

“It’s Your Call”

By Rev. S.C. Rowe

“A man's heart **deviseth** his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.” – Proverbs 16:9

This month(s) teaching deals with a tough subject for most new believers – “free-will” vs. the Providence of God. Many, including some mature believers, have a hard time understanding how we can be creatures with a “free-will” (the ability to choose and make decisions on our own) and still be subject to God’s divine will and destiny for us.

My goal here is to attempt to provide a simple explanation and viewpoint on this subject that will, hopefully, help you to gain a better understanding of this often confusing concept. While I do not claim to be a great biblical scholar, I have spent a lot of time researching and deliberating on this subject and I want to share with you the answer and understanding that I believe God has led me to. It has removed a great amount of confusion from my own life, brought me peace and comfort, and greatly strengthened my relationship with the Father of Life. I believe it can do the same for you!

AN AGE OLD ISSUE

For centuries, believers have been struggling with the issue of “free-will” vs. “Pre-destination”. It has been a topic that not only stirs confusion, but has even divided the Church over the years. People’s beliefs on this subject have spawned various denominations and doctrines and have even resulted in believers questioning whether those with opposing viewpoints are actually going to heaven!

Before we discuss the answer, we must first discuss the questions that have been raised. To do that, we need to briefly review some church history.

DEAR JOHN

The first school of thought we’ll review is “Clavinism”, named for its biggest proponent, John Calvin. It can be more accurately termed as “Determinism”. This “doctrine” can be understood to believe the following:

1. God wills all things to occur and everything that happens is a result of His choosing it to be so.
2. After man's fall, every aspect of him, including his mind and desires, became corrupted and depraved to the point of death. Because of this depravity, man is "an enemy of God, incapable of saving himself". Man has neither the power nor the desire to choose God.
3. God chooses specific individuals to be His chosen ones on no basis other than His good pleasure. "It is not man's actions, works or *even foreseen faith* that 'draws' God's choice". God simply wills it this way and God's will cannot be superceded.
4. Therefore, man has no choice in whether he will respond to God's choosing him. In fact, since God wills everything that happens, the idea of man acting completely on his own is not taught in the Bible.

Simply put, this group believes that we do not really choose to do anything. Rather, God causes us to choose whatever He wants to happen. This even includes salvation. They believe that the only people who come to salvation are those God has pre-chosen in advance.

John Calvin took this idea further and taught that man couldn’t even make a good choice if he wanted to. God directs, or causes, us to make good choices. If He doesn’t want us to make

a good, or positive, choice, then we are incapable of making one. In other words, we are only capable, or free, to make evil choices by ourselves.

These folks believe that, after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, we have no good left in us at all. We have only evil left and the desire to do evil. If God doesn't cause, or force, us to do good works, or positive things, we never will and will never want to. Oh, and by the way, God has already figured and planned out who will do good and we can do nothing to change it at all.

For me, this viewpoint raises more problematic questions than we have time to even begin to cover here. Some examples would be: If God causes us to make all of our choices, does that mean He causes people to do evil? What's the point of prayer if God already has pre-planned the outcome? Why should we bother witnessing, going to church, or studying the Bible if we are going to do and be whatever He has already decided anyway? Why bother thinking or learning at all? Why not just let God, the "Puppet Master", do all the work and dance us around by our strings?

The biggest problem I have with this "doctrine" is that it paints God out to be some demented producer/director that has created this show called "Life" for His own amusement. It makes us out to be nothing more than programs operating and performing only to meet the needs of His cosmic "computer game". Smells like were in the Matrix here, doesn't it?

"IT'S ALL NEW TO ME!" –God

The next "doctrine" to review is "Arminianism", also called "Open-Theism". This school of thought originated with the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius. This system of beliefs was created to correct the Calvinist view that both good and evil originates and is caused by God. They sought to reinforce that every good thing originates from God and that sin/evil is in no way connected with Him.

This "doctrine" found popularity in the First Great Awakening, propagated by John Wesley, and obtained wide spread acceptance during the Second Great Awakening, propagated by the Methodists and Presbyterian minister, Charles Finney. Its effects can be seen also in the Pentecostal movements and other evangelical groups in various forms. Some of the main beliefs for this school of thought are:

1. God does not have to control everything to be sovereign. Since He has all power and total control, He can, and does, grant man the freedom to make their own choices. This is an act of His authority and in no way demeans or weakens it.
2. Free-will was/is a part of the God created make up of man and was not lost in the fall any more than any other body part was. It is not a spiritual gift, but a built-in part of man.
3. God's grace works upon all men to influence them to do good, but only those who choose to agree with grace, by faith and repentance, are actually able to do it.
4. Conditional Election. God knew/knows in advance those who would believe in Christ and "pre-saves" them. He leaves those whom he foresaw would not believe in Christ in sin. Christ's death was for all mankind, but only those who choose to receive it are, or will be, actually saved.
5. God cannot know certain things and experiences the future with us. This doesn't mean that God is not omniscient, or all knowing. Rather, it means that He chooses not to know some things because He wants us to be free to make our own decisions. He then reacts to our choices accordingly, similar to the way a dancer reacts to her partner.
6. Resistible grace and uncertain perseverance. Everyone, including the believer, has the ability or choice to refuse to accept God's grace and mercy and their benefits. While grace is sufficient to help us stay saved and do good, we can, and some do, choose to fall from grace (or sin) and lose our salvation.

Once again, there are too many questions raised to discuss here. The biggest issue for me with this “doctrine” is that it contradicts itself. While stating that God does in fact pre-destine certain people to salvation as found in scripture (Romans 8:29 for example), it also states that God doesn’t know what decisions we will make ahead of time. Remember, they believe that God finds out what we are going to do only when we do it, not before. If God has chosen not to know what I am going to do, how can He choose, as scripture declares, to pre-destine me to conform to the image of His Son? If He doesn’t know what I’m going to do, how can He foreknow me to pre-destine me? If I’ve been pre-destined to salvation, how can I choose to resist it or go back to sin and condemn myself to hell? Wouldn’t that mean that I had more authority than God regarding myself? Wouldn’t I be “trumping” God’s plan? Ouch, my head is starting to hurt...

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

The last, and most recent, doctrine to discuss is “Molinism”, or “Middle Knowledge”. This one is for the super intellectual crowd. I won’t spend much time on this one since it is more a philosophy than an actual doctrine supported by scripture. While the 2 doctrines above are supported biblically (depending on your interpretation of scripture), this one simply is not. Nor does it make any claim to be. It is simply a “belief”.

The basic concept here is that proponents of “Middle Knowledge” believe that God does in fact pre-destine some for salvation and allows them to freely choose to accept or reject it. They believe that God does foreknow all of the choices we will make. They believe that God looked into the future and saw the outcome of every possible choice we all could/would make and decided to create a world that would cause us to make the choices that would either lead us to Him or away from Him. In other words, He knows those that will or won’t choose Him and created the perfect world, in advance, that would cause or help us to make those choices for sure.

Prayer, bible study, and witnessing are still important because they are tools God pre-ordained to help us make the choices He already knew we would make. Through prayer and bible study we find information necessary to make those choices and by witnessing, we also provide information for those who won’t believe (and those who will) to use to make their choices. This belief is actually a combination of elements from both of the previously discussed doctrines. Ooouch, I really need to find some Advil...

DOCTRINE FOR DUMMIES 101

If you’re like me, all of this has left you very confused and quite possibly in need of medical attention or a trip through the healing line at church. It never ceases to amaze me how theologians and other intellectuals can make the simplest of things so confusing! Let’s go back to our scripture text above.

“A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.” – Proverbs 16:9

What I see in this scripture is that God does indeed have a plan for everyone - a final destination or outcome, if you will, based on His advance knowledge of our ultimate choice to accept or reject Christ. I believe this is not only in regards to our ultimate salvation but also in our daily lives and situations. He allows mankind to choose the path to get them to the outcome while ensuring that, no matter what we choose, we will arrive at that destination or outcome.

I believe that God knew and knows, in advance the choices we will make and goes before us to work the outcome of our choices to lead us where He wants us to end up. He does not react to our choices when they happen, rather before they happen. God is not subject to time like we are. He created time and therefore exists outside of it. He is not subject to His creation. Rather, it is subject to Him. Our reality is not the only one. He has His own reality that ours is

subject and part to. His ways are higher than ours! We do not currently understand them. (1 Cor. 13:12) We won't fully understand them until we are with Him and as Christ is now.

God is not responsible for sin! Man and Satan are. The fact that sin and evil is allowed to occur doesn't mean that God wants it to or needs it to. It exists because we made choices that cause it to, not God. He knows in advance that it will occur, who will embrace it and who will embrace Him. He does NOT cause it to happen. He allows it to and allows it to work its eventual outcomes, in this life and the next. He does not pre-destine people to sin, rather he allows it. He has not chosen for those who will eventually go to hell to go there. They have/will. Hell and punishment are a reaction to those choices in advance. God's desire is that all men would be saved and that none would perish. (1 Tim. 2:3-4) That was and is His desire since before creation. He doesn't want anyone to go to hell. They make choices that take them there, just like believers make choices that lead them to Heaven.

God's mercy and grace are available to everyone, but will not be accepted by all. (John 3:16, 2 Thes. 2:7-12) They suffer the outcomes of their choice just as we enjoy the benefits of ours. God has good plans for those who accept His love and those who reject it. The choice is ours to make. He made it that way. Why? I have no idea. We'll have to wait to find out.

Witnessing is important to us, and God. (Mat. 24:14, 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-18) It is part of His plan to give man the information needed to make fair, informed choices. He is just. We have no way of knowing who will accept Christ. We are told nowhere in scripture that we would. God has given us the privilege of playing a part in the outcome of humanity. Sometimes we play good parts and sometimes we won't. It is important that we continue to witness (or tell what we know) about Christ and the life He brings because it gives others the information they will need to make their own choices. You can't make a choice without having more than one viewpoint or option. We need to provide others with a different option or viewpoint than the world/flesh does. When there's only one option, there is actually no choice to be made!

Regarding prayer, even though God "knows what we have need of, even before we ask," (Mat. 6:7-8) God still wants us to come to Him with our needs and ask Him for help. I have no idea why, He just does. I would suppose that it has more to do with us than Him. It brings/keeps us in relationship with Him.

Regular prayer can be very conversational in nature. There is no better way to thoroughly get to know someone than to simply talk to them. We talk to God through prayer and reveal ourselves to Him. Yes, I know that He already knows all about us. However, while doing this, we make our questions and desires known to Him (and to us) and, more importantly, it provides Him with opportunity to communicate back to us. This practice, of waiting to hear if God answers back, seems to be a dying practice among many believers. Many seem content to simply "say their piece" and walk away. I've found, through experience, that if we'll stay a while longer, often, God will speak back to us.

How does He do this? 2 ways: by the Spirit & by the Word. He speaks to us by the Spirit through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirit, tongues & interpretation, dreams, visions, and yes, sometimes even in an audible voice. He speaks to us through the Word by showing us examples of others in our situations or similar ones, revealing who He is & what He does, and through revelation and understanding given through the Spirit as we read. Many people keep their Bibles handy while they're praying in case God directs them, by the Spirit, to a certain passage or passages that speak to some aspect of their prayers.

One thing to keep in mind about God answering us is that it happens according to His plans. While I don't always get my answers immediately, I do always seem to get them eventually. I think that sometimes, we are not ready to receive the answer He has for us. We may need to grasp some other concepts first before we can understand the answer He has for us. This is where regular Bible reading/study comes in.

The second best way to get to know someone is to read some background information on them. The Bible is like God's biography or resume. It shows us who He is, what He's done, and what He's capable of doing. It gives us the basics we need to know about before we talk with Him. It makes our conversations more efficient and productive. It provides starting points for our discussions with Him and allows Him to further expand on these things to us in a more personal and specific way. Simply reading about Him and His ways are not enough for the basis of a good relationship. It only gives us the "big picture." If we want details or interaction, we need to go directly to the source. This is why regular prayer and Bible study are often mentioned in the same breath. They complement and complete one another.

Prayer and bible study provide us with knowledge and skills needed to make the right choices and arrive at our eventual outcomes. They provide a means for us to learn and walk in the plans He has for us. While we don't always know the outcomes, we can take comfort in knowing that His grace will sustain us and keep us no matter what the outcome.

IN CLOSING

It is my hope and prayer that this article has helped shed a little more light on this subject and made it a little less confusing to you. I know I've given you a lot of information to digest, but I think that, with God's help, you can do it. Believe it or not, this is actually the shortest writing on this subject that I've found!

In closing, let me sum my belief on this subject up for you very simply:

- God's plans for us are based on His foreknowledge of the choices we will make.
- He allows us to make those choices along the way.
- He works with us based on those choices to help us obtain the outcome we choose both daily and eternally.
- He provides us with and/or allows us access to tools to use to understand the options and make informed choices.
- Regardless of how or what we ultimately choose, His desire for us is ALWAYS for us to make the choice to accept Christ and be saved.

Your final destination and outcome is up to you. God has chosen to give you the power to decide this. For those who choose to accept Christ, He will help you and work with you to get you to Heaven. For those who reject Christ, He will allow you to be influenced by satan and make sure the door to hell is open when you get there.

For those readers who find themselves in the position of making your choice to accept or reject Christ, you need to know that you can choose to accept Him. Your final destination is in your hands. Don't fall into the trap of worrying about what God knows. Personally, I believe that the fact you may want to choose Christ is an indicator that you eventually will. If you weren't going to choose Him, you wouldn't be wanting to. Jesus said that nobody comes to Him without the Father (God) causing it to happen! (John 6:65) Why would God allow you to come to this knowledge of Christ and allow you to desire to accept Him if He didn't already know you would? Instead of putting the choice off, why not choose Christ today?

The Bible says that if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord (the master or boss) and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead – we SHALL be saved. (Romans 10:8-11) It doesn't say "might" or "could". It says SHALL! God will work for you and with you to help ensure you reach the ultimate outcome of being saved from His wrath and punishment and participating in His earthly blessings, eternal life, and Heaven. (John 10:19-29, 1 Peter 1:3-5, John 6:28-59)

All you need to do is accept and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord over everything and choose to believe that God resurrected Him from the dead. A belief is something you've chosen to accept as truth. You don't have to understand that thing to believe in it. You just need to accept it as truth. Most people don't understand how the lights come on when they apply electricity, but that doesn't stop them from believing it will happen. They simply accept it to be true. Just like electricity, you can do more research to find out why the resurrection occurred or is true if you want to. However, just like electricity, you don't have to fully understand the resurrection to believe it to be true. The Holy Spirit can and will help you to understand it better in time. (John 16:13)

By the way, you don't need to worry about "cleaning up" or living right before you accept Christ either. If you had no sin, what would you need saving from? The reason you come to Christ is to change directions and outcomes in your life. His Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth (John 16:13-15) and show you what you may or may not need to change. He will give you all the strength you need to live the life God has in store for you! (Acts 6:8)

So again I ask, Why not choose Christ today? Simply open up your mouth and declare that "Jesus is Lord!" and choose to believe that God raised Him from the dead.

If you did that, then, according to God's Word, you are SAVED!! Welcome to the family!

The best thing I can suggest you do next is find a church to attend regularly. There you will find people who will love you and help guide you in your journey to know God better and to live your life in a way that pleases Him and blesses you. You may have to visit a few to find the one that you feel most comfortable with, but don't worry, you will find a church family you can call your home. You can also check with friends and family members who are saved to help make your search easier.

Additionally, you can write, call, or email me and I will be happy to help you with suggestions and materials that can help you start enjoying the benefits of a prayer life and Bible study.

God bless you on your journey!

If you have any questions or comments about this month's teaching, you may feel free to contact me via email (shanerowe@freshrainonline.com), by phone at (317) 462-3634, or by postal mail: Rev. Shane Rowe, 1555 E. Main Street, Greenfield, IN, 46140.

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