

Do We Have a Free Will?

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Introduction

Question 1. Why should we study “free will”?

1. “Free will” is theologically significant.
2. Many people assume a particular definition of “free will” that is incorrect.

Question 2. What are some challenges with studying “free will”?

1. “Free will” is complex because it is connected to many other larger theological issues.
2. “Free will” is not defined in Scripture.
3. “Free will” is complex because it intersects with philosophy, historical theology, and systematic theology.

1. What is “free will”?

1.1. Will

the function of choosing

1.2. Constraining and Non-Constraining Causes

- Constraining causes force people to act against their will.
- Non-constraining causes do not force people to act against their will but are sufficient to cause an action.

1.3. Incompatibilism vs. Compatibilism

- Incompatibilism: Determinism and human freedom are incompatible.
- Compatibilism (i.e., Soft-Determinism): Determinism and human freedom are compatible.

1.4. Indeterminism vs. Determinism

- Indeterminism: Genuinely free acts are not causally determined.
- Determinism: Everything is causally determined.
 - Soft determinism = determinism + human freedom
 - Hard determinism = determinism - human freedom
- Compatibilism (i.e., soft determinism) rejects fatalism.
- Compatibilism (i.e., soft determinism) rejects hard determinism.

1.5. Libertarian Free Will vs. Free Agency

- Libertarian free will (i.e., contra-causal free will or the power of contrary choice) is the ability either to do something or not.
- Free agency (i.e., the freedom of self-determination or the liberty of spontaneity) is the ability to do whatever a person wants to do.

1.6. God’s General Sovereignty vs. God’s Specific Sovereignty

- God’s General Sovereignty: God is in charge of everything without controlling everything.
- God’s Specific Sovereignty (i.e., Meticulous Providence): God ordained everything, and he controls everything to accomplish his purposes.

	Incompatibilism as Held by Many Arminians	Compatibilism (i.e., Soft Determinism) as Held by Many Calvinists
Definition	Determinism and human freedom are incompatible.	Determinism and human freedom are compatible.
Determinism	Affirms indeterminism; rejects determinism ¹	Affirms determinism; rejects indeterminism and fatalism
Human freedom	Affirms libertarian free will (i.e., contra-causal free will or the power of contrary choice)	Affirms free agency (i.e., the freedom of self-determination or the liberty of spontaneity)
God’s sovereignty	Affirms God’s general sovereignty	Affirms God’s specific sovereignty

2. What have noteworthy theologians thought about “free will”?²

2.1. We Are Capable of Obedience: Pelagius (c. 354–415)

2.2. We Are Incapable of Obedience: Augustine (354–430)

2.3. We Are Capable of Cooperating: Semi-Pelagians (John Cassian, c. 360–435; Council of Trent, 1545–63)

¹ “Hard determinists” are also incompatibilists because they believe that determinism and human freedom are incompatible. Unlike indeterminists, however, they reject human freedom rather than determinism.

² The nine headings in this section reproduce the chapter titles in R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). I added the dates for each person in parentheses.

- 2.4. We Are in Bondage to Sin: Martin Luther (1483–1546)
- 2.5. We Are Voluntary Slaves: John Calvin (1509–64)
- 2.6. We Are Free to Believe: James Arminius (1560–1609)
- 2.7. We Are Inclined to Sin: Jonathan Edwards (1703–58)
- 2.8. We Are Not Depraved by Nature: Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875)
- 2.9. We Are Able to Believe: Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871–1952)

3. What are biblical and theological reasons for compatibilism and against incompatibilism?

- 3.1. The Bible never says that humans are free in the sense that they are autonomously able to make decisions that are not caused by anything.
- 3.2. God is absolutely sovereign.
 - Objection: Some argue that verses stating God’s providential control of the universe are merely exceptions but that they don’t describe how God ordinarily works through humans.
 - Objection: Some argue that this makes God the author and agent of sin.
- 3.3. Humans are morally responsible, which requires that they be free.
 - Objection: Some argue that real choices cannot be caused by God.
 - The Bible does not ground human accountability in libertarian free will.
- 3.4. God’s absolute sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility are simultaneously true.
- 3.5. The Bible condemns some people for acts not done with a libertarian free will.
- 3.6. God is omniscient (e.g., he predicts future events).
- 3.7. God breathed out Scripture through humans without violating their personalities.
- 3.8. God enables Christians to persevere: Christians work *because* God works.
- 3.9. God himself does not have a free will in the libertarian sense.
- 3.10. God’s people do not have free wills in heaven in the libertarian sense.

4. How does “free will” relate to the origin of both sin and conversion?

- 4.1. Is libertarian free will the reason for the origin of sin?
 - God is not the author or agent of evil.
 - Satan is not God’s equal opposite (i.e., a God-versus-Satan dualism).

- God, who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, ordained that sin would enter his universe.
- Satan and then Adam and Eve sinned because they wanted to sin, and they are morally responsible to God for it.

4.2. Is libertarian free will the basis for the origin of conversion?

People do what they do because they want to do it (i.e., as long as they are not constrained). Non-Christians do what they want to do, and they will *never* want to come to Christ as their master unless God first changes their “wanter.”

- Total Depravity

Unbelievers are *totally* depraved in the sense that depravity affects their entire being (Gen 6:5; Ecc 7:20; 9:3; Isa 1:6; 64:6; Jer 13:23; 17:9; Rom 1:18–3:20, 23; Jas 3:2; 1 John 1:8, 10) including the mind (Rom 8:5–8; 1 Cor 2:14; Tit 1:15), body (Rom 8:10; Eph 4:17–19), and will (John 8:34).

- Total Inability

Total *depravity* describes the human condition, and total *inability* describes the result of that condition (John 1:13; Eph 4:18 and Ezek 36:26; 2 Tim 2:26; Rom 6:17, 20; 8:7–8; 2 Cor 4:4). Unregenerate humans are incapable of obeying the gospel (Matt 7:18; John 8:43–44; 14:17; Rom 8:7–8; 1 Cor 2:14).

- Regeneration

Conversion is entirely a work of God (John 6:37, 44, 65; Jas 1:18). Regeneration transforms a human’s will and enables them to come willingly to Christ. Regeneration is the act whereby God through the Holy Spirit by means of his word instantaneously imparts spiritual life to the spiritually dead (John 1:13; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18). It is a spiritual resurrection (Eph 2:1–6; Col 2:13), birth (John 3:3–8), and creation (2 Cor 5:17).

- Human Responsibility

This does not mean, however, that humans are not responsible to obey the gospel because God may command humans to do what they cannot do by themselves (cf. Lev 18:5 with Gal 3:12). Human inability and responsibility are mysteriously compatible.

- Evangelism and Prayer

The God who ordains the ends also ordains the means, and evangelism and prayer are God-ordained means to God-ordained ends.

5. Concluding Applications on the Free-Will Debate

1. Praise God for sovereignly planning the universe and for flawlessly executing his plan.
2. Recognize that other orthodox Christians who disagree with you on this issue are not the enemy!
3. Since it is unlikely that all living Christians will agree on the issue of free will, promote unity on this issue as much as possible.
4. As in all areas of controversial doctrine, hold your view with humility.

6. Recommended Reading

- Asterisks (*) indicate the most highly recommended resources.
- Titles are hyperlinked to Amazon.com.
- The level of difficulty of each resource is ranked: 1 = introductory; 2 = intermediate; 3 = advanced.

Alcorn, Randy. “Who’s in Charge? Divine Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice.” Section 5 (chaps. 20–25) in *If God Is Good . . . : Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2009. [1. I read a draft of this lengthy book, which is scheduled for release on September 15, 2009. Typical Randy Alcorn: accessible, thoughtful, and relevant.]

Cairns, Alan. “Free Will,” “Self-Determination,” and “Will.” Pages 185–86, 411–12, 521–22 in *Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002. [1]

Carson, D. A. *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994. Reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002. [2. See esp. pp. 206–9, 253–55.]

* ———. “The Mystery of Providence.” Pages 177–203 in *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. [1. See esp. pp. 194–95.]

Edwards, Jonathan. *Freedom of the Will*. Edited by Paul Ramsey. Vol. 1. Works. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. [3]

Feinberg, John S. “God Ordains All Things.” Pages 19–43, 85–88, 125–29, 163–68 in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*. Edited by David Basinger and Randall Basinger. Downers Grove: IVP, 1986. [2. Clear and convincing.]

———. “God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking.” Pages 459–83 in *Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism*. Vol. 2 of *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*. Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995. [2. See pp. 459–70.]

* ———. *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2001. [2. See esp. chaps. 13–16 (pp. 625–796, 843–55). Theologically and philosophically informed.]

- Frame, John M. “Human Responsibility and Freedom.” Pages 119–59 in *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002. [2. Includes eighteen critiques against libertarian free will.]
- Gerstner, John H. “Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards on the Bondage of the Will.” Pages 279–95 in in *Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism*. Vol. 2 of *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*. Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995. [2]
- . *A Primer on Free Will*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982. [1. An unconventionally direct dialogical approach.]
- * Grudem, Wayne A. “God’s Providence.” Pages 315–54 in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. [1. See esp. pp. 322–31, 334–51. Fairly presents and soundly refutes the Arminian position.]
- Helm, Paul. “Will.” Pages 722–23 in *New Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright. Downers Grove: IVP, 1988. [2]
- Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957. [3]
- Naselli, Andrew David. *How Could a Good God Allow Suffering and Evil?* Kenosha, WI: CrossWay Community Church, 2008. [1. Addresses the logical and emotional problems of evil. A condensation of one of last year’s addresses in CrossWay’s Difficult Issues Series. Cf. [handout](#).]
- Nash, Ronald H. “Metaphysics: Some Questions about Indeterminism.” Pages 326–41 in *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999. [1. Clear definition of terms.]
- Packer, J. I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1961. [1. Lucid, enlightening, convicting. Excellent little book for Christians who wonder about the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in evangelism. Cf. [my summary and outline of the book](#).]
- * Peterson, Robert A., and Michael D. Williams. “Freedom: Incompatibilist or Compatibilist?” Pages 138–61 in *Why I Am Not an Arminian*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004. [1. For an opposing perspective, see Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, “Calvinism and the Nature of Human Freedom,” in *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 96–118.]
- * Piper, John. *Spectacular Sins and Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008. [1. See esp. pp. 39–64. Available online for free as a PDF.]
- Reymond, Robert L. “Why God Is Not the Author or Chargeable Cause of Sin.” Pages 372–76 in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. Nashville: Nelson, 1998. [2]
- Sproul, R. C. *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997. [1. Historical-theological overview that is concise, accessible, and chronological.]
- Storms, C. Samuel. “Freedom of the Will (?).” Pages 53–67 in *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*. 2d ed. Wheaton: Crossway, 2007. [1]

- . “The Will: Fettered yet Free (*Freedom of the Will*).” Pages 201–20 in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*. Edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor. Wheaton: Crossway, 2004. [2. [Available online for free as a PDF.](#)]
- . “Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will.” *Trinity Journal* 3 (1982): 131–69. [2. Cf. his “Jonathan Edwards and John Taylor on Human Nature: A Study of the Encounter between New England Puritanism and the Enlightenment” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 1984) and *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).]
- Talbot, Mark R. “True Freedom: The Liberty That Scripture Portrays as Worth Having.” Pages 77–109 in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*. Edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor. Wheaton: Crossway, 2003. [2. Refutes open theism. [Available online for free as a PDF.](#)]
- Wright, R. K. McGregor. *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1996. [2. Polemical.]