

Election, Foreknowledge and Free Will

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

The story is told of a group of theologians who were discussing the tension between predestination (God predetermines people to salvation) and free will (man deciding his eternal destiny). Things became so heated that the group broke up into two opposing factions. But one man, not knowing which group to join, stood for a moment trying to decide. Finally, he decided to join the predestination group. "Who sent you here?" they asked. "No one sent me," he replied. "I came of my own free will." "Free will!" they exclaimed. "You can't join us! You belong with the other group!"

So the man followed their orders and went to the other clique (the free will group). There someone asked, "When did you decide to join us?" The young man replied, "Well, I didn't really decide--I was sent here by the other group." "Sent here!" they shouted. "You can't join us unless you have decided by your own free will!"

Today this very same theological debate goes on. But let's stop debating and start believing that both teachings are true – election and freedom of choice. To take away one is to discredit the plan and purpose of God in salvation. There are some people who put all their eggs in the one basket of election. There are others who put all their eggs in the one basket of free will. When doing this they miss the balanced and Biblical teaching on God's marvelous plan of salvation in eternity past and how His saving plan comes to pass in eternity present.

In this study, we want to address the subject of election and how it is based upon God's foreknowledge. We will also discover that election and God's foreknowledge do not eliminate true autonomy or freedom of choice regarding a person's eternal destiny.

Someone said this about election and human choice:

"The pendulum swings, ridiculous extreme, bypassing truth which lies somewhere between."

He is right, and many today become one-sided in their theology instead of preaching a Biblical and balanced view of God's sovereignty and human freedom.

C.H. Mackintosh, one of my favorite older writers, make an important note in his study on "One sided theology." He wrote: "He, blessed be His Name, has not confined Himself within the narrow limits of any school of doctrine, high, low, or moderate. He has revealed Himself. He has told out the deep and precious secrets of His heart. He has unfolded His eternal counsels, as to the Church, as to Israel, the Gentiles, and the wide creation. **Men might as well attempt to confine the ocean in buckets of their own formation as to confine the vast range of divine revelation within the feeble enclosures of human systems of doctrine.** It cannot be done, and it ought not to be attempted. Better far to set aside the systems of theology and schools of divinity, and come like a little child to the eternal fountain of Holy Scripture, and there drink in the living teachings of God's Spirit."

It is clear that God has chosen us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and that we are born again by God (John 1:13). It is equally true and clear that we have a choice in our eternal destiny ("But as many as received him" - John 1:12). Many well-meaning people ask me if they should believe in election. I always answer them in the same way, "We must believe in election because the Bible teaches it."

A seminary professor once said:

"Try to explain election and you may lose your mind. But try to explain it away and you may lose your soul!"

1 Peter 1:2 records these words:

"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied."

Here are some great theological facts related to this important verse.

- As far as **God the Father** is concerned, I was saved when He chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) *and in eternity past conferred to me all of His saving benefits* (Rom. 8:29-30).
- As far as **God the Son** is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on the cross ("sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ") for it's His sacrifice that paid the penalty for my sin (1 Pet. 3:18) and provided total forgiveness, acquittal and justification before God (Rom. 5:9).

- As far as **God the Spirit** is concerned, I was saved one night back in 1972 when I heard the Gospel and received Christ (“through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience” – the obedience of faith in the Gospel message – Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

It was in 1972 when God’s plan of salvation for my life came together, but it took all three Persons of the Godhead to bring me to salvation! The Father planned it (past sovereignty), the Son supplied it (passion of the cross), and the Spirit applied it to my life (personal salvation)!

“In tenderness He sought me,
Weary, and sick with sin,
And on His shoulders brought me
Back to His fold again;
While angels in His presence sang
Until the courts of heaven rang.
Oh, the love that sought me!
Oh, the blood that bought me!
Oh, the grace that brought me to the fold.
Wondrous grace that brought me to the fold.”

In our present study, we must also explain what the phrase “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” means. How should we understand this phrase? The word “foreknowledge” (prognosis) means forethought. It’s something that God knows. What did God know? What did God know that caused His election or selection of people? Was it something he knew that people would do within His plan of salvation (their choice of Him?) or something that He knew that He would accomplish with His plan of salvation (God’s choice of them?).



Some teach that God looked ahead through the corridors of time and chose people on the basis that they would choose Him. However, if God chose people in this manner, we would have to call God’s election choice as the doctrine of divine reaction (God reacting to what men do) or the doctrine of human sovereignty instead of God’s sovereignty.

In this scenario, man's free will is sovereign and becomes the determining factor in God's election. However, God didn't draw straws in election; He didn't look down the corridor of time to see who would choose Him before He decided. Rather, by His sovereign will God chose that a group of people would be in the Body of Christ. It's very clear that the words "chosen" and "election" indicate that God chose us for Himself. That means God acted totally independent of any outside influence. He made His choice totally apart from human will and purely on the basis of His sovereignty. The point is that God has ordained to redeem a remnant of humanity to salvation. God's election is not based on a human act or achievement that is linked to man.

Since the word "foreknowledge" (something God knows beforehand) is linked to God's election or choice (not man's) in 1 Peter 1:2, it would suggest that the word foreknowledge has to do with God's prearranged plan to love and save a specific group of people (the Church), which He foreknew to be part of His ordained saving purpose. The concept of foreknowledge (what God knows and plans ahead), which is the basis for His choice, has to do with knowing His elect body (the Church) in an intimate and loving relationship through His foreordaining purposes. In essence, God's choice (election) is in accordance with (joined together) with God's foreknowledge (His foreknown purpose) which perfectly complements His choice.

This is the way "foreknowledge" (God's foreordained purpose) is used elsewhere in the Bible. It is linked with what God would do to accomplish His plan (divine foreordination) and not what man would necessarily do within His plan (human determinism). Foreknowledge has to do with what God knows and has planned to take place in order to bring about His specific preordained purposes (predetermined plan) for certain people that He has desired to love and bless.

Peter is teaching (1 Pet. 1:2) that we are elect by God in accordance with His foreknowledge, which speaks of God's foreknown plan and purpose to set His loving affection upon a class of people within the human race, save them, and make them His children. The exegetical evidence for this use of the word "foreknowledge" (God's known and predetermined plan) can be conformed elsewhere in Scripture.

♦ God the Father foreknew His Son in this way. God's Son was crucified on the basis of His specific foreknown and prearranged plan for His beloved Son.

Acts 2:23 declares:

“Him (Jesus Christ), being delivered by the determinate counsel (ordained will) and foreknowledge (forethought) of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”

In other words, God’s ordained choice and foreknown plan (the basis of His choice) came to pass in relation to the Son’s crucifixion. Foreknowledge (God’s foreknown and ordained purpose) was the bringing to pass of God’s perfect counsel and will.

♦ God the Father knew Israel in this way. God chose to bless Israel which was solely based upon a specific, foreknown, and preordained plan for the nation of Israel.

Romans 11:2

“God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew.”

This means God is not finished with national Israel! We discover here that God “foreknew” Israel in relation to His ordaining purpose and eternal plan which was the basis of His choice to bless Israel over other nations (Deut. 7:7-8).

♦ God the Father knew His Church in this way. God foreknew the Church in relation to His eternal, ordaining purpose, which involved the salvation of the Body of Christ, which includes our conformity to Christ.

1 Peter 1:2

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.”

Romans 8:29

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

In these verses, we once again see that God “foreknew” the Church as possessing a saving relationship with Himself, since this was God’s foreknown and ordained purpose in eternity past, and this same foreknown and eternal purpose was the basis for His election or choice of His Church (not man’s will, good works, or response to God in any way). God chose the Church in relation to His own foreknown, ordaining purpose, which was God’s prearranged plan in eternity past to save a company of people (Eph. 1:4). Yes, we are foreknown of God! He knew us for we were part of His eternal plan. As the hymns says:

“He called me long before I heard,
Before my sinful heart was stirred.”

The Biblical understanding of the word “foreknowledge” means that God *planned* before, not that He merely *observed* before. The sense is that God pre-thought and therefore pre-determined the destiny of His people. This relates to the truth of God’s predestinating, saving purpose for the elect body of believers.

Ephesians 1:11

“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”

God’s predestinating (predetermined) purpose is actually His foreknown purpose in eternity past (Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:29) which He has chosen to bring to pass. The Bible teaches that God elected or chose people in accordance with or in keeping with foreknowledge (His own foreknown purpose) to love and save a group of people and make them His own children. *Election (God’s choice – not man’s choice) is related to God’s foreknowledge in that it focuses on God’s eternal will, plan, and purpose coming to pass.* God chooses to implement his foreknown plan (the salvation of an elect body of redeemed people) and bring it to pass. Foreknowledge has to do with what God knows about His predetermined plan and not necessarily what people will do within His plan.

Dr. Henry Morris has written an important and informative note about this in his study Bible: “The foreknowledge of God involves more than just knowing ahead of time the choice that a given person will make, for ‘known unto God are all his works from the (foundation) of the world’ (Acts 15:18), and He ‘worketh all things after the counsel of his own will’ (Eph. 1:11). Those whom He foreknew, He then created as ‘the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory’ (Rom. 9:23). This in no way inhibits anyone who wants to be saved from coming to Christ, for he has invited all to ‘come unto me’ (Matt. 11:28), with the assurance that ‘whosoever will’ may come (Rev. 22:17).”

The choosing or election of God (1 Peter 1:2), which was done in accordance with His foreknown plan, is the theological and fundamental basis for our salvation. The general teaching about election is that God in eternity past did NOT choose anyone

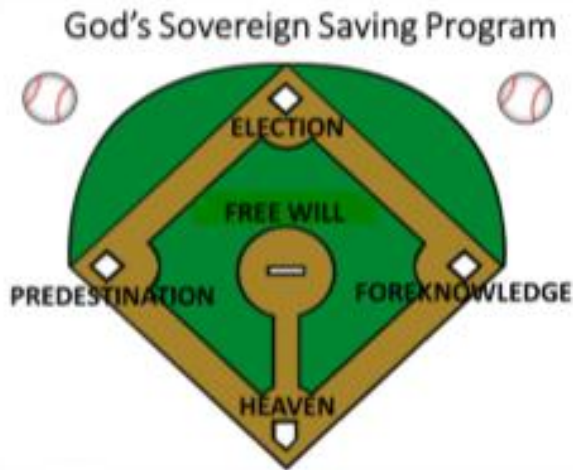
on the basis of anything that they would do (Rom. 9:11; 2 Tim. 1:9), but God chooses according to His own ordained and decreed purpose (Romans 8:28-30), which is based upon His own will and purpose – not the choice or will of others.

If we are elect “according” to God’s foreknowledge (something that God knows), as Peter states (1 Peter 1:2), it seems very clear that foreknowledge comes before election and complements election in some way. However, what was in God’s foreknowledge that caused Him to elect a group of people to salvation? Was it His knowledge of what they would do with His plan of salvation (believe or reject salvation) or was it God’s knowledge of His own eternal purpose and plan to save an elect body of believers?

As we have seen, the latter is the correct answer since foreknowledge is always linked to God’s ordained choice, purpose, and plan for people (Rom. 8:29; 11:2; Acts 2:23) and not what the people necessarily do within His plan. Therefore, this is the meaning of 1 Peter 1:2. *Foreknowledge is God’s foreknown choice, purpose, and plan to save an elect body of people to salvation.* This is a broad statement that speaks of God’s foreknown (pre-thought and pre-determined) purpose.

Election has to do with what God knows about His ordained plan and not what He knows others will do within His plan. While God knows about all men (what they will do within His plan - Ps. 139:1-6), in His elective purpose in eternity past, He *knows* His elect body in the sense of what He chooses or purposes to do for them (Rom. 8:29 – “For whom He did foreknow”).

The text of 1 Peter is then teaching that God elects (the choice of God) according to His foreknowledge (His foreknown eternal plan or decree to save an elect body). This speaks of God's perfect knowledge of His future plan. Election (God’s choice) and foreknowledge (what God knows) is the knowledge or the certainty of the fulfillment of divine election or His choice (what God has decreed). In essence, a group of people were elected according to God’s previously made covenant and purpose which is to love and save a company of people for His glory (Amos 3:2; Rom. 11:2; 8:28-30).



One way to illustrate God's sovereign and saving purpose over our life is to think of the four bases in the game of baseball. First base represents God's foreknowledge or His foreknown plan to set His love on a corporate group of people that He intends to save (1 Pet. 1:2; Rom. 8:29). Second base is God electing that same group or community of people to salvation ("elect according to the foreknowledge of God" – 1 Pet. 1:2 with 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:10).

Third base represents God's predestinating purpose or marking out the elect's destiny to Heaven and all the future blessings that He has prepared for them (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:29-30). But in the middle of the field is the pitcher's position which represents man's freedom of choice and involvement in God's saving program (John 6:47; Rev. 22:17). Part of God's sovereign plan is to allow human choice to interact with His foreknown, elective and predestination purpose. God is the divine umpire in charge of the bases but man is still involved in God's salvation plan in that He allows man's choices to bring to pass His foreknown, elective, and predestination plan for mankind.

In God's sovereign plan of election, He *thought* of us (Eph. 1:4), *sought* us (Luke 19:10), and then *brought* us (John 6:44) to Himself. The CAUSE of salvation is God (Jonah 2:9). But we must remember that election does not override the choice of man regarding His eternal destiny. Interwoven with God's sovereignty (His choice, power, and drawing men to Himself) is the free actions and choices of people (John 4:14; 12:46).

Robert Gromacki said:

"He (God) has graciously worked in and through the human will to gain the assent of that will without violating human responsibility."

Man is held responsible for God's *natural* revelation (Rom. 1:8-23; Psalm 14:1) and even the *special* revelation of a moral inward conscience (Rom 2:11-15; Gen. 3:22), which is actually the law intuitively placed into the heart of mankind. Since God holds all of humanity accountable for responding to general and special revelation, it would necessitate that people are responsible for responding to the revelation of

the Gospel. The Bible reveals that there is also a spiritual revelation of the Gospel (Acts 15:7; Eph. 1:13) to which man can respond.

Nevertheless, we must understand that this restored ability or faculty of faith to respond to the Gospel is not given to man, without the Spirit's work or assistance upon his human heart. A man's response of faith, which is directed toward the Gospel message, can only occur when the Holy Spirit teaches and convinces him of the truth, regarding Christ and the Gospel (1 Thess. 1:5 – "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance"). At some point in God's sovereign plan a person can respond favorably to His call of salvation ("Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden" ... Matt. 11:28).

The illustration of "Two Train Tracks" that eventually intersect together might give us a better understanding of the Biblical teaching about election (God's sovereignty) and free will (human choice). Picture one train track as Divine sovereignty and the other train track as human responsibility. Each train is running parallel together and is moving in the same direction and both trains must stay on their appropriate tracks. But at one point in God's sovereign program the tracks intersect to bring about His perfect salvation plan for the human race.



There is the track of God's sovereign grace in electing to himself a remnant or group of people to salvation (1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:10). Then there is the track of human responsibility (Isa. 45:22; Matt. 11:28; Rom. 10:13; Rev. 22:17). People are required to repent and believe. The teachings of "election" and "free will" are like two railroad tracks in Scripture that run parallel to one another which preserve the integrity of both "election" and "free will." It is critical to retain both teachings so one doctrine (election) does not undermine or destroy the other (free will).

Anytime you try to eliminate one train and set of tracks you will derail an important theological truth related to God's purpose in salvation. This is because both trains and tracks are moving in accordance with God's saving purpose and plan for mankind.

Even Charles Spurgeon, a Calvinist, concludes:

"Brethren, be willing to see both sides of the shield of truth. Rise above the babyhood which cannot believe two doctrines until it sees the connecting link. Have you not two eyes, man? Must you needs put one of them out in order to see clearly?" (Faith and Regeneration).

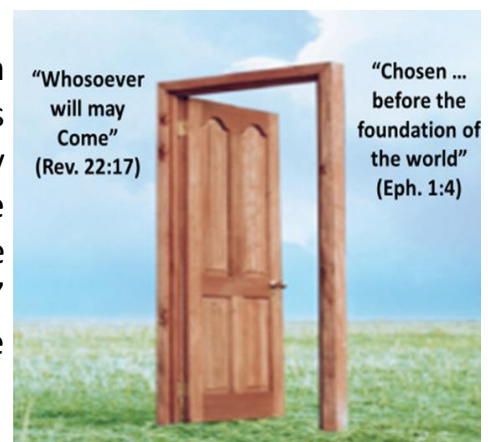
The problem with many today is that they have a one-sided teaching on God's sovereignty (election) and miss the wonderful truth that God in His sovereign purpose (Isa. 14:24) has also made allowance for a person to be responsible for believing in Christ through God's gracious assistance and initiatives upon his heart and life.



A prisoner behind bars, if given the chance or opportunity to leave the prison cell, can choose to respond favorably to the opportunity. In a similar way, those who are imprisoned by sin and Satan (Acts 26:18), can respond favorably to God's enlightening (2 Cor. 4:4), illuminating (Heb. 6:4-5), and convicting call (John 16:8), and make a valid choice regarding Christ and their eternal destiny ("And many believed on him there" – John 4:42).

To conclude that the human will is only subject to the sin nature and has no freedom to exercise itself otherwise, even *with God's aid and assistance*, goes beyond the teaching of Scripture. God **ENABLES** us to have faith since salvation is "not by the will of man" (human determination without God - John 1:13) but at the same time He **MAKES** us responsible for faith ("But as many as received him" - John 1:12). The individual has the final say regarding His eternal destiny (John 5:40).

Remember the door illustration? A person living on earth sees written upon the outside of a door God's open offer of salvation which is "whosoever will may come" (Rev. 22:17). But when he gets to Heaven he discovers different words written on the inside of the door: "chosen before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Both the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are true.



In Isaiah 1:18, God says:

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

God allows man to be a responsible human agent in relation to his salvation. Man can reason regarding his salvation and eternal destiny as God personally convicts and prepares his heart for salvation (Acts 16:14). Jesus repeatedly taught this. Man is autonomous in his response toward God.

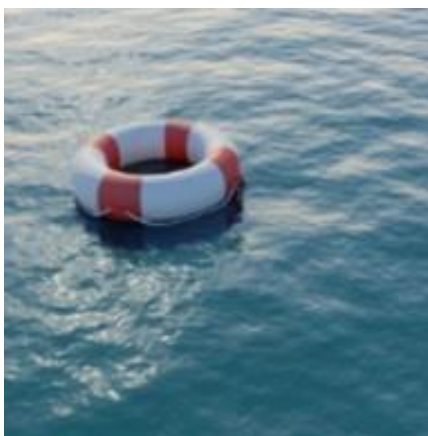
John 3:36

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

John 5:40

“And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

Here Jesus clearly reveals that these people refused His offer of salvation. He did not say they *could* not come but that they *would* not come. The Bible assumes everywhere that anyone who wills or desires to be saved, as a result of God’s grace working upon his heart (1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:13), can exercise saving faith – “his faith” (Rom. 4:5), “your faith” (1 Cor. 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:9), and “thy faith has saved thee” (Luke 7:50). This is why Scriptures call upon man to believe.



Charles Spurgeon once again remarks: “To me it is especially appalling that a man should perish through willfully rejecting the Divine salvation. A drowning man throwing away the lifebelt, a poisoned man pouring the antidote upon the floor, a wounded man tearing open his wounds—any of these is a sad sight. But what shall we say of a soul refusing its Savior and choosing its own destruction?”

It’s very clear that man does have a choice regarding his eternal destiny. It’s a valid choice. To conclude that man can only choose sin and destruction in his lost estate is erroneous, since God opens the mind and heart to a person’s need for salvation

(John 6:44; 12:32; Acts 16:14), and allows an individual to respond favorably to His call of salvation. To conclude that man has a free will that is only bound to sin is not Scriptural. This certainly is not the true definition and Biblical understanding of free will (John 1:12; Rev. 22:17).

In addition, to surmise that God makes a person responsible for rejecting the light of salvation (John 3:18; 5:40; 12:36), while at the same time purposing his destruction in hell from eternity past, is preposterous and is an erroneous and unbiblical teaching. This philosophical reasoning attacks the character of God who is both just and merciful at the same time (Rev. 15:3; Rom. 11:32).

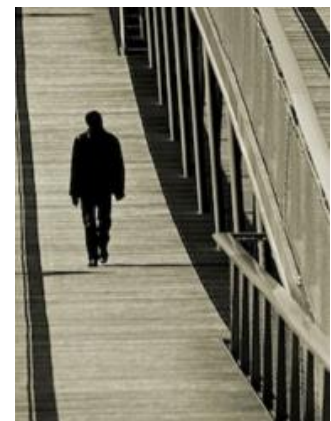
Someone said in a simplistic way:

“God votes for you; Satan votes against you, and you must cast the deciding vote!”

If “free will” means that God gives humans the opportunity to make choices that genuinely affect their destinies, then yes, human beings do have a free will. The invitations of God are found all through the Bible. Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH..." Joel 2:32: "And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered." This promise is repeated in Acts 2:21: and Romans 10:13: "Whosoever" means anyone and so anyone can be saved. In the New Testament, sinners are commanded over and over to “repent” and “believe” (Luke 13:3, 5; John 3:15-16; 6:47; Rev. 22:17).

Every call to repent and express faith in Christ is a call to choose. The command to believe assumes that the hearer can choose to obey the command (John 5:24). The Bible is clear that we not only have the *ability* to choose, we also have the *responsibility* to choose wisely. We are chosen (Rom. 15:16) but still free to choose our eternal destiny (John 5:25). However, free will does not mean that mankind can do anything that he pleases. Our choices are limited to what is in keeping with our nature.

Let’s give an example of this. A man may choose to walk across a bridge or not to walk across it; what he may *not* choose is to fly over the bridge. This is because his nature (who he is) prevents him from flying. In a similar way, a man cannot choose to make himself righteous on his own free volition without God’s intervening grace since his nature (sin nature) prevents him from seeing his guilt (Rom. 3:11). So, free will is limited by nature – man’s inherited sin nature.



So how can man, limited by a sin nature, ever choose what is good (Rom. 3:12)? It is only through the grace and power of God working in connection with one's heart (Acts 18:27; Phil. 1:29; Titus 1:1) that a person's human will truly becomes "free" in the sense that he is now able to choose salvation. It is the Holy Spirit who works in and through a person's will to bring them to saving faith.

2 Thessalonians 2:13 brings both divine sovereignty and human choice together: "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation (God's sovereignty over man's salvation) through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (man's response to the Spirit's call upon his life).

The Holy Spirit does not believe for you but enables you to make a valid choice regarding your eternal destiny. It's the Holy Spirit that sets us apart (sanctifies us) as God's child by performing a pre-saving work in our hearts and lives which allows us to open our own will and heart to repent and express faith in Christ (John 16:8). He is also the person within the Trinity that applies regeneration to our spirit (John 3:6-8). The Holy Spirit directs the sinner's attention to the Word of God and to the Son of God. He enables the unbeliever to see the glories of the Savior. He removes the obstacles, deals with the sinner's objections, and seeks to bring him to Christ through initiating personal belief in a man's heart. Salvation is God's work ("Salvation is of the LORD" - Jonah 2:9). At the same time, our motives, desires, and actions are voluntary, and we are held responsible for them.

In summary, the sin nature affects man's decisions in relationship to *sinful things* (Rom. 7:17-24; James 1:14-15); however, God's Spirit working upon the human heart, affects man's decisions in relationship to *spiritual things* and his eternal destiny (John 16:8). The Spirit opens the minds and hearts of sinners to the Gospel so that they can respond favorably and positively to God's invitation to salvation and eternal life.

John 6:37 brings election and free will together under one umbrella: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me (this is election – God's choice); and him that cometh to me (this is human choice) I will in no wise cast out."

J. Vernon McGee confesses this:

“You and I are down here, and we don’t see into the machinery of heaven. I don’t know how God runs that computer of election, but I know that He has given to you and to me a free will and we have to exercise it.”

Someone may ask, “You mean that if I’m not the elect I can still come?” My friend, the Bible does not teach that some people are non-elect. The term non-elect does not appear in the Bible. One man told me that he wanted to be saved but he was not sure that he was one of the elect. This is silly reasoning. Here is the Biblical truth; if you come, you will be the elect and “whosoever will” may “come” (Rev. 22:17). This is a tremendous and wonderful reality. God is building His elect body of believers and those who embrace His offer of salvation can enter the elect and corporate body (1 Pet. 2:9) He has chosen to save in eternity past (Eph. 1:4; Romans 8:29).

Someone once said:

“If the Lord had put a yellow stripe down the backs of the elect, I’d go up and down the street lifting up shirt tails, finding out who had the yellow stripe, and then I’d give them the gospel. But God didn’t do it that way. He told me to preach the gospel to every creature that ‘whosoever will may come.’ Jesus says, ‘and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out’ (John 6:37).”

Inseparably linked to God’s purpose in election is man’s responsibility to believe and trust Christ as his Savior (John 6:37). These two teachings do not contradict one another nor interfere with God’s remarkable sovereign plan of salvation. God has chosen us (John 15:16) so that we can choose Him (John 1:12). In the remarkable plan of God’s sovereignty, he has not forgotten man’s responsibility regarding his salvation.

Richard Halverson remarked:

“Nothing God planned interferes with human freedom ... Nothing humans do frustrates God’s sovereign plan!”

Of course, many disagree with this. They conclude that if man has the opportunity to decide his destiny, then this destroys God’s sovereignty, or keeps God from being in charge. But this is not the case. The fact that man can have a choice in his eternal destiny magnifies God’s sovereignty and shows how great and magnificent His plan is in saving people. God’s ways are higher than Augustine’s or Calvin’s ways, the

Synod of Dort's conclusions, or any of man's ideologies and philosophies.

Isaiah 55:8 declares:

"For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD."

God can do WHATEVER He wants to do, with WHOMSOEVER He wants to do it, WHENEVER He wants to do it, and HOWEVER He wants to do it. You cannot limit God and His ways.

Romans 11:33 declares this about God's purposes:

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

Again, many will claim that if man has free will to choose salvation then God is no longer sovereign, that God is not ultimately in control or in charge of the plan of salvation. This is a philosophical conclusion – not a Biblical conclusion (Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:20). God sometimes chooses to limit the direct intervention and display of His sovereign power (Matt. 26:53-54; Acts 2:23) but this does not make Him or His purpose less sovereign (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 46:9-11; Dan. 4:34-35). God is always in charge and is bringing everything to pass in the exact way He has planned (Isa. 55:8).

To conclude that God must do everything, such as make the final choice regarding a person's destiny, in order to remain sovereign (in charge), actually limits God's sovereignty. However, since God is indeed "sovereign" He can use all things, even man's choices, such as deciding the ultimate destiny of his salvation, as part of His own purpose and for His own glory. God "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11) - not after the preconceived ideas of Augustine and the Reformers.

God, in the process of reaching His predetermined outcome or goal (Eph. 1:11), gives mankind genuine freedom to choose or reject an invitation to salvation. God in some remarkable way lets our choices be a factor in the shaping of history or His Story (Genesis 1:28-4:16; Acts 2:23). God never treats people according to an irresistible eternal decree but gives them valid choice in fulfilling His intended goals for their lives. God genuinely interacts with our decisions. God in His sovereignty and providence (Psalm 115:3; 135:6) has chosen to weave together His own choice

and purpose, within the bounds of man's free choices. This is why Jesus taught that man should believe while he has the light (John 12:36). God offers the light of illumination and salvation to the sinner but this light can be rejected (John 3:19). God is moving people to the place of salvation to bring about His eternal saving decree, but these same people are given a choice regarding their eternal destiny ("whosoever will may come" - Rev. 22:17).



Let's illustrate it this way. A man can carry a goldfish bowl. At the same time the goldfish on the inside of the bowl has the freedom to swim about wherever it pleases and eat food. The bowl illustrates God's sovereign hand over the lives of people in the matter of their salvation and destiny. He is reaching out to save people (Luke 19:10) which involves carrying out His intended choice or purpose to make them part of His elect body or the "chosen generation" (1 Peter 2:9).

The gold fish inside the bowl illustrates the freedom of human choice ("Whosoever" - John 3:16; Rev. 22:17). God is moving people in the direction that He wants them to go regarding salvation (John 3:8) but they are still free to choose how they will be part of His great moving purpose (2 Pet. 3:9). God is in charge of taking history and people to His intended course. In relationship to salvation, God's desire is to take us to the intended course of eternal salvation.

Ephesians 1:11-13 illustrates God's sovereignty and human freedom like this:

"In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: (divine sovereignty – God creating a saving plan and marking out the destiny of a chosen body of believers) That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ (free will). In whom ye also *trusted*, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed (free will which is part of God's sovereign purpose), ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise."

Even though God gives us free will and allows us to make a choice regarding our eternal destiny, there is no danger, as some suggest, of God's sovereignty being limited, threatened or compromised. God is always in control. His counsel

and will is coming to pass in relation to His perfect plan. *Free will occurs within the parameters of God's sovereignty.* God's sovereignty is never threatened by man's choice. Instead, man's choice regarding his eternal destiny actually demonstrates just how sovereign God is in bringing His glorious plan of salvation to pass. God's sovereignty and grace is magnified when it is seen working in the hearts and lives of sinners (Acts 16:14; 18:27), allowing them to make a valid choice regarding their eternal destiny ("his faith is counted for righteousness" - Rom. 4:5).

Spurgeon is again on record as stating:

"Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no presidency of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism.



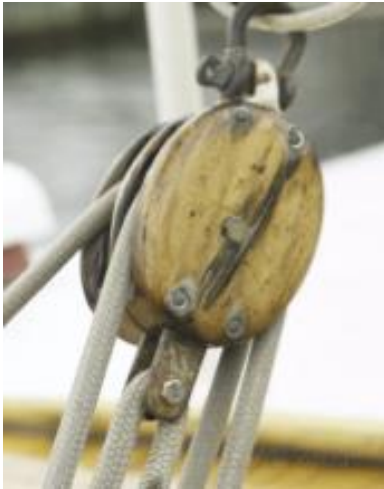
"These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring."

God's sovereign choice and man's ability to choose his eternal destiny (Heaven or hell) may seemingly be in conflict with one another and create a theological tension but we must view them as theological friends.

When a church member asked Charles Spurgeon how he reconciles free will and election, he replied "You don't have to reconcile friends!" This is true because they are both joined together, running parallel in Scripture, in order to convey God's sovereign purpose regarding man's salvation. To take away any one of them destroys God's marvelous plan of redemption for mankind.



It certainly is possible to recognize truth where we cannot *perceive* it; and also to understand truth where we cannot fully *explain* it. Both God's election and man's freedom of choice do run parallel together throughout Scripture and we should not try and undo one at the expense of the other. They are two theological friends that harmonize or work together in the outworking of God's plan of salvation.



R. B. Kuiper used the following illustration of God's sovereignty and human responsibility: "I liken them to two ropes going through two holes in the ceiling and over a pulley above. If I wish to support myself by them, I must cling to them both. If I cling only to one and not the other, I go down. I read the many teachings of the Bible regarding God's election, predestination, his chosen, and so on. I read also the many teachings regarding 'whosoever will may come' and urging people to exercise their responsibility as human beings. These seeming contradictions cannot

be reconciled by the puny human mind. With childlike faith, I cling to both ropes (election and freedom of choice), fully confident that in eternity I will see that both strands of truth are, after all, of one piece."

Alexander Maclaren comments on God's sovereignty and man's free will in this way: "These two streams of truth are like the rain-shower that falls upon the water-shed of a country. The one half flows down the one side of the everlasting hills, and the other down the other. Falling into rivers that water different continents, they at length find the sea, separated by the distance of half the globe. But the sea into which they fall is one, in every creek and channel. And so, the truth into which these two apparent opposites converge, is the depth of the wisdom and the knowledge of God, whose ways are past finding out."



What else can we say about election, foreknowledge, and predestination? Well, we could say much more, since untold volumes have been written on it. But for now we can come to this wonderful conclusion.

“His grace has planned it all,
‘Tis mine but to believe,
And recognize His work of love
And Christ receive.
For me He died,
For me He lives,
And everlasting life and light
He freely gives.”