



Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

THE GREAT PUZZLE

BY DAVID GUNN

The relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (or free moral agency) has long been a fixation for me. At one time I held to a strongly Calvinistic position complete with meticulous predestination. During the course of my studies, I've adjusted my perspective numerous times. These days I hold to a basically Chaferian soteriology and lean tentatively toward a general sovereignty model.² I think these approaches come closest to capturing and synthesizing what the Bible has to say on the subject. But it always fascinates me that like-minded theologians and exegetes, committed to the same presuppositional and methodological commitments, can come to such sharply divergent views on this subject. I think this is because the logical and theological problems involved in this question are daunting and perhaps insuperable in this life. Here's why:

In his contribution to David and Randall Basinger's *Predestination and Free Will*, Bruce Reichenbach helpfully employs the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle to clarify the problem at hand.¹ I don't particularly like his conclusions (in my opinion, the limitations

1 Bruce Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power" in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 101-99.

he tries to place on God's sovereignty are far too extensive, not to mention unscriptural), but I do like his analogy, so I've co-opted it for my own use. (Thanks, Bruce.)

The Puzzle Pieces We Have

When we consider the relationship of divine sovereignty and

2 I am acutely aware that "general sovereignty" means different things to different people. John Feinberg's summary comments are helpful: "General sovereignty models hold that in creating our world God decided to give

“Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure’” (Isa. 46:9, 10).

human responsibility, we are faced with a challenge somewhat like trying to put together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. A number of data points, derived from Scripture, function as these puzzle pieces. Briefly tabulated, they are as follows:³

1. God is totally sovereign and in control of all things (Ps. 135:6; Prov. 16:9; Eph. 1:11). We could add extra layers of complexity to this puzzle piece by making distinctions between God’s directive, permissive, and revealed wills, or between His desirous and determinative wills, etc. I think these are legitimate and helpful distinctions, but for now let’s just leave it at *God is totally sovereign and in control of all things*. Everything that ever happens, therefore, has been foreordained by Him and has its place in His all-wise and all-encompassing plan (sometimes called *the decree*).
2. Every person is morally culpable for his actions, and God does not cause anyone to sin (Hab. 1:13; James 1:13). I take it that this implies some sort of contra-causal freedom or at the very least compatibilism (though I confess to having difficulty seeing how the latter could truly make sense of this).
3. God exhaustively foreknows the future (at least what *we* call “the future”), including the future free actions of moral agents (Isa. 46:10; Matt. 26:34). Perhaps this is because

humans free will, i.e. libertarian free will. . . . This doesn’t mean that God does not get any of his goals accomplished, but only that he has chosen sovereignly to create a world in which he ‘sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out.’ The key with general sovereignty models is that God does not have specific purposes for everything that occurs. . . . Instead, God has general purposes that he accomplishes within the overall framework of the room that our freedom leaves him to maneuver” (John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001], 643–44). While I am uncomfortable with some of the language and concepts here, I do find myself drawn to the main features of this approach. As a unifying theory of sovereignty and human freedom, it offers marvelous explanatory power. It can deal with things like apparently extraneous evils better than full-blown meticulous predestination, and it also has an easier time constructing an internally coherent theodicy. But some features are problematic and do not comport well with Scripture. I am comfortable saying that I lean tentatively toward a moderate version of general sovereignty, but would insist that God’s foreknowledge is exhaustive, His plan/decree is all-encompassing, and He is able to (and sometimes does) override the human will to accomplish His purposes. If purists insist that that disqualifies me from being on the official general sovereignty team, so be it.

3 For the sake of brevity, no attempt has been made toward proof-texting these statements comprehensively.

He is atemporal (I am skeptical),⁴ or perhaps it is simply a feature of His omniscience. In any case, Scripture clearly teaches that He does possess this foreknowledge.

4. God works in our world both miraculously (a direct and often spectacular interjection of divine power into what we call the “natural course of things”) and providentially (where He superintends the “natural course of things” to accomplish His purposes indirectly—a sort of “behind the scenes” approach).
- Those four puzzle pieces relate to the general state of affairs in the universe. But there are at least six additional pieces that pertain specifically to soteriology:⁵
5. God sovereignly elects certain people unto salvation (John 6:37–39; Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:4, 5).
 6. No one can come to God without first being elected and divinely drawn to Him (John 6:44).
 7. Whomever God elects He also justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies (Rom. 8:29, 30; Phil. 1:16).

4 For a good defense of God’s sempiternality from a Calvinistic theologian, see John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 428–33. For an equally skilled defense from an Arminian theologian, see William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 77–112, 239–41.

5 Some have argued that whatever paradigm governs God’s sovereignty and man’s freedom in general must also govern the specifics of soteriology (election/reprobation/faith/salvation) and the doctrine of inspiration. This approach is appealing in its elegance; it reduces the levels of complexity that must be dealt with, which would certainly please William of Ockham. But I prefer to see soteriology and inspiration as special categories with their own governing rules and paradigms. There are several reasons for this, of which two are most prominent. First, Scripture’s various depictions of salvation seem to treat it more as a special miracle wrought of divine initiative than as a feature of God’s providential outworking. Second, God’s providence would, in one sense or another, necessarily encompass all the writings ever produced. Therefore, if the inspiration of Scripture were effected providentially rather than miraculously, how could we maintain, in a nonarbitrary manner, that the Bible is uniquely God’s Word but all other books are not? That is to say, if inspiration were merely a feature of God’s providence, then the Spirit’s acting on humans’ will to inspire Scripture would be on the same plane with my wearing a green shirt today in accordance with God’s predetermined decree. But if that were true, then *Moby Dick* and *Calvin and Hobbes* would be equally as “inspired” as the Bible, since the actions by which they were written are also subsumed under God’s predetermined decree and subject to His providence! Thus we are on safer ground to classify inspiration as a miracle rather than as an outworking of divine providence.

God has given us a lot of information about Himself and His plan. Sufficient information, even, to equip us to do all that He would have us do. But He hasn't seen fit to give us exhaustive knowledge of Himself and His plan, and there are many theological truths that we will not (indeed, cannot) learn on this side of Glory.

8. God genuinely wants *everyone* to be saved (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).
9. Nevertheless, many will not be saved.
10. It *seems* like free moral agency somehow factors into salvation, and that by resisting God, humans are able to frustrate His designs for them (Deut. 30:19, 20; Matt. 23:37; Rev. 22:17).

So there we have it: 10 puzzle pieces. Perhaps I am wrong about one or more of these, but I have endeavored to read and represent Scripture faithfully and am fairly confident that all of these statements flow naturally, and in most cases inevitably, from the germane Biblical texts.

Now that the puzzle pieces have been identified (“turned face up,” as Reichenbach puts it), the difficult task of putting them together begins. I don't get very far in the endeavor before it becomes clear to me that they don't all fit together. There are several ways to connect pieces 1 and 2, but none of them seems natural. Pieces 5 and 6 fit together nicely, but will not connect to piece 9. Pieces 8 and 9 don't seem to belong together at all, especially when pieces 1, 5, 6, and 7 are in the mix. And so on.

Making the Pieces Fit (or Not)

I put together as many of the pieces as I can, but several are left over, and try as I might, I cannot attach them properly to the others. Obviously, this is a problem. What can I do? Several options present themselves.

First, I could throw away all of the leftover pieces. Problem solved! Unfortunately, I now have an incomplete puzzle. (This is the equivalent of those who latch onto, for example, Calvinism or Arminianism and simply ignore the verses troublesome to their systems.)

Second, I could get out my scissors and reshape the leftover pieces. If they won't fit on their own, I'll make them fit! Unfortunately, I now have a damaged puzzle. (This is the equivalent of those who reinterpret the verses that are troublesome to their systems in exegetically untenable ways to resolve the difficulties they present, such as Calvinists who see “the world” in 1 John 2:2 as “the world of the elect.”)

Third, I could throw up my hands and complain that the

manufacturer has sold me a defective puzzle. No wonder I can't get the pieces to fit together—they were mismatched pieces to begin with! (This is the equivalent of the unbeliever or errantist, one who denies the unity and truthfulness of Scripture.)

Or fourth, I could trust that these 10 pieces really do fit together into a whole puzzle somehow, but that I don't presently have all of the constituent puzzle pieces. If I had more pieces, doubtless they would form the connecting “bridges” between the various pieces that I already have, filling in the gaps and completing the final picture. But I don't have them, and even though I keep checking the puzzle box and searching around on the floor for a dropped piece or two, no more are forthcoming.

The Missing Pieces

After thinking about this problem for many years, I have concluded that option four is probably the best. You see, God has given us a lot of information about Himself and His plan. Sufficient information, even, to equip us to do all that He would have us do. But He hasn't seen fit to give us exhaustive knowledge of Himself and His plan (indeed, our finitude would make that impossible), and there are many theological truths that we will not (indeed, *cannot*) learn on this side of Glory.

So what's a perplexed (and curious) theologian to do? The best he can do, and nothing more. I interlock the puzzle pieces together to the best of my ability, and I accept by faith that God will fill in the gaps someday when dust returns to dust and our time on earth is done. Or maybe He won't: the secret things belong to the Lord. In any case, I accept by faith that the rest of the puzzle pieces do indeed exist, and that He has them safely in His possession. For now, I leave the half-completed picture be. Sometimes I gaze at it and wonder what it would look like with all the gaps filled in. When a certain contemplative mood strikes, I squint at it a little, tilt my head to the side, and think that I can imagine the completed picture. But maybe not—maybe my imagined reconstruction is partially or completely off base. It doesn't matter. I'm grateful for the puzzle pieces I do have, invigorated by the challenge of trying to put them together, and humbled by the realization that I can't quite pull it off.

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