

How Do You Explain Election and Free Will?

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I often post the sermon topic on Facebook as a way to engage people ahead of time so they'll consider gathering with us for a service or watch the sermon online later. Some topics in our Glad You Asked series have generated more comments than others. Our question today, "How do you explain election and free will?" now has over 45 comments!

Here's the picture I posted of my desk on Monday morning. Unbelievably, the first series of comments involved potshots at the Packers.

- *The coaster is prime evidence of a fan with the inability of choosing good.*
- *That Packers thing is quite the blotch on this picture of studiousness!*
- *Packer coaster...Packer book. I wonder if J.I. wishes he had a different last name during football season.*

I was pleased when an astute Packer backer theologian made this application.

- *We were clearly all predestined to be Packers fans; some choose to accept and many choose to deny.*

Here are few more comments.

- *Can't wait!*
- *For me an understandable concept of truth, just hard to explain sometimes.*
- *Not in one sermon.*
- *Aw c'mon. Pick something hard!*

When I asked one EBC member for his thoughts on the topic he said, "*Why are you picking a fight?*" When I told an Edgewood leader about the sermon, hoping for some encouragement, he simply said, "*Good luck!*"

Veteran Edgewood missionary George King is 87 years old. Along with his wife Ellen and daughter Ruth, they have been missionaries in Japan for 58 years, having been supported by the generous givers of Edgewood all those years!

When George saw the sermon topic for this weekend, he sent me an email, *“Would it be an imposition to request a copy of your sermon notes for this sermon? This topic is the source of conflict between fellow workers on every mission field. It looks as though your material will be very helpful to me. I am always endeavoring to keep my messages clear, short, and simple. You seem to be making the same effort.”*

My aim today is to hit two out of three – to communicate as clearly and as simply as I can...but I make no promises on brevity. If you'd like to dive deeper we've posted some resources on the Edgewood app. Click on the “Worship Guide” image on the bottom menu, and select “Sermon Extras.”

I've been pondering George's sad statement all week: *“This topic is the source of conflict between fellow workers on every mission field.”* When I followed up to get more details about how this controversy has caused friction and fractures among missionaries, George offered this assessment: *“The school and Japanese churches suffered greatly. We ended the situation with a big official debate, before the entire fellowship in Japan. Of the missionaries, I was the only one with the Japanese ability in theological terminology to debate...I have much more that I would like to add, but it is 3 AM. By the way, I cleaned house and led the school and fellowship into great revival, and sending of missionaries to many other fields.”*

I'm not sure why Christians go to war over this but I've seen it first-hand...and you probably have as well. This subject has caused friendships to fracture, churches to split and divided Christians into doctrinal tribes. Too often, the debate between those who celebrate election and those who celebrate free will has failed to glorify God, promote evangelism or build up believers.

Instead of creating more controversy, let's commit to act Christianly toward those with a different view. Instead of dividing, let's become more devoted to each other. Instead of whacking others, let's be filled with wonder and worship. Instead of fighting, let's ask God to grow our faith. Instead of battling each other, let's bind together to reach people with the gospel. It's my prayer we will grow in awe of God and in grace toward each other.

George shared some closing wisdom which helps explain why he is still serving strong at 87 years old: *“I don't expect to agree on everything with anybody...”*

Likewise, I don't expect anybody to agree with me on everything. Even my wife, of 64 years, doesn't agree with me on some things, but I love her just the same."

I recognize some will try to put a label on me. I can't stop you from doing so, but I have always resisted saying I follow a certain strain of theology. My aim is to simply go where the Scriptures take me.

I'm reminded of what a Greek professor told his seminary students when they were translating every verse of the Greek New Testament over three years: *"Better to be at home with your Bible and not your theology, than to be at home with your theology and not your Bible."* When reflecting on this statement, Randy Alcorn writes, *"I try to allow God's Word to surprise me and change my mind and modify my positions. I like to learn. If I come to God's Word unguarded, with my shields down, God uses it to grab me, taking me where he wants me to go. If the Bible never changes your mind because you've already got everything figured out, you're missing the joy of discovery."*

There are two main positions concerning election and free will: Arminianism and Calvinism. Robert A Peterson provides a succinct summary: *"Arminians believe that God in His sovereignty and grace chooses for salvation people whom He foresees will believe in Christ. By contrast, Calvinists hold that God in His sovereignty and grace chooses people for salvation without taking their response into account."* The key issue is how people get saved. Calvinists believe God produces in us the decisive desire for Christ while Arminians believe we produce in ourselves the decisive desire for Christ.

This chart, while not representative of everyone who holds these views, shows the main differences.

Calvinism & Arminianism	
<u>Arminianism</u>	<u>Calvinism</u>
1. Sinner, can do good & respond to God	• Man unable of self to respond to God
2. God elects on basis of foreseen faith	• God elects according to His good pleasure
3. Christ died for all	• Christ died for Elect
4. Man can resist God	• Irresistible election
5. Believer may lose salvation	• Elect can never lose salvation

Here's what I believe the Scriptures teach. I have a simple mind, so I recognize this might not be satisfactory to everyone, but here goes: *God is supremely sovereign and we are responsible for our response to Him.* The word "sovereign" means God has absolute authority and complete control. Regarding our topic today, it refers to God's election.

I love the answer Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon gave over 100 years ago when someone asked him how he reconciled God's sovereignty and human responsibility: "*I wouldn't try,*" he replied, "*I never reconcile friends.*" In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*. They work together.

Let's look at these friends now. We'll begin with a Scriptural survey of 10 passages, which speak of God's sovereignty in election and then we'll look at 10 passages which illustrate our responsibility to respond. We'll conclude with 10 passages where we see these friends shaking hands.

God is Supremely Sovereign

To introduce the topic of election, listen to these words from Spurgeon: "*Some will be ready to say, 'Why preach upon so profound a doctrine as election?' I answer, because it is in God's Word, and whatever is in the Word of God is to be preached.*"

The sheer volume of verses, which speak of God choosing, electing and predestining, shows we must give careful consideration to His sovereignty. For the sake of time, I'm electing to choose (see what I did there?) just some of them.

1. Matthew 24:22: "*And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the **elect** those days will be cut short.*"
2. John 6:44: "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me **draws** him.*"
3. Acts 13:48: "*And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were **appointed** to eternal life believed.*"
4. Romans 8:29-30: "*For those whom He foreknew He also **predestined** to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn*

- among many brothers. And those whom He **predestined** He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.”* BTW, the word “He” is used five times in two verses!
5. *Romans 8:33: “Who shall bring any charge against **God’s elect**? It is God who justifies.”*
 6. *Ephesians 1:4-6: “Even as **He chose us** in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love **He predestined us** for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.”*
 7. *Ephesians 1:11-12: “In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been **predestined** according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory.”*
 8. *Colossians 3:12: “Put on then, as God’s **chosen ones**, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”*
 9. *1 Thessalonians 1:4: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has **chosen** you.”*
 10. *2 Peter 1:10: “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and **election**, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”*

In these 10 verses we hear these phrases: *Elect, draws, appointed to eternal life, predestined, God’s elect, He chose us, chosen ones, chosen and election.* Ray Pritchard puts it like this: *“God is in charge of what happens, when it happens, how it happens, why it happens, and even what happens after it happens. This is true of all events in every place from the beginning of time. He does this for our good and His glory.”*

*God is supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible for our response to Him.* Let’s look now at our responsibility to respond.

Our Response is our Responsibility

Instead of referring to “free will,” I prefer the phrase, “human responsibility.” Since sin has stained everything, including our wills, even our freedom is fraught with self-centered sinfulness. Having said that, both the Old and New Testaments testify to the truth of our accountability before the Almighty. It’s as easy to find verses highlighting human responsibility, as it is to discover those expounding divine election.

1. Joshua 24:15: “*And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, **choose** this day whom you will serve...*”
2. 2 Samuel 24:12: “*Thus says the LORD, ‘Three things I offer you. **Choose** one of them, that I may do it to you.’*”
3. Ezekiel 18:32: “*For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so **turn**, and live.*”
4. Matthew 11:28: “***Come** to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*”
5. John 1:12: “*But to all who did **receive him**, who **believed in his name**, he gave the right to become children of God.*”
6. John 3:3: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”
7. John 3:16-18: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that **whoever believes** in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. **Whoever believes** in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*”
8. John 7:37-38: “*If anyone thirsts, let him **come to Me** and drink. **Whoever believes in Me**, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’*”
9. Romans 10:9: “***If you confess** with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe** in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*”
10. Revelation 22:17: “*The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘**Come.**’ And let the one who hears say, ‘**Come.**’ And let the one who is thirsty **come**; let the one who desires **take the water of life** without price.*”

Here are some phrases we heard in this list: *Choose, turn, come to me, receive Him, believed Him, born again, whoever believes, come to me, if you confess, come, and take the water of life.*

*God is supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible for our response to Him.*

Hand in Hand

Before looking at passages where these two friends are found hanging out together, let’s admit this is difficult to understand. Like the Incarnation and the Trinity, we

can grasp some of this truth and yet not all of it. I'm OK with that. As your pastor, I urge you to be OK, too.

It's good for us to live with a sense of mystery. One passage I often come back to is Deuteronomy 29:29: ***"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."*** There are some secret mysteries known only by our majestic God but everything we need to know in order to obey Him has been revealed to us. In other words, when we can't figure it all out, we must still engage our faith and follow Him.

Shortly after I got saved, a friend handed me J.I. Packer's book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. I was delighted when it was assigned for one of my theology classes at Moody. I can't find my original copy so I bought another one and reread it this week. Listen to some of what he says...

An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stands side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence, but it is a mystery to know how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together...two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts. What the Bible does is to assert both truths side by side in the strongest and most unambiguous terms as two ultimate facts...

This is easily said, but the thing is not easily done...we like to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out...the temptation is to undercut and maim the one truth by the way in which we stress the other: to assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or to affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man. Both mistakes need to be guarded against.

Here's what I think he's saying: *We can't resolve God's sovereignty and our responsibility by denying one or the other.* The Bible speaks of both being true without any contradiction, often in the same verse.

Spurgeon is my hero in this regard: *“If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other.”*

I’ve highlighted in red those phrases that speak of God’s sovereignty and used yellow to show human responsibility.

1. Genesis 50:20: *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”*
2. Exodus 7:3, 8:15: *“But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart...but when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them...”* Interestingly, there are 10 passages where it clearly says God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and 10 other verses indicate Pharaoh hardened his own heart!
3. Luke 22:22: *“For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!”*
4. John 6:37-40: *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out...And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*
5. Acts 2:23: *“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”*
6. Acts 3:15, 18: *“And you killed the Author of life...But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He thus fulfilled.”*
7. Acts 13:39, 48: *“And by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”*
8. Philippians 2:12-13: *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*
9. 2 Thessalonians 2:13: *“...God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”*

10.1 Peter 2:8: ***“They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.”***

We can conclude the Bible has no problem affirming both election and responsibility. In fact, as Norman Geisler writes, *“God’s predestination and human choice are a mystery but not a contradiction... The Bible spends little time attempting to explain them. It simply states the facts and expects us to accept what it says.”*

In his commentary on Romans, John Stott offers this quote from Charles Simeon, who lived during the time when the Calvinist-Arminian controversy was quite bitter (actually, it has become bitter again). Brothers and sisters, bitterness has no place within the body of Christ.

Simeon warned his congregation of the dangers of forsaking Scripture in favor of a theological system: *“When I come to a text which speaks of election, I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question.”*

Concluding Thoughts

Please turn to the Book of Romans. We camped out in Romans 3 last weekend and now I want us to see how chapters 9, 10 and 11 work together.

1. God is supremely sovereign. The Apostle Paul deals with the doctrine of election as it relates to Israel in Romans 9:10-11: ***“And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls.”*** This is fleshed out more in verses 15-16: ***“For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”***

2. We are responsible for our response to Him. Now let’s look at Romans 10:1: ***“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”*** I see two applications in this chapter – one for those who are not saved yet and another for those of us who know Christ.

- **Confess Christ.** If you don't know Jesus Christ through the new birth yet, it's time to confess Christ as your Savior and determine to follow Him as your Lord. Listen to Romans 10:9-10 and verse 13: ***“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... for ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”***

If you're ready to respond to the gospel by confessing Christ, you could pray something like this: *“God, I admit I am a rebellious sinner who deserves to be eternally punished for my sins. I repent from how I've been living and turn to You. I confess You are Lord and I believe in my heart You were raised from the dead. You died in my place as my substitute and I ask You now to save me from my sins. I believe and receive You as my Savior and by Your grace give me what I need to live under Your Lordship for the rest of my life. In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.”*

- **Go with the Gospel.** Some Christians, when pondering God's divine election have elected not to be involved in evangelism because they believe God will save those He wants to save without any help from us. While maintaining the doctrine of election, it's a grave error to conclude God will save whoever He saves without us going with the gospel.

The classic example of this came two centuries ago when timid William Carey appeared before a group of Baptist ministers to get their approval to become a missionary. The chairman stood up and said, *“Sit down, young man! When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid, or mine!”* Carey was refused his ordination four different times! Undeterred, he went on to become a missionary and the ‘father of the modern missionary movement.’

Romans 9:14-17 does not allow us to opt out of evangelism: ***“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says,***

‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

J.I. Packer addresses this head on: *“They must be told of Christ before they can trust Him, and they must trust Him before they can be saved by Him. Salvation depends on faith, and faith on knowing the gospel. God’s way of saving sinners is to bring them to faith through bringing them into contact with the gospel. In God’s ordering of things, therefore, evangelism is a necessity if anyone is to be saved at all. We must realize, therefore, that when God sends us to evangelize, He sends us to act as vital links in the chain of His purpose for the salvation of His elect.”*

What a joy to see over 2,000 names written on the wall in the Worship Center! It’s very moving to know these names have already been written on your hearts as you long for your loved ones to follow Christ. I’m not sure how much longer we’ll have access to this wall because it will eventually be covered with acoustic panels, but you can still add names this weekend.

It’s time for us to live on mission like never before, church! God has placed you on purpose for His purposes in your family, in your neighborhood, at your workplace, on your campus and in the various places in which you gather.

We don’t know *who* will be saved therefore we must tell everyone *how* to be saved. This happened to me Friday when I was at a McDonald’s finishing up this message. A man sat down near my and was reading the newspaper. I asked him if there was any good news in the paper. He told me it was all bad news. I said a quick silent prayer and told him he has to read the Bible to get good news. It was really cool what happened next. He glanced down at one of the bad headlines and said, *“I think Armageddon is coming.”* I agreed and told him we tackled that topic in the sermon two weeks ago and told him we better all be ready by making sure we’ve put our trust in Christ. He then told me he hasn’t been to church in over 10 years. I gave him my card and told him how to listen online and invited him to gather with us at Edgewood. He smiled and said, *“I might just do that.”*

I don’t know if Randy will watch a sermon or visit but I tried to faithfully communicate the gospel. I appreciate Spurgeon’s practical theology: *“The way for you to ascertain God’s choice is to talk about Christ to everybody*

you meet; try to bring everyone to Christ. The Lord will do the sorting far better than you can; He never makes a mistake.”

It’s moving to me to know 8 people are being baptized Sunday afternoon! You are living out Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** I hope you’re able to come to show support as they take this step of obedience.

3. Turn your Doctrine into Doxology. The proper reaction to the consideration of God’s supreme sovereignty along with our responsibility is to be moved with wonder that cascades into worship. That’s how Paul ends these three chapters filled with deep doctrine. Notice how doctrine moves him to doxology: ***“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable His ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.”***

I’m going to ask you to do four things right now.

- Read these verses silently with deep reverence.
- Now please stand and listen as I read this passage of praise.
- Finally, let’s explode with exaltation by reading this glorious section of God’s Word in unison.

*God is supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible for our response to Him!*

And all God’s people said, “Amen!”