. The belief that Christ died for all has provided missionary motivation.
2. The emphasis on conversion and a relationship with Christ has been an impetus for evangelism and revival.
3. The stress on prevenient grace has meant that Arminians are open to the workings of God's grace in righting the wrongs caused by sin and in openness toward cultures.
4. The call for religious freedom from the state has provided for a more freewheeling and creative approach to missions.
5. The emphasis on freedom in working cooperatively with God has given impetus to world evangelization and social reform (Van Engen 2000, 76–78).

Not all observers will evaluate some of these emphases quite as positively as does Van Engen. Some will find here a certain anthropocentrism and experientialism that can be overreaching and even counterproductive. However, as in the case of Calvinism, most of the really deleterious influences of Arminian theology and missiology emanate from extreme forms of it.

Analyzing and Avoiding the Extremes

True teachings can be pressed to the point where other teachings, equally true, are lost sight of and the teachings so tenaciously held and extremely stretched are left alone to explain all relevant phenomena. Partial truth, while still truth, is not the whole truth even though it may be made to function as though that were indeed the case. Calvinism can be maintained and expounded in such a way that it makes (or *appears* to make) God out to be the Author or Determiner of everything that happens and man the victim of

God's decisions. Arminianism can be maintained and expounded in such a way that it makes (or *appears* to make) man out to be the sole determiner of his fate and God the loving but limited landlord of the human estate.

Augustinian Deterministic Calvinism

Augustine's idea was that God's sovereignty is exhaustive, comprehensive, and deterministic of all events, not just the salvation event. That view was argued by the Synod of Dordt (1618–19) and in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). However, Augustine's determinism was thought to be extreme by some. Melancthon anticipated Arminian theology and sent the Lutheran Church in that direction with the Augsburg Confession (1530). Arminius and the remonstrants strongly rejected Augustine's pessimism about human ability.

As one would anticipate, determinists such as Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), and Charles Hodge (1797–1878) have been succeeded by contemporary interpreters such as John Piper, Ray Ortlund Jr., R. C. Sproul, and Harold Camping. But, by the same token, these determinists have critics who believe that their teachings lead to hurtful consequences. C. Gordon Olson is one of them. He expresses appreciation for the scholarship of these men, but he finds their methodology flawed and some of their conclusions extreme and believes that they unnecessarily polarize believers. He maintains that some of their statements on predestination and election go beyond the biblical text; that some of their assertions go beyond Calvin's own statements; and that the frequent charge that Arminians and most evangelicals today are Pelagian or semi-Pelagian is divisive (Olson 2002, 441–46).

Entertaining a related but still different concern, Ralph Winter takes issue with what he calls a "passive Augustinian neo-Platonism" that experiences catastrophic illness and other bad events and then concludes that "it must have been God's will." Winter points out that, despite his deterministic position, Edwards died in an effort to spare Indians by trying out a vaccine on himself. He did this in the face of Augustinian/Calvinistic fellow clergy who said that he was "interfering with Divine Providence" (Winter 2001, 6). Winter credits the open theist Gregory Boyd with a substantial insight when, in *God at War*, Boyd maintains that sickness is the "work of the devil, and not the will of God" (Boyd 1997, 183; quoted in Winter 2001, 5). Winter advances the idea that research and other undertakings directed toward the eradication of disease-bearing microbiological organisms are part of our Christian duty in the war against evil (see chap. 10). And he insists that this understanding and approach would have tremendous appeal to educated Hindus, whose worldview makes Brahman out to be the source of suffering and evil.

To the extent that Calvinists state or defend their position in extreme ways, criticisms such as those of Olson and Winter merit a hearing. Most evangelicals take exception to the notion that the God and Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ is the Author of evil. They take exception to a scenario where humans dance puppet-like on a string that reaches from heaven and to the accepting and supposedly “faith-full” response, “God killed my baby.” The God of the Bible becomes an impersonal god like Brahman or a deity like Allah who rules by fiat decree and whose love is confined to submitters only.

However, not all extremists are of a determinist bent. Some are free-willist.

Open Theism and Extreme Arminianism

At the free-willist, Arminian end of the theological spectrum is a view of God that became quite prominent about the turn of the century. Sometimes called extreme Arminians, open theists such as Gregory Boyd, Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Richard Rice, and William Hasker take exception to the classic view of God held by the church fathers and Reformers (Pinnock 1996; Boyd 2001). They deny that God is omniscient in the sense that he has absolute foreknowledge of all future events. Whether by self-limitation or simply by virtue of the fact that future events have not yet occurred and therefore cannot be known, God’s sovereignty is circumscribed. He simply does not have foreknowledge that encompasses all future happenings. Even if he may somehow be able to orchestrate certain events crucial to his purposes (e.g., such as the crucifixion of Christ), he cannot know the free actions of individuals that culminate in such events. Open theists emphasize that God’s love is such that humans are free to make their own choices. Often surprised by the calamities that overtake his children, God “feels” with them in their difficulties and sometimes “changes his mind” in response to their entreaties and prayers.

Criticisms of open theology are numerous and serious. Most basic is the criticism that open theism flies in the face of the orthodox and biblical teaching that one of God’s attributes is a foreknowledge that is comprehensive and absolute. Furthermore, in denying God’s omniscience, open theists also diminish his omnipotence, immutability, and ability to effect his plan for history. As Bruce Ware writes,

And what do we make of God’s providential oversight of the unfolding of human history? Deficient knowledge and wisdom surely mean that neither we nor God can be certain about just what will happen in the end. Will God succeed in fulfilling his goals? Will history move in the direction he hopes it will? Are God’s predictions and promises sure? The only answer open theists can give to these questions is that they are hopeful that God will somehow pull it off. . . . In short, the God of open theism suffers greatly from this lack of knowledge and it affects his plans, wise counsel, predictive ability, and providential control of history. (Ware 2000, 20)

E. Calvin Beisner goes so far as to say that open theism constitutes an “evangelical heathenism.” His view is that open theists remake God in

accordance with their own image of him. He dates the invasion of open theology into the modern missions movement to the 1930s and 1940s with the moral government theology of Gordon C. Olson (1907–1989; not to be confused with C. Gordon Olson, also cited in this chapter). An engineer and informal Bible teacher associated with the organization Men for Missions, Gordon C. Olson was influenced by revivalist Charles G. Finney (1792–1875) and theologian Lorenzo D. McCabe (1817–1897). Beisner appeals to a number of theologians and contends that Finney tended to elevate philosophy over Scripture. McCabe took Arminius’s and John Wesley’s ideas of human freedom and carried them entirely too far. Influenced by Finney and McCabe, Olson promoted the idea that “God’s foreknowledge was necessarily limited by human free will” (Beisner 1996, 17). Abandoning the classical doctrine of the omniscience of God and taking his findings to their “logical” conclusion, Olson taught that such classical doctrines as original sin, human depravity and moral inability, the atonement, and justification are also wrong.

Beisner’s criticism of Olson’s open theism (and moral government theology) is indeed severe, but there has been no shortage of other critiques and by no means do all of them stem from Calvinistic determinism and the doctrine of foreordination.

One of the earliest criticisms of open theism was that of William Lane Craig (Craig 1987, esp. 27–37). In Craig’s view, foreordination cannot be the only, or even the best, argument against open theism. First, Craig surveys the vast amount of biblical data that confirms what Christians have known and believed from apostolic times, namely, that God has absolute knowledge of the past, present, and future. Accordingly, he maintains that the plain and overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that open theology/theism cannot be true.

Second, he argues that God’s foreknowledge includes knowledge of our sinful intentions, thoughts, and behaviors. But since God cannot be the author of evil, it is not possible that he foreordained these sinful occurrences. Sinful activities “are therefore truly free acts, or contingents, and God’s knowledge of them is thus foreknowledge of future free actions” (quoted in Olson 2002, 451).

Third, Craig upholds the concept of middle knowledge—the notion that God knows the future in its entirety, and he knows the events that could take place but *actually do not*. For example, Jesus said that if the mighty works he did in Galilee had been performed in Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon, those cities would have repented (Matt. 11:20–24). This demonstrates a knowledge not only of what actually happened but what might have happened under different circumstances. Having knowledge this extensive, God has the ability to choose between the free choices of human agents by ordering circumstances without effecting the actual choices themselves.

The primary stage upon which this controversy will be played out is a theological one. But a theological issue is also a missiological issue by

definition. Recalling the pilgrimage of McCabe, we cannot disregard the possibility—even the likelihood—that denial of God’s omniscience will lead to changes in or rejection of doctrines intrinsic to biblical missions. This will be apparent in chapter 2. As we will see (pp. 56–57), some open theists refashion the love of God in such a way as to make heaven not universally obtainable but bordering on the inescapable. God’s mercy becomes so wide and human freedom so extensive that only those who actually choose hell can be expected to go there. To the extent that open theists go to such an extreme, not only is the sovereign God of the Bible diminished by human freedom, but Christian mission is diminished as well.

Mediating Proposals and Options

The best way to deal with the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is to go to the biblical text and, employing sound principles of exegesis, attempt to see what the text actually says. Of course, the Scriptures must be read and studied within the contexts of the historical and contemporary churches, so we must give consideration to whatever the best minds and hearts of the church have had to say and do. Church and missions history provides us with numerous correctives if we are prepared to learn from history. But ultimately we must go to the Bible for ourselves and study the text “in its original historical-cultural and grammatico-literary, as well as its theological, context,” as William Larkin admonishes us (Larkin 2001, 1). Philip Schaff long ago wrote, “The Bible gives us a theology which is more human than Calvinism, and more divine than Arminianism, and more Christian than either of them” (cited in Olson 2002, 32).

In identifying basic views on this subject, C. Gordon Olson does not give special attention to either a moderate Calvinism or a moderate Arminianism. Rather, he identifies his own view as being the “mediate theological view” and provides an extensive explanation without mentioning other parallel views. Perhaps he feels that his view is unique. Perhaps it is. Here I will look at Olson’s “mediate” view alongside that of a moderate Calvinist and a moderate Arminian. None of the three views comes out of an attempt to work out some kind of “friendly compromise.” All three are sincere attempts to wrestle with what the Bible actually has to say on this critical issue, thereby opening the door to continuing dialogue. All three proposers are wholeheartedly committed, not only to the authority of Scripture, but also to Christian mission.

D. A. Carson and Grant R. Osborne are colleagues in the New Testament department of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) in Deerfield, Illinois. C. Gordon Olson completed his doctoral studies at TEDS. The reference used in briefly summarizing the positions of Carson and Osborne is a publication of the Ministerial Association of the Evangelical Free Church of America in which their views are compared and contrasted (Keynes 2001). Carson has written an entire book on the topic (Carson

1994). For Olson's position we will look at his book, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism* (Olson 2002).

The Mediating Perspective of a Calvinist: D. A. Carson

Carson approaches the problem as a Calvinist and argues for "compatibilism" (Keynes 2001, 1–10; see also Carson 1994; Carson 2000). In his view, God is absolutely sovereign but never in a way that mitigates human responsibility. His sovereignty is never to be understood to mean that anything and everything that happens does so as a result of God's direct doing and therefore man is not really free. Divine sovereignty and human free will are not antithetical because God stands behind good and evil "asymmetrically." That is, God stands behind good in such a way that he causes good, and it is to be credited to him. Evil, on the other hand, is occasioned by secondary causes. God himself is not responsible for evil nor is he to be charged with that responsibility.

The Bible yields numerous illustrations of compatibilism. For example, when Joseph's brothers were confronted with the evil they had done in selling him into slavery, Joseph said, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:19–20). Two very different intentions were involved in that single act. The fact that God used it for good and deserved credit for that did not mitigate the fact that Joseph's brothers meant it for evil and therefore they had to bear responsibility for what they did. Joseph gave God credit for the good, but God alone was in a position to judge Joseph's brothers.

Joseph's experience presaged a similar and infinitely more important event, namely, the crucifixion of Christ which, in accordance with God's perfect plan effected salvation but without absolving those who actually crucified him of responsibility for that heinous crime.

Carson clears up a number of difficulties that arise out of mistaken assumptions and misinterpretations of the biblical text, but he is quite ready to concede that, though compatibilism offers a logical and biblical way of better understanding the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, compatibilism itself remains something of a mystery.

The Mediating Perspective of an Arminian: Grant R. Osborne

Approaching the question from an Arminian perspective, Osborne says that both Calvinists and Arminians do well to approach their differences with a good measure of humility. Not only does the Bible present us with a large number of verses that support both positions, but a careful reading of the Bible as a whole would seem to indicate that God is not as interested in this issue as we are. Furthermore, there is no indication that this issue was a subject of debate in the early church.

That having been said, Osborne is concerned that extreme forms of both views be rejected (Keynes 2001, 10–13). He is persuaded that

a correct understanding of Arminianism would answer to excesses of both positions. Arminianism, he says, does hold to God's omniscience, his sovereignty, and even to the predestination of those who will believe. At the same time, human depravity means that, faced with a decision for Christ, the person who does not know Christ will reject him apart from the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. Predestination grows out of that foreknowledge. So repentance and faith is "simply the way we participate in the saving work of God (Rom. 3:21–4:25)" (12).

One way of reconciling freedom and divine foreknowledge is middle knowledge (referred to above) according to which God knows all possible worlds in which humans exercise free will and God actualizes the possible world that conforms to his will. But of greater interest than satisfying the biblical tension between sovereignty and freedom is Osborne's twin interests of helping the church to avoid both doctrinal aberrations and ecclesiastical divisions with reference to this question.

The "Mediate Theological View": C. Gordon Olson

Olson's missionary text *What in the World Is God Doing?* (Olson 2003) and his *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism* (Olson 2000) are of special interest because they reflect the musings and investigations of a missiologist who has wrestled with these issues and arrived at an understanding that he believes to be satisfying and biblical.

Olson first attempted to divest himself of unwarranted assumptions and undertook a thoroughgoing inductive study of the biblical text as it relates to Calvinism and Arminianism. He reaches a view that is actually more Amyraldian (i.e., basically Calvinist but more Arminian with respect to the doctrine of grace). But since Olson himself simply calls it a "mediate theological view" I will attempt to briefly summarize what is involved and leave it at that.

There are three major movements in the development of Olson's mediate position: (1) a new awareness that philosophical assumptions play a major role in Calvinist extremism; (2) an extensive inductive study of the biblical text; and (3) the emergence of a new position. Let's look at what is involved.

First, Olson credits Calvinist J. Oliver Buswell Jr. with "sensitizing" him to a philosophical error that had been a determining factor in his own thinking up to his reading of Buswell. The error was the commonly held notion that God cannot foreknow that which he has not determined. Buswell's response to that idea reminds us of William Lane Craig's position above and is unequivocal. He writes:

[Jonathan] Edwards and [Lorraine] Boettner thus come to the conclusion that, since God is omniscient, there can be no free or contingent event.

But it is presumptuous for man to claim to know what kind of things God could or could not know. *There is a mystery in knowledge which will*

probably never be resolved for us. Nevertheless, even human knowledge is an observable fact. For men to declare that God could not know a free event in the future seems to me sheer dogmatism. (Buswell 1962, 1:46; emphasis mine)

Olson holds that Buswell's insight is devastating to both extreme Calvinism and extreme Arminianism. Olson likewise takes aim at another unwarranted assumption by saying that the certainty of a future event need not necessarily mean that the event has been divinely determined.

Second, having disabused himself of these "unwarranted assumptions," Olson proceeds with an inductive study of the biblical text that includes relevant word studies, an examination of texts crucial to the cases of extremists, a special study of passages that bear most intimately on the sovereignty of God as sovereignty relates to salvation, and so on. Only by undertaking a careful reading of this book will the reader be able to appreciate the comprehensiveness of his study.

Third, as one would expect, the "mediate view" to which Olson arrives is both comprehensive and complex. Nothing approaching justice can be done to it in this venue, but by simply pointing to some baseline conclusions that relate most intimately to the sovereignty/free will issue, perhaps readers will get a sense of his thinking.

1. God limited the exercise of his sovereignty by creating moral beings and delegating certain authority to them.
2. Since the fall did not erase God's image, depravity does not mean that man cannot respond to God's initiatives.
3. Although Christ's death is particularly efficacious for believers, it is potentially available to all.
4. Election/foreordination is based upon foreknowledge.
5. The conviction of the Spirit immediately prepares sinners for faith.
6. The new birth is conditioned upon repentant faith.
7. God's calling to salvation is not irresistible.
8. God declares sinners to be righteous by repentant faith alone, apart from works.
9. Christ's charge is to proclaim salvation on God's terms (Olson 2002, 33–44).

In essence, Olson's mediate position holds that by virtue of his omniscience and foreknowledge God orchestrates and orders events of his choosing without coercing the wills of the moral agents involved in them. Certain men and women may not incline themselves to follow God's will and for that they will be held accountable. But by his Spirit, an omniscient and omnipotent God can work in both the world of his making and the lives of his creatures in such a way as to counteract evil and effect his own plan and purpose.

Sovereignty, Freedom, and God's Plan according to Paul

One Bible passage frequently referred to in connection with the issue is Romans 9–11. Given the fact that the early Christians entertained existential questions just as puzzling and even perplexing as the theoretical questions we face, it is not surprising that the Spirit led missionary Paul to write to these issues as they relate to the larger plan of God in church and missions.

The Two Meanings of “Mystery”

The word *mystery* (Gk. *Mysterion*) comes into play here. The term is used twenty-seven times in the New Testament (twenty-two times in the singular). The word is derived from *muo*, which means to shut one's mouth and from that idea comes the basic meaning of “silence,” and by extension, “secret.” The word has various related meanings in the New Testament, but primarily it is used to refer to sacred truth or information or teaching that would not be known to human intelligence unless and until God chooses to reveal it by his Spirit. Accordingly, Paul speaks of the “mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19), the “mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3), the “mystery” having to do with Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32), and, in the chapters before us, the “mystery” of God's plan for the partial hardening of Israel, the inauguration and completion of the “times of the Gentiles,” and the restoration of Israel (Rom. 11:25).

It is of the utmost importance that we recognize the profound difference between this (primary, but not sole) use of *mysterion* in the New Testament and the meaning of the English word *mystery* as commonly defined in our dictionaries and used in ordinary conversation (i.e., something beyond human comprehension). As is often said, New Testament mysteries are “revealed secrets”—known, but only by virtue of divine revelation. English dictionary mysteries, on the other hand, are “known to be incomprehensible” or, at least, largely so.

Paul highlights both types of mystery in Romans 9–11 and it is of the essence that we understand this to be the case. Paul did not write these chapters primarily to solve human conundrums of either the first or the twenty-first century. He wrote them to answer questions growing out of divine revelation, especially those having to do with God's plan for his people Israel.

What about God's promises to Abraham, his disposition of Israel as a nation, and the relationship between believing Jews and Gentiles in the

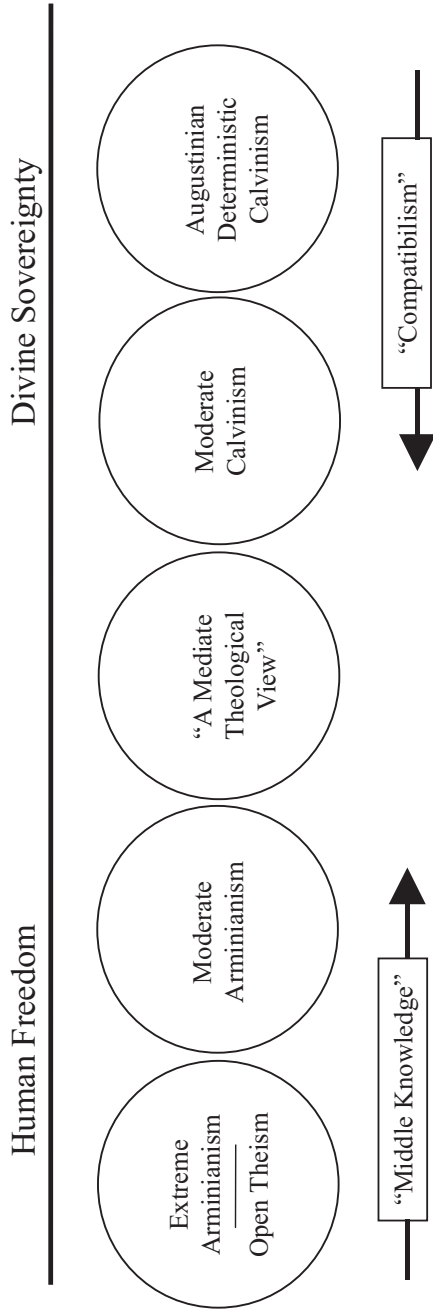
church of Jesus Christ? These were the “mysteries” with which Paul and his readers were concerned (Rom. 11:29; Eph. 3:4, 6, 9). Granted, in answering these and still other questions related to God’s plan for Israel, Paul dealt with other perplexing issues as well. But Paul was mainly concerned with the faithfulness of God, his great redemptive plan for the world, and the place of Israel and the church in that plan. Roman Christians, and other believers, desperately needed to understand the nature of the true God and the divine plan for all peoples and especially his own. Answers to the questions were available, but only by virtue of divine revelation.

It is reassuring that, nearly a century and a half ago in his commentary on Romans, Charles Hodge, distinguished between these two types of mysteries (Hodge 1859, 277). Recognition of that simple distinction no doubt contributed to some emphases that do not ordinarily characterize Reformed theology, such as his insistence that God makes his salvation available to all; that God’s offer of mercy is to be extended to all; and that “whosoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (256–57). While the identity of the Jewish nation has to do with a separate debate, Hodge also took a position more common to Arminians that the “[Jewish] nation, as such, shall acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah, and be admitted into his (God’s) kingdom” (278).

The Mystery of the “Partial Hardening of Israel” and God’s Plan

Frederick Godet called the book of Romans the “cathedral of the Christian Faith” (Godet 1970, introduction). Certainly it is one of the most concise and yet incisive theologies ever penned. It was most likely written about A.D. 58 to the fledgling church at Rome. Though Paul had not yet visited the church, he knew a number of the believers there (Rom. 16:3–16) and something of their trials. Jews, for example, had already been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius (ruled 41–54) and some were perhaps returning with predictable anxieties. Christians undoubtedly were aware of precursors of the kind of persecution that was about to be unleashed under Nero (ruled 54–68). It was no simple matter to figure out what in the world God was doing.

Look at it this way. As the “apostle to the Gentiles,” Paul wanted believers in Rome to understand not only what God was doing but also his own message and mission. Accordingly, he laid out the basics of God’s eternal and magnificent plan of redemption. As he proceeded to unfold the doctrines of sin, justification, sanctification, and glorification, the Roman believers must have been overawed by the greatness and majesty of it all. At the same time, they were living in a time of transition. The “people of God” had come to include many people other than Jews. In fact, in the church the distinction between Jew and Gentile had been erased. There was no preference. Or was there? What about God’s prior election of Israel? Had God’s plan and promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob failed? If so, and God was unable to work out his plan for Israel, what about the promises and plan for all Christians



Based on C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation*. Cedar Knolls, N.J.: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002:50-52.

Figure 1. Free Will and Divine Sovereignty

as disclosed in Romans 1–8? To put it in another way (and in a way some may prefer to put it), what kind of God is he after all? Is he forgetful of his promise? Changeable? Unknowing? Limited?

Paul deals with questions such as these in Romans 9–11. Many commentators think of these chapters as constituting a parenthesis between the doctrinal chapters that preceded them and the practical chapters that follow. But if these chapters constitute a parenthesis, it must be one of the most important parentheses ever penned. A consideration of Paul's teachings at this point should be sufficient to convince us of that. Take note of Paul's points:

As concerns God's sovereignty in his dealings with Israel—Romans 9:1–29. Paul affirms that Israel is indeed a special people of God, and that the promise of God to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3 et al.) has not failed. But not all natural descendents (“children of the flesh”—v. 8) are children of the promise because God chose as his special children the descendents of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. And he did so of his own sovereign will before they were born and could show themselves to be good or bad.

But wait a minute. Paul's answer, based on divine revelation, elicits a question that emanates from human curiosity: How can God hold Hagar, Ishmael, Esau, and their progeny responsible when he is the one who did the choosing? How does one get around that problem? And Paul only compounds that mystery when he adds that it all depends on God's will and purpose, not on human will and works. Why? Because God purposes that his power be proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Human questioners of every century really get their comeuppance here. “Who, after all, do God's creatures think they are to question God's decisions?” asks Paul. Since when does the pot question the potter as concerns its shape? These rhetorical questions are straightforward and to the point. They are also rather unsatisfying if we persist in pursuing human perplexities. But if we are willing to take our lumps and return to what God has chosen to reveal of his will and plan, more light will be forthcoming.

Paul goes on to say that the sin of Israel would be sufficient ground for their rejection as a nation. But since all Israelites were not rejected there must be more. And there is: God's promise to Abraham, his commandments through Moses, his judgment on Pharaoh's Egypt, his messages of mercy through Hosea and Isaiah—all are still valid. God in patience endured vessels of wrath in order to make vessels of mercy. God fashioned for himself a people who were not a people, a “beloved” who was not beloved, and “sons of the living God” who were nobodies. So says Hosea. And so it is. Apart from God's mercy corporate Israel would have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah. But because God is patient, loving, and merciful, a remnant will be saved and “carry out [God's] sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” So says Isaiah. And so it is. There are no ifs, ands, or buts here precisely because, in the final analysis, the fulfillment of God's plans and promises does not depend upon “human will or exertion.” It depends on God himself.

As concerns man's freedom to respond to God—Romans 9:30–10:21. In this section of the parenthesis, Paul speaks more to issues having to do with human will and the ability to respond appropriately to God. In the closing verses of chapter 9, Paul says that the difference between the larger nation of Israel on the one hand, and the “remnant” of Israel and believing Gentiles on the other, is that the former relied on the law and attempted to attain righteousness by works while the latter exercised faith and attained the righteousness that comes by faith. Corporately, Israel “stumbled over Christ” and was (temporarily) rejected. A remnant of Jews and many Gentiles believed in Christ and have been (eternally) saved.

The eternal purpose of God being to show forth his own power and mercy through Christ, human freedom basically consists in inclining heart and mind toward or away from God and his revelation. All lesser freedoms flow from this fundamental one. And even here it is the Holy Spirit who is at work. Illumination, conviction, salvation—all are aspects of his work of grace. Acknowledgment, repentance, faith—God has every right to expect these by way of grateful response. If this is not enough to completely quiet our human curiosity, it nevertheless is essential to understanding the plan of God.

These truths bring us to one of the greatest missionary passages in the entire Bible—a passage we must look at in some considerable detail in the chapter that follows on the fate of the unevangelized. At this point, we confine ourselves to the shortest and simplest way of summarizing Paul's teaching in these verses as it relates to the present discussion: God's eternal and unchangeable purpose and plan is that in this age of grace his “new people,” the church, preach the gospel to people everywhere so that “whosoever will” may call upon the name of the Lord and be saved (Rom. 10:14–17). It is our responsibility and privilege to go and preach to worldlings. It is their privilege and responsibility to hear and believe.

As concerns the brilliance and glory evident in the divine plan—Romans 11:1–36. Paul himself must have been overwhelmed as he unraveled the threads of God's magnificent plan for Israel and the nations as outlined in the first thirty-two verses of Romans 11. God did not reject Israel even though they temporarily rejected him. As in Old Testament times so today in this age of grace, there is a Jewish remnant who will believe when the gospel is preached. Though Israel as a nation has been removed from the olive tree and the Gentiles grafted in, this arrangement is temporary. The salvation of Gentiles will move Israel to jealousy and faith, the “times of the Gentiles” will come to an end, and Israel will be grafted into the olive tree again. If Israel's trespass has blessed the world through the death and resurrection of Christ, just imagine what their turnaround will mean, not only for them but for the entire world. Truly through Abraham all will be blessed.

What began with a human query in Romans 9:1 ends in *gloria Dei* in Romans 11:33–36. Human curiosity may not be fully satisfied, but the all-important answer to the question with which Paul began this section

of Romans is now so clear and compelling that Paul himself can hardly contain himself. No person had any inkling of what God would do with his chosen people. No one was in a position to offer God counsel as to how he should proceed, once they rejected him. No people of earth merited either his saving grace or the revelation of his grace. Yet being as all-knowing as he is, he conceived the plan. Being as loving as he is, he made it possible. Being as all-powerful as he is, he will carry it through:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33, 36)

Conclusion

Curious things happen in human forums. For years, members of the Evangelical Theological Society (E.T.S.) engaged in a debate on the theological position of open theology as it has been expressed by some who consider themselves evangelical. The debate finally came down to the question of whether two members who espouse open theism, Clark Pinnock of McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario, and John Sanders of Huntington (Indiana) College, should be expelled from the E.T.S. Many discussions and almost an entire issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2002) were devoted to the question. Many expected that they would be expelled at the annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, in November 2003, but accommodations were made and that action was not taken.

A report in *Christianity Today* related, “Most members of the E.T.S. believe such teaching [i.e., open theism] not only departs from the overwhelming testimony of Christian thinkers through the ages but also calls into question God’s own accuracy in biblical prophecy.” If that is so, ordinary mortals might wonder how it could be that its proponents could be exonerated in the councils of astute twenty-first-century evangelical theologians (Neff 2004, 21). But it appears that open theists have not been exonerated. Very likely the open theology discussion has not been closed. As E.T.S. President David Howard Jr. of Bethel Seminary later reported, “Open theism has not been cleared. The issue was the connection to -inerrancy.”

It seems that, after all had been said and done, the issue ultimately did not come down to whether open theism is acceptable. Since the theological basis of the E.T.S. rests on a shared belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the real issue is whether a member can opt for open theism and still hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. Both Pinnock and Sanders claim to believe in inerrancy, so in the final analysis the question becomes, “What does inerrancy mean?” (see further discussion of that issue in ch. 8). According to Howard, “Upholding inerrancy will probably require incorporating an expanded definition of the term in the ETS constitution. That will require an 80 percent vote and a long process” (Neff 2004, 22).

In short, rather than resolve the problem of open theism, well-meaning theologians have taken on another problem that just aggravates matters. We have left the question of the nature of God and moved to a discussion of the nature of revelation. Some observers might be justified in using this debate as *prima facie* evidence that theologians do not solve problems. Rather, they only create problems to be solved.

But that conclusion is unwarranted. If anything, all of this simply proves that, like everyone else, theologians have limitations, both individually and corporately. It also may well prove that, when it comes to the question before us, there is a point at which acceptance of the complementarity and even synergy of God's sovereignty and man's freedom actually can enlighten our minds, strengthen our faith, encourage our service, and reinforce our mission. By the same token, there is a point past which the clash and tension between divine sovereignty and human free will do just the opposite.

It is incumbent upon us all, then, to recognize our finitude, avoid extremes seemingly necessitated by human reason or bias, and simply accept God for who he is and Scripture for what it says. Then we should trust ourselves to the faith and service of an all-knowing, all-powerful, wholly just, and ever-loving God. Parallel rails of a railroad track seem to run together if one looks far enough into the distance. But, given human reason and experience, we know that they do not actually meet. They just appear to do so. The sovereignty of God and the free will of humankind appear to run on parallel tracks and, no matter how far we gaze into the future, it seems that they cannot possibly come together.

But given divine revelation, a full measure of faith, and an appropriate supply of humility, we eventually will come to understand that they *come together*. It just *appears* that they cannot do so. In another dimension of space and time they actually can and will. In the end, divine sovereignty and human free will prove to be a perfect match, not an impossible mix.

Christ staked his whole life and ministry on it. We can stake ours on it too.

Epilogue

Returning to that Sunday morning message illustration with which we introduced this chapter, I began the sermon by saying "I would like to speak this morning on the topic 'God Loves You and Has a Wonderful Plan . . . Period.'" It was the "period" that initially ruffled that part of my audience that was "in the know." They were so conditioned to hearing and repeating "God loves you and has a wonderful plan *for your life*" that my topic seemed to be not only truncated but almost heretical.

For forty minutes or so we devoted our minds to thinking with Paul as he showed how an awesome God melded the vagaries of Abraham's faith, the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, the steel of Joseph's character, and (miracle of miracles) the horrendous crucifixion of his beloved Son by his chosen people. His plan was such that he could provide and proclaim the

life-giving gospel to all peoples. As we proceeded in the text, our hearts sang with Paul: “Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

Then and only then did the true significance of the “therefore” in Romans 12:1 become apparent. If our God was both willing and capable of effecting such a wonderful plan for Israel, for his church, and for the whole world, is it not reasonable that we freely present our bodies in sacrificial service to him? And is it not reasonable to believe that, whatever twists and turns our life might take, sooner or later we will discover that his plan for our life is as “good and acceptable and perfect” as has been his magnificent plan for all of history (Rom. 12:2)? After all, his plan for *our* history is but part of his larger plan for *all* history, is it not?

As they departed church that morning, some of our hearers remarked, “You know, I never thought of it that way.” That’s a bit odd, isn’t it? The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to think and write about it that way almost two thousand years ago.

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