

# Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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## Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

by Dan Trygg

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Genesis 1:26-28

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” II Peter 3:9

“...who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” I Timothy 2:4

“Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.<sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?<sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord Yahweh; so turn, and live.” Ezekiel 18:30-32

“The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John.” Luke 7:30

“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,<sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,” 2 Peter 3:11-12

One of the puzzling questions in theology has to do with the relationship between what theologians call “God’s sovereignty” and “human freedom of choice”. The question has to do with, “**How much is God in control over our choices and decisions?**”, versus “How much are we free to make decisions on our own, without interference, control or influence from God?”.

**On the one extreme are those who would say that God determines everything.** To them, human freedom is little more than an illusion. God is always going to have His way, His will, His desire. He is in control of *every* decision and *every* event. Nothing happens outside of His will and purpose. **An obvious problem for such people is how to account for evil and calamity. Is God in direct control of this, too?**

**On the other extreme are those who emphasize human freedom to the exclusion of God’s oversight or influence.** In their minds, we are free choosers, with no limitations, controls or interference by God. We do what we want, and God keeps His distance. We are autonomous, literally a “law unto ourselves”. We are masters of our own fates, and God will not interfere with our choices. **An obvious problem for these people is that there *are* definite limitations on our choices built right into the world around us. We *can’t* do just anything we want.**

Furthermore, the fact that God will judge and punish evil is a definite interference at a most fundamental level.

As I said, these are the extremes on both sides of a continuum of debate and opinion. It is important, when approaching classical theological or philosophical controversies, to recognize that often human reasoning, debate and argumentation have made assumptions, defined terms and historically led the discussion in directions that may be far removed from what the Bible actually says. **It is easy to be swept up into well-established positions**, ...to “pick sides”, as it were..., when **we should really be avoiding “sides” so that we can think more clearly** without the distortions and pressures of others. **We need to go back to the basics. What does the Bible *actually* say about these issues?** When people “define terms”, or use “buzz words”, are they getting at the real meaning of the original writings, or are they bringing their bias *to* the Scriptures, ...reading things *in* which do not faithfully represent what the original inspired authors meant? This particular theological debate is particularly “poisoned” by specialized definitions and unwarranted pre-judgment, on *both* sides of the issue. **It is also important to stop where the revelation stops.** “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our children” (Deut. 29:29). If we could avoid speculations and extrapolations that go beyond what God revealed, we would eliminate most of the debate.

**Regarding God’s “sovereignty”, the very term is a misnomer.** The origin of the word originated from the Latin (*super anum* – power above), was passed on through French (*soverein* – princely) into old English (*souerein* – supreme). **The “g” was first added in the 1500’s, after the influence of Calvinism** began to spread. **The “g” changed the meaning of the term from simply the “supreme power” to emphasize “supreme reign”, which subtly introduced the idea of control, dominance and governance.** This is a *huge* distinction. It is one thing to say that God is the supreme power, asserting that no one can resist, stop or dominate Him, but a far different thing to assert that God *controls* or *governs* everything. **To say that God is the supreme power “above” all things, or even to say that He rules “over” or “above” all things, is *not* the same as asserting that He *controls, determines or influences* all things on the lowest level.** “Sovereignty” is not strictly a Biblical word. It is a theological concept, open for debate. The use of this term unjustifiably conveys the notion of *control*, instead of strictly describing God as “the Most High”.

**What does the Scripture say? The Bible clearly conveys that God is the supreme power in the universe.** There is none like Him (I Chron. 17:20; Jer. 10:6). He does what He desires, and none can stop Him (Psa. 115:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:35). He has dominion *over* all things and rules *over* all (I Chron. 29:11,12; Psa. 103:19). He is the blessed and only supreme power, the King of kings and the Lord of lords (I Tim. 6:15). He is the Almighty God (Gen. 17:1; Rev. 11:17; 19:6). **God does have a plan, and is working out that plan** (Eph. 1:9-11; cf. Gen. 12:3; 22:16-18; Heb. 6:13-18; Eph. 3:8-11). **He works this large-scale plan out in and through the lives of people, whether they know Him or not** (Isa. 44:24-45:7; Jn. 11:49-52; Acts 2:23). There is mystery here! ***It is not clear how much He is involved in everyday decisions.*** He knows the end from the beginning, and *will* establish His purpose (Isa. 46:9-11). He determines the times and boundaries of nations, yet works so that we might seek Him (Acts 17:24-27). He may even use unjust people to accomplish His purposes, though He holds them accountable for any transgressions and evil they choose to inflict, ...and they *may* choose to go beyond God's intention (Zech 1:14,15; Nah. 1:3; II Chron. 28:1-15). **In the end, however, God will crush all opposition, judge and remove evil, and cause everyone to yield to Him** (Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10; Rev. 19-21).

**When you read the Bible for an overview, it is quite clear that humankind has free will, within limits.** We were made in the image of God Himself, and the ability to choose seems to be a key aspect of His nature. **Our first parents were given a choice in the garden.** *This is central to the rest of Biblical history!* **They chose to disobey God, but the consequences of their decision were very real and far reaching.** Their free choice could not simply be undone, nor could they choose to avoid the consequences. **Human choices are limited by the cause-and-effect nature of the world God has created.** We cannot simply choose to dream up or choose some other reality. We are bounded by the creation God has made, and must live within the natural order He has established. Furthermore, when we read the stories of God's interactions with people, it is clear that He communicates with people and offers them a choice. Their responses to God's promises or warnings determine either a positive or negative outcome. **Unless you have a prior theological agenda, it certainly appears that people freely choose or reject God's messages, and experience real consequences as a result.** *This is consistent with life as we experience it.*

**There seems to be a partnership relationship between us and God. When you read the Bible, it does not appear as though God is controlling or manipulating people,** ...although there are occasions where He strengthens their resolve to resist Him (e.g., the hardening of Pharaoh's heart) or goes to extreme measures to convince someone to follow (e.g., the angels that physically drag Lot's family out of Sodom, or His dealings with Jonah). Ultimately, a choice must be made either for or against following God. The way the stories, promises and warnings are presented, **God seems to try to appeal to our understanding so that we can choose to respond to Him, or not.** The fact that God inspired people to write the Bible, and that it has been preserved for us through the years, indicates that God respects our minds and wills, and wishes to convince us to follow Him. If He were a controlling, determining God, the Bible would not be necessary. He would just "work through" whomever He wished, and they would do His will. **There is not any example of a "puppet relationship" between God and people anywhere within the pages of the Bible.** Furthermore, the Ezekiel passage above is clear that **God wants people to choose life, but many choose the way that leads to death, anyway. Clearly, God does not control every human decision.**

Following are **five arguments in support of a partnership relationship between God and human beings:**

**(1.) All of the invitations and admonitions to believe and obey God only make sense if people truly have an ability to make a free choice for God.** If we had no such ability, why present it in this manner? If God simply "zaps" those who come to faith, why appeal to them with reason and exhort them to choose?

**(2.) All of the imperatives (commands) in the Bible are a strong argument that we do have a real ability to make choices.** There are over 1600 imperative verbs in the NT alone! Why would He *command* us, if we were *unable to choose*? Why command us to do something, unless we have the ability to choose to obey?

**(3.) The reality of consequences, accountability, and judgment strongly indicates that we have the ability to choose.** If we were *unable* to choose, would it be *just* to hold us accountable? It seems clear that God uses these to instruct and motivate us to choose to obey Him, ...just like we do with our children and other people in our lives.

**(4.) The plain teaching of Scripture is that we are in a partnership relationship with Him.** I Corinthians 3:9 calls us "God's fellow workers". In II Corinthians 6:1, Paul exhorts us, "and working-together-with Him, we implore you not to accept the grace of God in vain..." It is quite clear from the following context that Paul certainly thought we had *the ability* to choose for God, ...or choose to disregard Him.

**(5.) The passages that exhort us to "test-out-by-trial-to-discover" point to our active role in discovering God's will and growing in skill, maturity and obedience** (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:10; I Thess. 5:21). If God just "worked in us", then why would we be exhorted to experiment? This only makes sense if we are people who can choose to experiment and learn, or not.