

## *God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom*

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The relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom has long exercised theologians.<sup>1</sup> It divided Pelagius and Augustine, Erasmus and Luther, Arminius and Calvin, Wesley and Whitefield. It divides contemporary Calvinists and 'open' theists. Here I present a systematic treatment of the subject that does justice both to God's sovereignty and to human freedom. I hope that this will help to reconcile different views on the issue.

### **The problem**

What do we mean by 'God's sovereignty' and 'human freedom'? Possible answers are:

(S1) *God's sovereignty*: God determines everything that happens in the universe.

(F1) *Human freedom*: Human beings determine some of the things they do.<sup>2</sup>

As thus defined, God's sovereignty and human freedom are incompatible. There can be sovereignty without freedom, or freedom without sovereignty, but not both.

One way in which philosophers have tried to get round this problem is by redefining human freedom as follows:<sup>3</sup>

(F2) *Human freedom*: Human beings do what they want to do.

As thus defined, human freedom is compatible with a completely determined universe. In such a universe, human beings are still aware of wanting things, even though their wanting is determined.

However, this kind of freedom does not make human beings responsible for their actions. This is because, on the Day of Judgment, they could say to God, 'You determined the wrong things I did by the way you set up the universe.' James insists, however, that no one can blame God when he or she sins (Jas. 1:13–15; cf. Sir. 15:11–20).

Another way in which scholars have tried to resolve the problem is by appealing to one of the basic theories of modern science (the quantum theory).<sup>4</sup> According to this, the universe is not completely determined. At a microscopic level, it is undetermined. For example, in a sample of a radioactive substance, the radioactive atoms do not all decay together, but randomly.

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<sup>1</sup> There is an extensive literature on this subject. Recent texts include: D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981); Clark Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993); Clark Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (eds.), *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (eds.), *Still Sovereign* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 2nd edn. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004); Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> This definition allows for 'involuntary' action.

<sup>3</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., A.S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge University Press, 1928), Chap. 14; Danah Zohar, *The Quantum Self* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990).

However, this picture does not help us. If there are events in the universe that are, to scientists, undetermined, this does not make them undetermined to God.<sup>5</sup> God can determine when radioactive atoms decay, whether they decay together, or randomly. In any case, not all scientists believe that the universe is undetermined at a microscopic level.<sup>6</sup> Einstein is one who did not.

### A resolution

A more promising suggestion is to say that God uses his sovereignty to give human beings freedom.<sup>7</sup> He certainly has the power to do this – if he wants human beings to have freedom, he can give it to them. This leads to another definition of sovereignty:

(S2) *God's sovereignty*: God allows human beings to determine some of the things they do, and determines everything else that happens in the universe.

At first sight, this definition is unsatisfactory. If human beings determine some things, it would seem that God can no longer work out his purposes in the world. He can no longer, for example, 'work all things together for good' for those who love him (Rom. 8:28). In other words, his sovereignty would seem to be so severely diminished as to empty the word 'sovereignty' of its meaning.

However, God has many ways of controlling human behaviour without taking away human freedom.<sup>8</sup> In the first place, he has designed human beings and their environment in such a way that, while they can do many things, they cannot do many other things. Secondly, he can intervene in the causal mesh of the universe to change the circumstances in which a human being makes a decision without letting his intervention be known. This is because the universe is a complex and subtle system. Scientists speak of a butterfly in one part of the world affecting the weather in another part.<sup>9</sup> God can make a small change at one point to bring about a significant change at another point.

So, for example, if he sees a man who is thinking of doing something that would obstruct his purposes, he can intervene to close off this option, or present him with a more attractive one. Alternatively, he can allow him to act, and intervene afterwards to recover his purposes.

To do this, he does not need to know what human beings will do in different circumstances. Some philosophers suppose that God does know this, and used this knowledge (called 'middle knowledge') in setting up the universe.<sup>10</sup> He thereby determined the history of the universe while preserving human freedom. Other philosophers, however, question whether God can know what human beings will do when they are acting freely, other than by observing them (cf. Gen. 6:5–7, Luke 13:6–9).<sup>11</sup> If he did know, with certainty, they would be bound to act in the way that he foresees.

<sup>5</sup> Donald M. MacKay, *Science, Chance and Providence* (Oxford University Press, 1978), Chap. 2.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., P.C.W. Davies and J.R. Brown (eds.), *The Ghost in the Atom* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 175–6.

<sup>8</sup> See my book, *God's Control over the Universe*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness, Scotland: Whittles, 2000), Chap. 5 (distributor: bmdpgn@amsolve.com). Cf. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, 1897), 180–2; J.R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK, 1976), 29–30; Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 57–9.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., James Gleick, *Chaos* (New York: Viking, 1987), 9–31. The effect occurs under unstable weather conditions.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 55–61; Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God*, 143–50. I have added 'other than by observing them' to cover the point made by Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S.*

God doubtless knows what human beings will do in many circumstances (cf. 1 Sam. 23:10–11, Psa. 139:1–6, John 6:64, etc.). When he does, he can control their behaviour by arranging their circumstances. But when he does not know, he can still open up or close off their options at key points, or recover his purposes in other ways. Only rarely need he override their freedom, and make them do something that they would not otherwise have done.

God can therefore control the universe by judicious intervention. He has so designed it that he can, to a very large extent, allow human beings to determine what they do, and the natural order to take the course that their actions dictate, while at the same time, by intervening discreetly here and there, carry forward his purposes in the world. Indeed, he can if he wishes bring to pass something he has predestined, fulfil a prophecy he has inspired, or answer a prayer he wants to hear, without having to take away human freedom to do it (cf. Acts 2:23 etc.).

His providence, in other words, is effectively ‘risk-free’.<sup>12</sup> Even in the extreme case of early humans behaving so badly that he regretted making them, he was able to recover his purposes by flooding the world and saving Noah (Gen. 6–9).

We can therefore redefine God’s sovereignty in a way that is consistent with human freedom as follows:

(S2’) *God’s sovereignty*: God controls everything that happens in the universe.

God can control what happens in the universe very tightly or very loosely depending on what he wants to achieve. To secure the death of an evil king in disguise on a battlefield, by a stray arrow that found a gap in the latter’s armour, he had to exercise very tight control (1 Kings 22:29–38). To ‘give up’ sinners to their sins (Rom. 1:24, 26), he need only exercise very loose control. Texts that scholars use to prove that world history is ‘open’ or ‘closed’ really reflect the different ways God exercises control in it.

When God exercises loose control, he permits many things to happen that he does not want to happen (hence the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, ‘your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’: Matt. 6:10). This is because he wants human beings to have freedom and be responsible for their actions. [He did not go into the Garden of Eden until after Adam and Eve had committed their act of disobedience (see below).] Some theologians speak of God having two wills, one willing what he would like to happen and the other what actually happens.<sup>13</sup> However, it is one thing to say that God permits human beings to sin because he wants them to be free, and another that he *wills* them to sin. The reality is surely that he has one will – that human beings should freely obey him.

### *Illustration*

An illustration of how God can control the world while allowing human beings freedom is the way in which a mountain shepherd controls his flock. To get his sheep from one pasture to another, he does not have to tie leads round their necks, and pull them along. He can choose a route so that the flock will tend to stay together; he can gently guide the leading animals in the right direction; and he can send his dog to usher an animal back that

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Lewis & Francis Schaeffer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 99. They note that foreknowledge can be obtained by using a time machine. However, foreknowledge obtained in this way cannot be used to change the future.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Helm, *The Providence of God*, Chap. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 212–4.

wanders too far away. He can thereby get his flock to a new pasture while allowing the animals almost complete freedom to go where they want.

The Bible frequently uses the shepherd and his flock as a picture of God's dealings with his people.

### **Evil**

Philosophers have long puzzled over the question of how there can be evil in a world created by a good God.<sup>14</sup> The Bible answers this question in Genesis 1–3. Genesis 1 affirms that there was no evil in the world when God created it – it was 'very good' (1:31). Genesis 2 and 3 explain how evil came into it – through creatures (Adam, Eve, and the snake) abusing the freedom God had given them. God allowed them to commit their crimes, and only intervened after they had done so (3:8). He then punished them for what they had done, and changed the natural order to make their lives less pleasant for them (3:14–24). In particular, he cursed the ground, and brought death on human beings.

This answer to the problem of evil corresponds to the 'free will defence' of philosophers.<sup>15</sup> My earlier discussion shows that this defence does not mean that God has no control over the world. He has all the control he wants.

Genesis 3 describes the natural order as it now is, scarred with suffering and death. These will not be present in the 'new heaven and new earth', but they are an inextricable part of the world now. God does not take them away, even for Christians, except in special circumstances. Jesus forewarned his disciples, 'In the world you shall have tribulation' (John 16:33).

Genesis 3 also describes the snake, now the Devil, as having some influence in the world. God evidently allows him to have this, while at the same time keeping his activity in check. The Devil's freedom is a paradigm of human freedom: he has it, but cannot prevent God from achieving his purposes.

### **Salvation**

We now come to the thorny questions:

- (1) Are people free to accept or reject the gospel?
- (2) If they are free to accept it, can they do so without God's help?

Pelagians and Arminians answer question (1) in the affirmative, Calvinists in the negative. Pelagians answer question (2) in the affirmative, Arminians in the negative.<sup>16</sup>

I begin with general considerations. Our study so far has shown that, whichever way we answer question (1), God is still sovereign. If he wants people to be free to accept or reject the gospel, he can still control the world. The alternative – that people are not free, and can only accept the gospel if God makes them do so – does not make him more sovereign. It only makes his sovereign purpose different. In the first case, he chooses to have as his people those who freely accept his Son. In the second, he chooses individuals on other grounds, and makes them his people.

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1990); Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of Evil* (London: Fount, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 17–9.

Freedom to accept or reject the gospel does not mean that people can take any credit for accepting it. To be saved, they have to confess their sins, repent of them, and rely utterly on Jesus for forgiveness of them. There is no place for pride of any sort. Jesus told his disciples, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:3).

Freedom also does not mean that evangelists can tell people, ‘You are free to accept or reject Jesus.’ Their task is to preach the apostolic message, ‘God *commands* all people everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30–31). People may be free to accept or reject, but God puts them under obligation to obey.

In respect to question (2), there is no doubt that God helps people to accept the gospel. He does so in the first place by means of the gospel itself. Jesus commended himself as one to be trusted and followed by his life and teaching. Shortly before his death, he told a crowd, ‘I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself’ (John 12:32). God has provided a major inducement to faith in the person of Jesus himself.

In addition, Jesus told his disciples that, after his death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit would ‘convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment’ (John 16:7–11). (I discuss this further below.)

Our conclusion then is that people *can* be free to accept the gospel. That they *are* free is suggested by many passages in the NT. A poignant example is Jesus’ lament, ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you did not want this’ (Matt. 23:37). Another example is the vinedresser’s plea in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, ‘Sir, leave it this year also, until I dig round it, and spread manure, and if it bears fruit, [good]; but if not, you can cut it down’ (Luke 13:6–9).

However, there are some passages in the NT that seem, on first sight, to contradict this. On closer examination, however, they do not, as the following examples show.<sup>17</sup>

### *Jesus’ teaching*

On one occasion, Jesus told his Jewish critics, ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ (John 6:44).<sup>18</sup> The question is, does the Father do this coercively? The answer comes in the next verse, where Jesus explains: ‘It is written in the Prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard from the Father and has learned comes to me’ (45). This describes a *non-coercive* process: God teaches ‘all’ (‘they shall all be taught by God’), some ‘learn’ and ‘come’ (‘everyone who has learned comes to me’), others do not. God taught the Jews through the OT (Luke 16:31).

On another occasion, Jesus told Jews who did not come to him, ‘You search the Scriptures, because in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me; yet you do not want to come to me that you may have life’ (John 5:39–40). John later explained that these are the people of whom Isaiah spoke: ‘[God] has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart’ (12:37–41, quoting Is. 6:9–10). Jesus’ statement, ‘you do not want to come to me’, indicates that the process described by Isaiah was again non-coercive: God ‘blinded’ and ‘hardened’ those from coming to Jesus who did not ‘want’ to come to him.

<sup>17</sup> For a full discussion, see *God’s Control*, 57–67. To the examples on page 61, add 2 Pet. 1:1 [G], 10 [P].

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 37, 39, 65; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24; 18:9.

God's teaching in the OT thus had a *double action* on Jews:<sup>19</sup> it drew those who learnt from it to Jesus, and it hardened those who were unwilling to learn from it. God's acts in Egypt had a similar effect: they hardened Pharaoh (Exod. 7:8–14:31), but softened Rahab (Josh. 2:8–11). The Holy Spirit's activity in Acts, 'convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment' (see above), was likewise double-acting: it led some to repent (2:37 etc.), and others to greater hostility (5:33 etc.).

Jesus thanked his Father for drawing to him the kind of people that he did: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the learned and clever, and have revealed them to babes' (Matt. 11:25). He went on to say, 'All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son wills to reveal him' (27). Jesus here implies that he has the authority to choose those to whom he will reveal his Father. He then exercises his choice: he invites those who are struggling under the burdens imposed by the Pharisees (23:1–4), 'Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...' (28–30).

Jesus calls those who respond 'chosen' (Matt. 24:22 etc.). But the process is again non-coercive: Jesus invites, respondents take his yoke upon them.

#### *Paul's teaching*

*Romans 8:28–30.* In this passage, Paul states that 'we know that [God] works all things together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose: that<sup>20</sup> whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the first-born among many siblings; and whom he predestined, these he also called; and whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified.'

The key to understanding this passage is that 'glorified' is in the aorist tense. Paul is writing about people who have already died and been glorified. These are the people the writer to the Hebrews describes as 'righteous persons made perfect' (Heb. 12:23) – those in the OT who, 'having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having planned something better for us, that without us they should not be made perfect' (Heb. 11:39–40). These can be described as 'foreknown by God' (i.e. known before Christ came),<sup>21</sup> 'predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son', 'called according to his purpose', and (through faith) 'justified'. Then when Christ died and rose again, they were 'perfected' and 'glorified' (cf. John 5:25–29).

*Romans 9:6–29.* In this passage, Paul begins to deal with a contentious implication of the gospel: that Jews who do not believe in Jesus Christ are lost, even though the Jews are God's chosen people. He argues that God's rejection of Jews does not mean that his promises to the Jews have failed, because God had previously been selective in Jewish history, choosing only one son of Abraham and one son of Isaac (6–13). Paul further argues that God is not being unrighteous when he chooses in this way because he is acting out of mercy (14–16). He can have mercy on whom he wants and harden whom he wants (17–18).<sup>22</sup> In answer to the

<sup>19</sup> An example of double-action is the effect on smokers of a notice in a hospital waiting room saying, 'Priority will be given to non-smokers'. This will prompt some to give up smoking, but make others angry.

<sup>20</sup> Gk. *hoti*, as in 28.

<sup>21</sup> In Jewish thought, 'knowing' a person implied having a relationship with that person (see, e.g., Amos 3:2, Matt. 7:21–23, Gal. 4:8–9).

<sup>22</sup> Paul here emphasizes God's side in the hardening of Pharaoh, as his Jewish opponents would. He is arguing on their ground.

question, ‘Why does he still find fault?’, Paul replies, ‘Will what is moulded say to the one who moulded it, “Why have you make me like this?” Or has not the potter authority over the clay to make from the same lump one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?’ (19–21). He then comes to the point he has been leading up to: ‘What if God, wanting to demonstrate his wrath and to make known his ability, bore with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fit for destruction, and [did this] in order that he might make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy, which he prepared for glory, whom also he called – us, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles?’ (22–24). He then cites scriptures to support the inclusion of Gentiles in the second group and of Jews in the first (25–29).

We can understand verses 22–24 as follows. When Paul states that ‘God bore with much long-suffering vessels of wrath in order that he might make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy’, he means that he wanted to make known to the former his blessings on the latter. The purpose of this was to provoke them to jealousy (11:11–14) and lead them to repentance (2:4). The two groups, ‘vessels of wrath’ and ‘vessels of mercy’ are not therefore rigid, as Paul makes clear in 11:22–23.

God does not therefore *force* people to be ‘vessels of wrath’ or ‘vessels of mercy’. So why does Paul describe God acting coercively in the previous verses? The answer is to establish God’s *right* to act as described in verses 22–24. Paul’s argument is that if, as the Jews’ own scriptures teach, God has the right to act like a potter, blessing Isaac and Jacob and hardening Pharaoh (7–21), then he certainly has the right to act as he does through the gospel, dividing Jews and saving Gentiles (6, 22–29).

*1 Corinthians 2:14*. Paul writes that ‘a natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned’. Here, however, ‘the things of the Spirit of God’ do not refer to the gospel, but to God’s ‘hidden’ wisdom (7–9) revealed to ‘the mature’ (6) through the Spirit (10–16), a wisdom too deep even for some Christians (3:1–3).

*2 Corinthians 4:4–6*. The apostle says that ‘the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they should not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ’ (4), while ‘God ... has shone in our hearts to [give] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of [Jesus] Christ’ (6). But Paul has just spoken of how he and his co-workers so conducted their ministry as to commend themselves ‘to every person’s conscience in the sight of God’ (1–2). This implies that there is something left in people to appeal to, despite the actions of ‘the God of this age’.

*Ephesians 1:3–14*. Here Paul states that God ‘blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, according as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, ... having predestined us to adoption through Jesus Christ to himself ...; in whom also we were allotted, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to what he decides he wants ...’ (3–5, 11).

The meaning of this passage turns on the meaning of ‘chose us in him before the foundation of the world’. This could mean that God chose us ‘to be united with Christ’ or ‘through being united with Christ’. In the latter case, God chose *Christ* ‘before the foundation of the world’ (cf. Luke 9:35 *P*<sup>45, 75</sup>, John 17:24, 1 Pet. 1:20, etc.), and we partake of his chosenness through being united with him. The second interpretation is favoured by 2:6 (‘God raised us with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus’). We do not sit in the heavenlies in ourselves: we sit in them by being united with Jesus who sits in them.

*Ephesians 2:1–10*. Paul goes on to tell his readers that they, along with other believers, were ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ until ‘God made us alive with Christ’ (1–5). In its context, this means that God made *Christ* alive, and makes us alive with him (5–7) ‘through faith’ (8–9).

In English translations of verse 8, Paul seems to say that faith is a gift of God, but in the Greek it is salvation that is a gift (*pistis* is feminine, *touto* is neuter).

In verse 10, Paul says, ‘we are [God’s] handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God laid down beforehand, so that we might walk in them’. This could mean that God has a particular plan for each believer, but it is more likely to mean that he has a general plan for all believers – that they should do the good works Paul exhorts the Ephesians to do in Chapters 4–6.

*Philippians 2:12–13*. Paul told the Philippians, ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to want and to work for his good pleasure.’ Here Paul speaks of God working in believers even to ‘want’ his good pleasure, but not so coercively as to take away their responsibility to ‘work out’ their salvation. Paul’s point is that believers should work out their salvation ‘with fear and trembling’ because it is ‘God’ who is working in them.

#### *Other teaching*

*James 2:14–26*. These verses could be taken to mean that believers can achieve salvation entirely by their own efforts (‘by works’). James is, however, countering antinomianism, the idea that people can be saved irrespective of how they live. His argument is that good works must accompany faith, not that they can secure salvation (cf. Eph. 2:8–10).<sup>23</sup>

*1 Peter 1:1–2*. Peter describes his readers as ‘chosen exiles of the dispersion in [Asia Minor] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to, and sprinkling with the blood of, Jesus Christ’.

The key to understanding this passage is that Peter’s readers were Jewish – he refers to them as ‘exiles of the dispersion’ (cf. John 7:35, Gal. 2:7–9). God could therefore have ‘known’ them (been in relationship with them<sup>24</sup>) before they heard the gospel (cf. Rom. 8:29, 11:2). Peter says that God, ‘according to’ his relationship with them, chose them to be Christians. The implication is that they were in a state to accept the gospel when they heard it (John 3:21; cf. Cornelius, Acts 10).

#### **Apostasy**

‘Can Christians commit apostasy?’ This is another thorny question. Calvinists say ‘No’, Pelagians ‘Yes’; Arminians are divided.<sup>25</sup>

On this, the NT itself seems divided. Some scriptures seem to say that Christians can never be cut off from God; others seem to warn that they can be.

This difference arises because the authors are addressing different problems. In the first case, the issue is whether Jesus can keep followers safe in any tribulation they pass through. The answer is that he can (John 10:27–30, Rom. 8:31–39). In the second case, the issue is what happens if people (a) profess to follow Jesus but continue a life of sin, or (b) start to follow

<sup>23</sup> See my article, ‘Faith and Works’ (on-line).

<sup>24</sup> See note 21.

<sup>25</sup> Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 32. For opposing views, see R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Belfast: Ambassador, 1983; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997); David Pawson, *Once Saved, Always Saved?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996).

him and then not merely falter but completely fall away. The answer is that they will be rejected [(a) Matt. 7:21–23; (b) John 15:1–6, Rom. 11:22, Heb. 6:4–6, 2 Pet. 2:20–22].<sup>26</sup>

What the authors say therefore coheres. In effect, God will not cut off those who fear being cut off, but will cut off those who do not (cf. Deut. 29:18–20).

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that God can allow human beings to have free will while controlling everything that happens in the world. This means that we can do equal justice to passages in the Bible that speak of God's sovereignty and to those that imply human freedom. These can be together in a fully consistent way.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 to a man being saved in spite of his work ('as through fire') must be understood in its context. He is referring to *teachers* (1–10) whose teaching does not promote lasting Christian qualities (cf. 13:8–13). He does not say the same of teachers whose teaching is destructive (16–17).