

CHAPTER SEVEN HOW HUMANS MAKE FREE CHOICES

The Molinist Position: A person is free with respect to a choice only if he is able to make and carry out that choice and also able at the same time and in the same circumstances to refrain from it. Such freedom would mean free choices cannot be determined.

Theological Truth #4 That Favors Calvinism: A person is free with respect to a choice if he truly wants to perform that choice. Such a view of freedom leaves room for choices to be determined and, at the same time, remain free.

My wife and son love putting together jigsaw puzzles with thousands of pieces. They have the patience to stay with them until a picture emerges. I must admit I don't have the persistence. But I have done the large puzzles created for very young children that have half a dozen or a dozen pieces. Those are more at my level.

Our study has been more like one of those large puzzles with a few pieces (otherwise I would not have stayed with it as long as I have!). So far, our work has displayed for us a picture of how God is absolutely sovereign and how he exercises that sovereignty through meticulous providence. Now we are ready to fit in an important piece—the piece that speaks of human freedom. And here is our discovery: We do not have to force a piece into the puzzle that does not fit with what we have seen so far. What we discover in the Bible is that its teaching on how humans exercise free choices fits perfectly with our picture that has already come together of divine sovereignty.

This is important because, for some, their view of human freedom shapes how the entire puzzle is assembled. As Sam Storms has insightfully written, “The real point of dispute between Arminians [as well as Molinists] and Calvinists is...the nature of man and his will.”¹ It is the nature of man and a certain view of what freedom is that drives the Molinist and Arminian to

¹ Sam Storms, *Chosen For Life: The Case For Divine Election* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 53.

develop the view of God (as well as his sovereignty and providence) they have. Likewise, if we were to discover the Bible teaches indeterministic or libertarian human freedom, we would have to do the same—that is, go back and rework our view of God. Let’s see why this is so.

Indeterministic freedom argues that, “A person is free with respect to action X only if he is able to perform X and able to refrain from performing X.”² This presence of what we might call “alternativity”³ leads most libertarians also to argue something like Alvin Plantinga:

A person is free with respect to an Action A at a time T only if no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he performs A at T or that he refrains from doing so.... The freedom of such creatures will no doubt be limited by causal laws and antecedent conditions. They will not be free to do just anything; even if I am free, I am not free to run a mile in two minutes. Of course my freedom is also enhanced by causal laws; it is only by virtue of such laws that I am free to build a house or walk on the surface of the earth. But if I am free with respect to an action A, then causal laws and antecedent conditions determine neither that I take A nor that I refrain.⁴

What Plantinga is affirming, which is a typical indeterminist (and more to the point for our current discussion, Molinist) tenet, is that no actions or events or decisions that precede a particular decision determine that decision,⁵ even though such antecedent movements can influence it,⁶ even though they possibly even limit the choices available,⁷ and finally even if such antecedent movements may provide a strong chance of predicting the outcome.⁸ Bottom-line,

² David M. Ciococchi, “Understanding Our Ability To Endure Temptation: A Theological Watershed,” JETS, 35, 4 (December 1992): 463-64. Ciocchi labels this “categorical ability.”

³ On alternativity see Paul Helm, “Compatibilism And Two-Way Contingency,” in “Helm’s Deep” (October 1, 2016).

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature Of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 170-171, cited in John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine Of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 628.

⁵ Feinberg, *No One*, 626.

⁶ Feinberg, *No One*, 628-29.

⁷ Kenneth Keathely, *Salvation and Sovereignty* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010, Kindle Version), ch. 3, argues for a soft indeterminism in which choices are limited by the character of the person—a character that is shaped by antecedent choices, still this is not decisive in determining the particular choice made.

⁸ Plantinga, *The Nature*, referenced by Feinberg, *No One*, ch. 4.

even if desires and motives have been shaped strongly to form a preference, the libertarian argues the free person can decide against what she wants to do at the moment.⁹ And what is more, once the decision has been made, the indeterminist affirms, “the agent could have chosen otherwise.”¹⁰

It is easy to see, then, that if humans are free in this manner (especially if choices cannot be determined by antecedent movements or circumstances outside the person¹¹), God’s relation to their choices cannot be determinative, as we have argued it is in Chapters 4-6. Though God knows with certainty what choices will be made, they are not necessary or divinely determined choices, so argues the Molinist.¹² What follows, then, for the Molinist, at least to some degree, is that God’s governance must be dependent upon or limited by human choices.¹³ Consider how William Lane Craig describes Luis Molina’s view of divine concurrence:

*[Molina] compares divine concurrence with secondary causes to two men pulling a boat: there are two causes cooperating to produce a single, total effect. Thus [when a man wills to produce some effect, God concurs with the man’s decision] by also acting to produce that effect; but he does not act on the man’s will to move it to its decision. ...[The concurrence] **depends for its existence on the influence and cooperation of the [human] will itself....**”¹⁴ (emphasis added)*

⁹ Paul Helm, “Who’s The Magician?” in *Helm’s Deep Blog* (September 17, 2016, accessed September 24, 2016 at paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com), highlights how strange this belief is among indeterminists—namely that a person must be able to choose contrary to her preference (contrary to her will) in order to be free.

¹⁰ John D. Laing, “The Compatibility Of Calvinism And Middle Knowledge,” *JETS*, 47, 3 (September 2004): 455.

¹¹ See Alan Richardson, “Foreknowledge,” in Alan Richardson, Ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 130. Feinberg, *No One*, 628: “The fundamental idea of indeterministic free will is that genuine free human action is incompatible with (or rules out) causal determinism...genuine freedom is incompatible with determinism.”

¹² William Lane Craig, “The Middle-Knowledge View,” in James K. Beilby, Paul R. Eddy, Ed’s., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 125-31; William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility Of Divine Foreknowledge And Human Freedom* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf And Stock, 1999, repr.), 70-72.

¹³ I believe Paul Helm, *The Providence Of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 42, is correct when he asserts: “...the chief (if not only) reason why [an indeterminist] view of providence is taken is concern to preserve [their view of] human freedom....”

¹⁴ William L. Craig, “Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?” in Clark H. Pinnock, Gen. Ed., *The Grace Of God And The Will Of Man* (Mineapolis: Bethany House, 1995), repr.), 154.

Yet, we have discovered that Scripture is clear that God's sovereignty is not limited by or dependent upon human choices. So, we ought to be relieved to know that the Bible does not affirm this indeterministic view of human freedom.

Now, since many readers will merely assume that for humans to be genuinely free, it must be in the libertarian or indeterministic sense,¹⁵ the question might arise at this point, "Are you saying, then, that we are not genuinely free?" Such would be not only the question, but with it there would be an implied accusation that my Molinist brothers and sisters would raise. In fact, Tim Stratton argues that, "If one assumes determinism, then it makes no sense to ask the following questions: 'Are *you* willing to change your mind?' 'What would it take for *you* to change your mind?'"¹⁶ The trajectory of his article is that divine determinism would not allow for genuinely free human choice.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, it is not only a mistake to assert those who are compatibilists (and soft determinist Calvinists)¹⁷ do not believe humans are free in any way, I will also show that it is both logically consistent for them to believe what they do about human

¹⁵ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *Faith And Philosophy*, 20, 4 (October 2003): 461, argues that most Christians believe in libertarian freedom. My experience has been that she is probably right.

Paul Helm, "Who's The Magician?" also affirms that libertarian freedom appears to be the philosophy of religion default position for what true human freedom is.

¹⁶ Tim Stratton, "Incoherent Questions," at freethinkingministries.com/incoherent-questions/ (November 22, 2016, accessed that same day). One of the very points I will demonstrate in this chapter is that the soft determinist Calvinist can in fact assert that, "*You* can change your mind," and this can be consistent with the view of divine governance we have affirmed.

¹⁷ Feinberg, *No One*, 632, 635-36, uses the phrases "soft determinists" and also "Calvinist determinists," equating the two, as I have throughout this book.

freedom, and it is consistent with biblical teaching.¹⁸ And, in fact, we will discover indeterminism is inconsistent with biblical teaching.

In other words, as we look into the Bible, we discover the puzzle piece of human freedom is compatibilistic freedom, a freedom that fits with soft determinism—the picture of divine sovereignty and providence that has already emerged. So, the view of freedom we will affirm is this: “The plain and obvious meaning of the words Freedom and Liberty...is the power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has, to do as he pleases...for one to do and conduct as he will, or according to his choice, is all that is meant by it.”¹⁹ In other words, “...we are free in the greatest sense that any creature of God could be free—we make willing choices, choices that have real effects. We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions.”²⁰

Now, before we go on, it is helpful to delineate a truth that has been implied, but not explicitly stated, namely that the will is determined in one of three ways: By causes external to it; by internal causes; or by nothing at all.²¹ Though the Molinist believes choices can be limited and influenced by external and internal causes, they cannot be determined by such things and remain free. Let’s start by evaluating their proposal.

An Evaluation Of The Molinist View Of Human Freedom

¹⁸ Calvinist theologian, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000, repr.), 330, writes: “...are we in any sense free? The answer depends on what is meant by the word ‘free.’ In some sense of the word ‘free,’ everyone agrees that we are free in our will and in our choices. Even prominent theologians in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition concur. Both Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*...and John Calvin in his *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* are willing to speak in some sense of the ‘free’ acts and choices of man.”

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, Christian Classics Ethereal Library Edition, Accessed April 2015, at cel.org/ccel.org/ccel/Edwards/will), Part 1, Section 5 (page 24).

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, repr.), 331.

²¹ Donald J. Westblade, “The Sovereignty Of God In The Theology Of Jonathan Edwards,” in Sam Storms, Justin Taylor, Ed’s., *For The Fame of His Name: Essays In Honor Of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 114.

As we have seen, the Molinist believes God innately knows what a person would do no matter what set of circumstances is actualized in the world. Based on this knowledge (including God's knowledge of the indeterministically free choices of persons), he ordains a certain set of circumstances and a choice as the outcome. As such, so the argument goes, if a person would have made a different choice in a particular situation, God would have known that and ordained a different outcome. So, what we have is the following: A strong view of God's omniscience, a strong view of God's providence, and the certainty of future events, but not their necessity.²²

There are at least eight problems with this view of human freedom. The first is that it makes God's governance dependent upon and limited by human choices, which, as we have seen, runs counter to biblical teaching. Now it is true that the Bible affirms that God decrees conditionals: "If A does B, then C will happen." Through God's innumerable combination of permissive and causative governing movements, the choices of A truly do matter, can be righteous or unrighteous, have consequences, and bring about change in the world. However, "the way to understand such conditional aspects of God's overall willing is not as God's response to what he has merely foreseen will happen, but as his response to what he has both foreseen and been willing to permit.... [However,] there is a crucial distinction between a willing of conditionals [as the soft-determinist affirms] and a conditional will [as the Molinist affirms]...."²³ The Bible affirms the former, but not the latter.

The second problem has to do with wedding such a strong view of divine omniscience and a libertarian view of human freedom. Molinists are correct to affirm that the certainty of a future event does not mean that event is necessary—in the sense that it does not matter what the person

²² Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," 125-27; *The Only Wise*, 51-54, 70.

²³ Paul Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," in James K. Beilby, Paul R. Eddy, Ed's., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 183.

decides in the chain of events leading up to and including a particular decision, they necessarily must do whatever is certain to happen.²⁴ However, they are incorrect in assuming there is not any kind of necessity in the certain event. An example will help.

Suppose that Mary, convinced by her physician, decides to undergo a colonoscopy. As a result, the date is set and she faithfully abides by the instructions to fast and cleanse her colon in preparation. While she is in the procedure at the hospital the surgeon accidentally damages her colon during a polyp removal. This leads to a reparative surgery and, as such, a longer time that Mary is unable to eat. Once Mary comes out of the procedure and is recovered enough to eat, she is very hungry. As a result, when the hospital offers a very appealing lunch to her (meatloaf and mashed potatoes, which is her favorite meal), she accepts and eats—very gladly and freely!

Now, from eternity past, even the Molinist asserts, God has known each of these events in the chain that happens and so they are certain. At the same time, we must add that we can take any one of the choices and events, and see that there are different levels of necessity attached to them. For example, once damage was accidentally done to the colon, there was a kind of necessity upon the surgeon to repair it. Given the fact that she is a competent surgeon, wants Mary to be well, and is capable of doing the procedure, she knows she must do it. However, she is not constrained to do the surgery against her will as if someone is holding a gun to her head or as if, at the time she thinks to herself, “I don’t want to do this procedure, but somehow I can’t help myself. It almost feels like the forces of the universe are compelling me to do this!” This would be an altogether different kind of necessity.

Likewise, in Mary’s decision to eat, there is a necessity in that she is hungry, her body needs nourishment to survive, she wants to eat, is not nauseous from the surgery, feels fine, very much

²⁴ Even soft-determinists, like Paul Helm affirm this. Helm, “The Augustinian,” 183.

enjoys what is on the menu, she lacks any other compelling reason not to eat, and so she wills that outcome. However, if any of those things had not been true (for example, if she had been nauseous), there could have been a different outcome. What is more, no one is holding a gun to her head to make her eat, nor is anyone force-feeding her against her will. Also, she did not have the sense, “I really feel nauseous and don’t want to eat, but I can’t help myself. Forces larger than me are compelling me to order the food and now to take up the fork and eat it.”

Though we can say that Mary hypothetically possessed alternativity, i.e. the ability to reject the food (to make a different choice), given the other circumstances leading up to the decision and given the preference of her will itself, she would certainly eat and at one level there was a necessity. Yet, it was not a necessity that opposed her will.

Paul Helm explains the reality behind this example and the fallacy of the Molinist’s thinking that no necessity at all is present in what God knows will certainly happen: “If there is something in the past that entails something in the future and if what is past is necessary—accidentally or historically necessary—then what is entailed is similarly accidentally or historically necessary....”²⁵

The point is this: If God knew all of the events and preferences of Mary leading up to and including her preference to eat (as even the Molinist asserts), it is very difficult to conclude there was not some necessity in her eating. So, it appears there is a problem with holding to such a strong view of divine omniscience and, at the same time, indeterministic human freedom (a contra-causal freedom that lacks any necessity).

The third problem involves the strange outcome for indeterminists that for choices to be truly free, a person must be able to choose the opposite of what their true preference is. In other

²⁵ Helm, “The Augustinian,” 184-85.

words, they must be able to choose against their will. So, if we were to go back to our example of Mary in the hospital, if her choice is truly free, she must be able to say, “No,” to the meatloaf and mashed potatoes even though her preference is to eat them and even though she lacks any compelling reason to refuse the meal.

Right away some will respond, “Oh, but Tom, can’t you imagine a reason for Mary to refuse her favorite dish, such as her desire to keep going in her weight loss momentum of the past couple days so she could lose those few extra pounds she put on during the holidays? Or perhaps she is expecting family to visit soon and so she doesn’t want to eat while they are in the room?” To this any soft determinist can say, “Oh, we most definitely can imagine those. However, in each of these situations what we are proposing is that a new and greater motive has replaced the motive of enjoying the delicious food. Such an explanation is actually more in line with soft-determinism than it is indeterminism. And, with each of the parts of the chain we can not only say God decreed or willed it and brought it about causatively, permissively, or as a combination of both, but also Mary truly willed each decision as well. So, she is free.

“Well, then,” an indeterminist might respond, “Mary can, for no apparent reason, choose to forego the food.” As we will see below, such a response does not appear to be in line with biblical teaching on the human will, but additionally, it lacks empirical verification. Paul Helm explains:

Libertarianism has the following that it has because it is claimed that it provides a clear criterion of human responsibility, a necessary and sufficient condition of it. But the usefulness of this criterion for that purpose, establishing that a person is morally responsible and what he is responsible for, is in fact impossibly difficult. For such a choice is weird, an instance of human beings having the power in a situation in which A is preferred to choose B instead of A, all other states of affairs except the choice being exactly unchanged. Claims of this type are empirically unverifiable and require us to believe that each of us possesses and exercises such a power when not the least piece of empirical evidence is produced for it. Such evidence as there is is consistent with compatibilism. Can you imagine this criterion of a free choice working in a court of law, or in the family?²⁶

²⁶ Helm, “Magician?”

This leads to a related fourth problem with indeterminism, and that is the arbitrary nature of such a free choice.²⁷ It does not appear to be the way humans make decisions. Of course we talk of making decisions on a whim, but there is at least some reason for the decision—even if the reason is small or slight, such as, “I have no preference in this situation, but I know I must choose,” or “I want none of the choices,” or “I will hurry and choose this one because I feel pressured,” or “I want to prove as an indeterminist that I can choose against my preference, so I will make this decision.” Granted, if there truly is no preference, as in the first response, either a choice between options will be made because a person believes he must choose, or perhaps there is no desire for the option(s) available, so the choice or preference is not to choose or to go without. Yet, at some level there is some reason for a preferred choice—a reason that is shaped by antecedents and so truly belongs to the person and can also be decreed by an absolutely sovereign God.

In order to answer this accusation of the arbitrary nature of their view of freedom, indeterminists appeal to ways of viewing the will that sound very much like soft determinism. Robert Kane gives an example of a woman encountering a car wreck on her way to her job. To stop would enable her to help, but would also mean she is late to the office. Kane continues:

[U]nder such conditions, the choice the woman might make either way will not be “inadvertent,” “accidental,” “capricious,” or “merely random” (as critics of indeterminism say) because the choice will be willed by the woman either way when it is made, and it will be done for reasons either way – reasons that she then and there endorses...So when she decides, she endorses one set of competing reasons over the other as the one she will act on. But willing what you do in this way, and doing it for reasons that you endorse, are conditions usually required to say something is done “on purpose,” rather than accidentally, capriciously, or merely by chance.²⁸

²⁷ Helm, “Magician?” affirms this problem.

²⁸ Robert Kane, “Libertarianism,” in J.M. Fischer, R. Kane, D. Pereboom, & M. Vargas, Ed’s, *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 29, cited in Helm, “Magician?”

Yet, Paul Helm rightly responds:

When the situation is described, as Kane...describe[s] it, as one having reasons or conditions, the compatibilist freely claps his hands with glee. It is obvious that the situation as described by Kane is easily incorporated into compatibilism. For compatibilism has no difficulty at all in allowing for conflicts in the self between one set of desires and another, or of a stalemate between the two settled in time by the preference for one of them; of willing a course of action as a result of settling the claims of competing reasons; of sudden decisions following periods of hesitancy and even of decisions, which when made, surprise the agent. All these are what we may call the phenomena of conscious choice, and cannot be used as an argument in favour of libertarianism. They are equally open to the compatibilist and the libertarian; when they are described as Kane describes them above then this is obvious.²⁹

Perhaps an indeterminist will answer, “But, Tom, we are not trying to say there can be no reasons for a different choice. We are simply saying an alternative choice can be made, that one can change their mind. As a free being, they have this ability.” Yet, as Helm has introduced, the compatibilist can say all this as well. Both the way we have described God’s governance, as well as how we see the human will functions, allows room for humans to: Respond to reasoned argumentation, to change their mind, to change habits, to make real choices from their own will, and to have the hypothetical ability to choose other than what they chose—but it does not include the ability to choose contrary to their strongest motive or preference, which appears to be a contradiction.

A fifth problem with the indeterministic view of human freedom is that it does not match with our experience. Interestingly, it is popular to think that indeterministic freedom better matches experience. However, this usually arises from a reductionistic and twisted view of deterministic freedom, that argues what is believed is choices and events are fatalistically programmed and we have no choice. Of course, given that description of determinism, most will

²⁹ Helm, “Magician?”

say it does not match their experience. After all, humans usually have the sense when making free choices that they are not coerced, that they are choosing as they desire, and in some sense, they certainly could have made another choice. Where deterministic freedom fits better with experience is when it comes to the impact that previous decisions, circumstances, character, and habits have upon our choices. Additionally, I am convinced that if people rightly understand compatibilistic vs. libertarian freedom, most will think it odd that the ability to choose contrary to one's will (what they prefer) is necessary for a genuinely free human decision.³⁰

A sixth problem, and one related to the fifth, is that no one can come up with any evidence of the core of libertarianism in practice. Even in the example found in Helm's blog (that was originally in Kane's essay)—the woman coming upon the wreck, we can say that whichever decision the woman makes, she is not forced from outside herself and she truly wants to make it and has reasons for that decision which are compelling. So, at the moment of decision she makes the decision she does because it is her strongest desire at the time. It is odd to say that one was her strongest desire, but she went in the opposite direction. This all is true even if she really wants to help the person, but knows she will lose her job if late one more time and so she decides not to stop. Even in that situation, she is acting on the strongest motive at that moment—albeit simultaneously trumping another strong motive.³¹

A seventh problem with libertarianism—and this because it will often imply otherwise—is that compatibilism can account for almost every power and ability the former advocates (with the exception of deciding against their preference at the time).³² There is a very real sense in which

³⁰ See the helpful discussion about this topic in Helm, "Magician?"

³¹ I am dependent upon Helm, "Magician?" for this insight.

³² Helm, "Magician?"

the compatibilist (or soft determinist) can say that in a genuinely free situation, the person has the power to do otherwise than what he or she chooses. Consider the following examples:

- The non-Christian has the natural ability to choose to trust in and follow Christ. He has all the powers and faculties to do so, as well as the General and Special Revelation of God to explain things. Yet, the reality is that such a person (apart from the work of God's Spirit to change the direction of his heart) will never want to do so. His intellect, desires, and will all move in a different direction. Such a situation (whether he trusts in Christ in the future or never does) can also, at one and the same time, be consistent with the decrees of God that are not dependent upon or limited by his human choices (and carried out through immeasurable causative and permissive movements) .
- The Christian has the ability to say, "Yes," to God and "No" to sin because of her transformed heart. When facing a temptation, if she refuses and says, "No" all the way through it, she also at one and the same time, could have said, "Yes." Yet, all the way through it, her strongest desire at the time was to say, "No." Such is also true had she said, "Yes" to the temptation. What is more, whichever way she goes, this can be ordained by God through immeasurable causative and permissive movements on God's part (and yet, in the case of saying, "Yes," to the temptation, not be in accord with God's moral will).
- A person can change the course of his decisions and habits—thus changing the direction of his choices (and so soft determinism is not equal to naturalistic determinism!):
 - A woman who decides not to stop at a wreck can change her mind, turn around, and go back—and all this be decreed by God in a manner he is not dependent upon or limited by human choices, and all along the way she could have kept going, but did not want to, for her strongest desire at that moment was to go back.
 - A man can be overweight for twenty years of his life due to poor dietary habits, try unsuccessfully to lose weight several times, and then finally decide to make the changes he needs to—choices that take him in a very different direction in life and lead to the loss of over fifty pounds. (This is my experience) All along the way he could have changed earlier, but operated according to his strongest desires at the time. When he made the changes, he operated according to the strongest desires at that time, but certainly could have chosen to stay on the same path and eat as he had been eating. All of this can and does take place according to the decrees of God, carried out through immeasurable causative and permissive movements on the part of God—and all in a way that God's decrees are not limited by or dependent upon these choices.
 - A woman who ignored and/or rejected Jesus Christ for most of her life (who was naturally able to come to him, but did not), can finally respond to compelling reasons and motivations for considering him in a new and fresh way, trust him as her Savior, turn and walk in a different direction in life—and do this because of new strongest desires (even though all along the way should could choose to keep saying, "No,"

but does not want to say, “No”!). This can take place through an immeasurable combination of causative and permissive movements on the part of God that include trials in her life, friends and family who talk to her about Jesus Christ, countless people praying for her, and the orchestration of all these movements so that the woman receives and rests upon Christ alone for salvation.

The eighth and final problem with indeterminism we will look at is the reality that the Bible does not teach this view of human freedom. To see that is so, we will turn to this subject in the rest of the chapter, to consider it in depth.

How Humans Make Free Choices: The Biblical Teaching

One of the first discoveries we need to make about how humans make free choices is that they are not arbitrary, i.e. they are not disengaged from antecedents. The key point at which volition connects to these antecedents is that of motive.

Free Human Choices Emerge From The Strongest Motives At The Time

What I mean by motive is, “The whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things [united together].”³³ To state it another way, there is no difference between volition and preference, for, “A man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will.”³⁴

To see this, we will begin with the words of Jesus in Matthew 15:17-20:

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.

³³ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 2 (page 6).

³⁴ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 1 (page 4).

In Matthew 15:1-20 the apostle records an incident in which scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus to complain that his disciples were not adhering to the traditions of the elders by washing their hands ceremonially when they eat (15:1-2). Jesus then confronts them in response because they had not adhered to a true commandment of God due to their own traditions and he quotes to them Is. 29:13, to make the point that they claim to be near to God, but their heart is not truly close or submitted to him (15:3-9).

After these Jewish leaders left, Jesus addressed the crowd and clarified that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but it is what comes out of the mouth, originating in the heart. In other words, don't be concerned merely about externals, instead, be concerned about where your heart is. Are you truly submitting to and trusting in God and thus following his commands? Or are you ignoring him (thus showing a lack of love and submission) and building your own commands that deal only with surface issues, following them, and thinking you are fine (15:10-11)?

In response to what Jesus said, his disciples tell him that the Pharisees were offended (15:12). No doubt, behind the disciples' statement was concern since the Pharisees had been such revered leaders. They thought Jesus should be concerned about the response of the Pharisees as well. Jesus' reply to them is startling: "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." The essence of the response is that the disciples need not concern themselves with the response of the Pharisees, since they are blind guides and will lead them in wrong and eternally destructive ways. In other words, they can't be trusted and so their opposition should not be seen as that important. It is not from God! Yet, the verse 13 ground underneath why they are blind guides can be shocking to readers at first glance.

In the context we see that the “plant” (13) refers to people and those who will be uprooted include those scribes and Pharisees who have not been planted by the heavenly Father. The lexical and conceptual connection to the wheat and weeds parable of Mt. 13:24-30 affirms that planting here would denote God’s sovereign action in bringing about true salvation (also Old Testament background sees God’s people as his plants: Ps. 1:3; Is. 5:1-7; 60:21). Jesus is saying that those whom God has not brought forth, whom he has not truly placed in his field—but they have been falsely placed there—they will be uprooted. Jesus is asserting that these Pharisees are not in the people of God, because God did not choose them and place them there. This agrees with what we see elsewhere that people in general (Mt. 11:25-27; John 6:37, 44) and the Jewish leaders in particular (John 10:26) will not come to God through Christ apart from initiating, effective divine grace. Such persons who do not come to him will be uprooted, i.e. judged and ultimately removed from even the presence of God’s genuine people and blessing.

Next, Peter asks Jesus to explain what he meant when he taught in v. 11, “what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” So, Jesus launches into that explanation in verses 17-20. In these verses that form a chiasmic structure, Matthew records two points that Jesus made.

Jesus’ first point is that mere food does not defile a person (make them unrighteous or unholy before God) since it passes through the digestive system, is expelled, and does not necessarily impact the heart (17, 20). In Mark’s version the parenthetical explanation (“thus he declared all foods clean,” 7:19) clarifies that standing behind Jesus’ comments is a salvation-historical shift—that is, in the coming of Jesus and the New Covenant, the dietary laws are fulfilled in him and so no longer apply (cf. Acts 10:15; Col. 2:16-17). There may also be the implication that lack of adherence to the dietary laws alone never defiled a person (it would have been the person’s lack of faith in God to follow these laws that pointed to greater realities—Christ).

The second point Jesus makes is that which makes a person unrighteous or unholy comes from the heart (18-19).³⁵ In other words, whether something is morally right or wrong (done in the way God wants for the purposes God wants [cf. 1 Cor. 4:5; 13:1-3]) starts in the heart. In the context of Matthew 15, Jesus is using “heart” primarily to focus upon either the thoughts and how they impact desires and motives or the focus is upon desires and motives themselves.³⁶ I argue this based upon Jesus’ use of Isaiah 29:13 (see Mt. 15:8-9), where the focus is doing the right things outwardly in word or deed (although this was not perfect either!), but doing them with the wrong thoughts about or motives behind why to do them. That in both cases (Isaiah’s day and Jesus’) there was a lack of devotion to God, love for him, and trust in him is revealed by doing some of the right things for the wrong motives—an attitude that also led to substituting man’s traditions for God’s commands (what we think is more important than what he says).

Motives and desires include, “That which incites to action; that which determines the choice, or moves the will” (motive), and also, “An emotion or excitement of the mind, directed to the attainment or possession of an object...a passion excited by the love of an object...a wish to possess some gratification or source of happiness...that internal act, which, by influencing the will, makes us proceed to action” (desire).³⁷ Another word for motives and desires is preference. There are three primary shaping influences upon the human heart (or what man prefers) in the Gospel of Matthew: nature (i.e. what a person is like when born: Mt. 11:25-27; 15:13), nurture (i.e. how a person shapes his own character with his choices and actions: 6:19-21), and the devil

³⁵ Jesus’ affirmation stands strongly upon Old Testament teaching. Consider Psalm 141:3-4, where the psalmist not only affirms that the heart is the source of our ethical choices and actions, but he also affirms one’s words are an indicator of what is in the heart: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! ⁴ Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds....”

³⁶ BAGD, 403-404.

³⁷ These definitions are from *Webster’s Dictionary* (1828 ed., on-line).

(16:23)—all three of which form the character of an individual, and this shapes the preferences (12:33-35).

In verse 19 Jesus gives examples of sins, which may represent the Ten Commandments, a summary of the Law of God. His point is that all these start in the thoughts, motives, and desires. And, whether these are acted out or remain in the thoughts, desires, and will (see Mt. 5:21-20), they are sin. We should also not miss the contextual implication that right behavior also starts in the heart, when Jesus chides the Jewish leaders by showing what Isaiah had earlier written (cf. Mt. 15:8-9) applies to them. The point is that they should want what God wants, in the ways pleasing to God, and for the purposes God wants them.

Though by no means does Matthew 15:17-20 provide a complete taxonomy of how choices flow from the strongest motive at the time, it starts us well on the road to understanding this truth.

Another passage that aids in our understanding is Matthew 12:33-37, which reads:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

In Matthew at this point readers are being called to come to Jesus, to make sure they have trusted in him. Contrasted with this, they are also being shown that opposition to Jesus is growing—to the point that, as can be seen in 12:22-32, some Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Satan (strongly implying he is not truly from God and not truly the Christ). Jesus not only refutes this, but ends his refutation and rebuke of these leaders with these words (32): “And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

So, in a section in which the identity of Jesus is emphasized and readers are being called to trust in him, the point is made that what one says (blaspheming the Spirit, i.e. attributing Jesus' works to other sources other than the Holy Spirit) can demonstrate what is truly in the heart and where a person stands in regard to God.

In the passage-at-hand, Jesus tells the Pharisees they need to see themselves for who they really are and what they are really like (33), and then he goes on in v. 34 to clarify who and what they are—they are like vipers (deceitful snakes that can appear to be a branch and then can bite when grabbed, e.g. Acts 28:3). In other words, though they appear to be righteous, they can only speak evil, because their hearts are evil.

In verse 35 Jesus explains the reason behind why the character of people in general and the Pharisees in particular can be known by the words they speak: namely, what a person has treasured up in their hearts (their thoughts about what is truly important in life and the desires and motives that arise from this)—be they good or evil—will determine their choices, what they say, and what they do (this agrees with Prov. 4:23, that says from the heart “flow the springs of life”). This is why a person's words (and in context words that reveal truly their thoughts and affections in regard to Jesus) can be used in judgment to confirm where they stand with God.

John Piper helpfully writes:

The human heart produces desires as fire produces heat. As surely as the sparks fly upward, the heart pumps out desire for a happier future. The condition of the heart is appraised by the kinds of desires that hold sway. Or, to put it another way, the state of the heart is shown by the things that satisfy its desires. If it is satisfied with mean and ugly things, it is a mean and ugly heart. If it is satisfied with God, it is a godly heart. As Henry Skougal put it, “The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its desire.”³⁸

³⁸ John Piper, *The Purifying Power Of Living By Faith In Future Grace* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1995), 186-87. Skougal's quote is from Henry Skougal, *The Life Of God In The Soul Of Man* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1986, orig. 1677), 62.

There are several things that this Matthew 12 passage teaches about human choices we will eventually examine. However, the main point for now is that we see an example of how one set of motives in the heart (those that move the heart against Jesus) can out-weigh other motives and evidence (that should have commended Jesus as truly the Messiah).

This is seen in light of the preceding context to this passage, where we discover Jesus has healed (12:9-14), demonstrating he is Lord over the physical realm, and has cast demons out of a man so as to heal him, demonstrating he is Lord over the spiritual realm (12:22-32) and demonstrating he is Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-8). In the midst of the recounting of these miracles, Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-3 to make the point that Jesus is the Messianic servant of God (12:15-21). And all of this comes on the heels of Jesus calling people to him for rest (11:25-30) and demonstrating what one does with him is the decisive issue for people when it comes to eschatological judgment (11:20-24). The point is unmistakable that the Pharisees should have seen who Jesus truly is and desired to trust in him. However, their thoughts and affections moved them decisively to a different conclusion.

There is one more passage in Matthew's gospel that provides strong confirmation for the point we are making—Matthew 6:19-21. There we read: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In addition to verses 19-20 teaching that we are to seek ultimate fulfillment and happiness in those things that are most important to God and to seek these in the ways he desires, verse 21 teaches where one is seeking to lay up his treasure will be a good indicator of where his heart is and where his heart is will be a good indicator of whether or not he has eternal life. What appears

to be implications of this text is not just that a person's motives shape their choices and actions, but that the resulting choices and actions further shape motives. Additionally, it seems to substantiate that choices are made out of the strongest motives, for one set of motives is lifted up above the other—to encourage one and discourage the other.

That human choices flow out of the strongest motive(s) at the time is not only seen in these Matthean texts, but also in the Old Testament. In Ecclesiastes 10:2 we read: “A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.” In this text we discover that one's decisions and behaviors are shaped by previous inclinations, i.e. antecedent decisions, convictions, and behaviors (foolishness and wisdom in wisdom literature deal with all three [e.g. Prov. 1:7; 9:10]).

To understand this statement accurately, we must realize that fear of the LORD is essential for wisdom (Prov. 9:10) and such fear, though it can be learned (Ps. 34:11) comes ultimately from a work of God's grace (Is. 25:3; Jer. 32:40 [cf. Dt. 30:6]). Additionally, this statement is in a section of Ecclesiastes that is making the case that wisdom is superior to folly and/or mere strength, even if the world does not always recognize this (cf. 9:11-18). Clearly whether one is wise or foolish will have an impact upon their words and behaviors (10:12). What is more, the larger context clarifies that wisdom comes ultimately from God and has great impact upon people (12:9, 11) and ultimately the wise are in the hands of God, so even they do not direct entirely or ultimately their own outcome alone (9:1).

Bottom-line, then, Ecclesiastes 10:2 substantiates that a person's thoughts, motives, and desires, move their choices—either in a wise or foolish direction. What is more, these thoughts, motives, and desires are shaped by antecedent circumstances, choices, and works of God, just to name a few.

It is in Romans 7:15-17 where we gain even greater clarity that the will is moved by the strongest motive at the time and specificity for how this can be so among competing desires. In the process of Paul pointing out that the Law is not sinful or responsible for sin, but rather it is sinful people who are responsible and the problem (cf. 7:7, 14), Paul writes the following: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Not only does Paul not fully understand why he does what he does (15a), he affirms that his greatest overall desire (God’s will) is not what he always does. Instead, there are times he does the very thing he can say that overall he hates—he sins (15b). What Paul does know about why he does what he does in those times is that it is indwelling sin behind such decisions (17). At the same time, the fact that Paul’s greatest overall desire is to do God’s will and to avoid sin confirms the Law is good (16).

What Paul is saying here can be best understood with a parallel situation. Let’s say Julie decides she wants to change her diet so she can lose weight and be healthier. She starts out on her plan and really wants to eat more vegetables and fruit, eat less food overall, and wants to minimize her snacks and intake of desserts. For the most part, Julie does well. She is often saying, “No” to cookies, cake, and candy and she is eating more fruits and vegetables. Yet, there are those times she gives in and grabs the ice cream in the freezer and fills her bowl. She really wants to eat differently. Yet, in those moments, she is able to rationalize with herself and so she gives in to her greatest motive at the time (to enjoy the ice cream), even though that momentary greatest motive conflicts with her overall motive to eat differently and lose weight at most other times.

What Paul explains is the experience of all Christians to some degree. Because we are new and transformed people, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), we want to please God (and this is the overall direction of life and often comprises our strongest motive at most times). Yet, there are times—though we cannot fully explain it, other than to say it is the fact that sin still indwells us—when the strongest motive is to give into the temptation and we do.

So, if we understand correctly what Paul is saying, we grasp that choices are made according to the strongest motive at the time, but also this is more complex than what it is first thought. We can have competing motives in which some are strongest at one time and others at another time.

Free Human Choices Are Determined

We also discover the reality that all choices are determined. What I mean by determinism or determination of the will is the same as Jonathan Edwards: "...causing that the act of the will or choice should be thus, and not otherwise: and the will is said to be determined, when, in consequence of some action, or influence, its choice is directed to, and fixed upon a particular object."³⁹ First and foremost, I am asserting that the choice is "decided," it is "settled" or "fix[ed] conclusively"⁴⁰ by the strongest motive at the time and that motive is decided, settled or fixed conclusively by other antecedent movements. In other words, "that for everything that happens, there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could occur."⁴¹

Another way to say this is that choices are caused. All choices have causes, including the person and soul coming into existence by God's providence, as well as life situations that

³⁹ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 2 (page 6).

⁴⁰ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, on-line, at www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/determine (accessed 12-13-16).

⁴¹ Feinberg, *No One*, 631.

precede the choice.⁴² A cause is “any antecedent, natural or moral, positive or negative, on which an event so depends that it is the ground or reason in whole or in part why it is rather than not, or why it is as it is.”⁴³

There are at least six senses in which we can use the word “cause:”⁴⁴ (1) Someone’s comment causes us to draw a certain conclusion about them. (2) One with authority (a police officer, boss, or parent) causes another, a subordinate, to take action. (3) To speak of the causes, i.e. the reasons behind a movement or world event. (4) To speak of causes in the social sciences—i.e. the reasons behind societal trends. (5) Causes or reasons which persuade us to take action—i.e. to go to a baseball game, to visit the zoo, or to go to a restaurant. (6) Natural causality or that which occurs in nature—lightning strike and a resultant fire; a boulder crashing into a car from the mountain above and the resultant wreck and bodily injuries to passengers. The first five varieties of causality can fit with compatibilistic freedom, though it can also be seen how that some versions of #’s 2-3 may not fit.

As can be seen, causes do not have to compel or constrain in a manner that the person is not operating from the preference of their own will:

*Causes do not [have to] compel. For...all that is needed for one event to be the cause of another event is that, in the given circumstances, the event which is said to be the effect would not have occurred if it had not been for the occurrence of the event which is said to be the cause, or vice versa, according as causes are interpreted as necessary or sufficient conditions.... In short, there is an invariable concomitance between two classes of events, but there is no compulsion in any but a metaphorical sense.*⁴⁵

⁴² Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, II, 1 (page 28-30).

⁴³ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, II, 3 (page 35).

⁴⁴ The following six way of using “cause” are taken from Feinberg, *No One*, 641. He was dependent for them in Lionel Kenner, “Causality, Determinism, And Freedom Of The Will,” *Philosophy*, 39 (1968): 234-35.

⁴⁵ Feinberg, *No One*, 642. He is citing A. J. Ayer, “Freedom And Necessity,” in *Philosophical Essays* (1954), 281-82.

It will be helpful at this point to return to our illustration of hospitalized Mary and her choice to eat the meatloaf and mashed potato meal in the hospital. Mary's visit to her family physician, her previous reading about the importance of colonoscopies, her awareness of friends and family members who experienced colon cancer, her choice to undergo the colonoscopy, the scheduling of the colonoscopy, the scheduling by the hospital of the surgeon who did the procedure, the slight slip of the surgeon that led to the need for the additional surgery, the prolonged time Mary went without eating, the complete cleansing of her body, the lack of nausea, the absence of any compelling reason to turn down the food, the previous experiences with meatloaf and mashed potatoes that led her to enjoy this meal, the aesthetically and aromatically appealing nature of the present meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and her preference to eat, all formed just some of the sufficient causes behind her choice to eat. However, she was, in no way compelled against her will to make that choice. It was a genuinely free decision. When we add what we have learned about God's governance, we can say that God ordained her eating and all the means to that end (the causes) and yet, in no way did this remove her genuinely free choice.

The reality that genuinely free human choices are determined or caused in the ways just described is the key point at which the manner of functioning for the human will fits with God's absolute sovereignty exercised through his meticulous providence in all things.

Given what we have just discovered, it must also be seen that the accusation that some indeterminists make against determinists, namely that determined choices mean the person cannot truly exercise his reason to make choices, is simply not true. In fact, what we have just presented supports in a stronger sense the use of human reason to make choices than does indeterminism. The view of divine sovereignty, providence, and human freedom advocated in

this book actually sees the use of reason as part of the means God ordains in addition to the ends he ordains.⁴⁶

Regardless of what we have said, indeterminists argue that genuine human freedom means choices are not decisively caused by antecedents, but rather can be made as sovereign acts of the will. Yet, there are problems with this approach:⁴⁷

- To say the will or volition determines an act of volition is the same as to say volitional choice produces volitional choice. It is a contradiction.
- If a power of will determines an act of the will, then a power of choosing determines it. If a power of choosing determines volition by choosing it, then here is the act of volition determined by an antecedent choice choosing that volition. So, we are still back to a cause.
- “If the will determines itself, then either the will is active in determining its volitions, or it is not.... If active, then the determination is an act of the will; and so there is one act of the will determining another.... But if the will is not active in the determination, then how does it exercise any liberty in it? [Indeterminists] suppose that the thing wherein the will exercises liberty, is in its determining its own acts. But how can this be, if it be not active in determining? Certainly the will, or the soul, cannot exercise any liberty in that wherein it does not act, or wherein it does not exercise itself.” (The reason this is important is because if the will is active in its choices as a sovereign agent, then we are back to a cause behind the effect, and so we are back to determination)

Another problem we see from supposing a free choice must not be determined or caused by motives and/or ends is this: “If a man’s choices are not determined by the ends that he has in view, but simply by meaningless oscillations of his will, then they are determined by nothing but chance and the man becomes the mere plaything of something external to himself.”⁴⁸ This is another way of saying that in that event we have no assurance the man is making a genuinely free choice.

⁴⁶ See Helm, *Providence*, 221.

⁴⁷ These are taken from Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, II, 2 (pages 31-32).

⁴⁸ J. Greshem Machen, *The Christian View Of Man* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1999, repr.), 28.

Without a doubt, the main reason for believing human choices are determined is Scripture. Returning to Matthew 15, we see that human choices are determined by antecedent movements in the heart that decide the strongest motive(s) at the time, which moves the will: “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person” (18). In Mt. 12:33-35 we discover that the words which proceed from the heart and display what is there, are determined by what is in the heart, just as a tree determines or causes its fruit: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” It is the person’s desires and intents—what they believe that is important and will bring happiness or will prevent the least amount of pain (otherwise, appeals as we discover in Mt. 5:8-10; 16:25-26 do not work)—that decides and determines choices that result in true life or lack of true life (Prov. 4:23). This is why God can judge the “purposes of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5) to display justly where the person is at in relation to him. Such antecedents in the heart not only decide the general direction of a person and their choices (Eccl. 10:2: “A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left”), but also the specific choices in the midst of competing desires (Rom. 7:19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want....”).

We must notice in all the examples we have offered in this chapter the choices are coming from the person’s own heart, out of their character, habits, antecedents, and truly comprise, at some level, what they prefer. So, they are free choices—regardless of the level of determination or causation present. “An action is free even if causally determined so long as the causes are nonconstraining. ...[In other words,] causes can be sufficient to bring about an action [and the action still be free, [if the action is] not contrary to the individual’s will, desires, or wishes.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ John S. Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in David and Randall Basinger, Ed’s, *Predestination And Freewill: Four Views Of Divine Sovereignty And Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 24.

Returning to a previous illustration, Julie had generally wanted for years to lose weight and improve health, yet, there were too many times when the desire for the taste of food and how it made her feel (that it gave her comfort in the midst of difficulties) won out over the desire to lose weight and to say, “No” to food. Each of her choices was determined by the strongest motives at the time and those motives by antecedents. What changed for Julie eventually was a friend told her about an app she could download to her phone that would enable her to figure out how much she could eat each day to lose the amount of weight she desired and then she could record her food intake daily. Strongly motivated by both her horror at seeing her ever-expanding self in a recent picture and also by chronic back pain which, in part, could be alleviated by weight loss, she began to change and to lose weight. Once she experienced success, she was even more motivated to keep going. At each point along the way—both before and after losing weight—Julie’s choices have been both free and also determined.⁵⁰

We also need to see that choices are not only determined within the heart of an individual, they also are divinely determined. We know this because in a context where it is affirmed that free choices for which humans are responsible are determined from the heart of the person, we also discover that ultimately individuals who do not choose to trust in Jesus Christ make that choice, not just because they refuse to (that is true), but also because God did not decisively work in them—passing over them (Mt. 15:13: “Every plant that my Father has not planted will be rooted up.”).

Elsewhere, we are left with no doubt that sinful choices determined by the heart’s strongest motives at the time are not choices for which God is ultimately responsible. Rather they are caused by strong sinful inclinations in the person (Rom. 7:20: “It is...sin that dwells in me.”).

⁵⁰ This illustration is based upon a real-life situation of which I am aware.

What is more, this latter passage is in a larger context in which it is asserted that God not only “orchestrates all things together for good to those who love him” (Rom. 8:28, author’s translation), but also that all things ultimately originate from God (Rom. 11:36a). God can decree that a saint will be permitted to give into a temptation to sin, and so it is both determined by God and also determined in a way by God that he is not the one sinning or responsible for the sin. The person is genuinely wanting, at that time, to give into the temptation, and yet it is also determined by antecedents in himself, as well as by God’s eternal purpose.

Free Human Choices Belong To The Person, Not The Independent Will

We also must grasp that neither freedom, nor the state of the lack of freedom can properly be ascribed to the will itself. These are states which more accurately describe the person who possesses a will (by will I mean: “That by which the mind chooses anything...that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of choosing...an act of choosing or choice.”⁵¹).

Jonathan Edwards explains:

...neither liberty nor its [converse] can properly be ascribed to any being or thing, but that which has such a faculty, power or property, as is called will. For that which is possessed of no will, cannot have any power or opportunity of doing according to its will, nor be necessitated to act contrary to its will, nor be restrained from acting agreeable to it. ...to talk of liberty or the contrary as belonging to the very will itself is not to speak good sense.... For the will itself is not an agent that has a will: the power of choosing, itself, has not a power of choosing. That will that has the power of volition is the man, or the soul....⁵²

These first three topics (strongest motive, the will being determined, and freedom belonging to the person, not an independent will) are important because apart from them we may form an understanding of how humans make choices that is a distortion of the process, makes the will its own little “person” within the person that can act independently, and that divorces the will from

⁵¹ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 1 (page 3).

⁵² Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 5 (page 24).

intellect and desires. As we will see below, such an understanding would not be in accordance with the description the Bible offers of how humans make choices.

In Matthew 12:35 the apostle writes: “The good person (*ho agathos anthrōpos*) out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person (*ho ponēros anthrōpos*) out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” It is the entire person who is bringing forth either the good or evil, who is choosing and taking action. This is important to understand because, as is even implied in this verse, the will functions generally in line with the entire person. The good or evil treasure of the heart most likely speaks of what the person thinks about what is to be prized—a way of thinking that shapes the desires and strongest motives and so moves the will, which in turn moves the speech and actions. What is more, as we see elsewhere (e.g. Mt. 6:21; Heb. 5:14; 2 Peter 2:14, 19),⁵³ antecedent circumstances, choices, actions, habits, and character of the entire person also shape the thoughts, desires, and therefore the will.

Such an understanding guards against the view that when decisions are made “on a whim,” that the will is operating sovereignly and independent of thought processes, habits, character, i.e. of the entire person. Such could give the impression that a decision can be made that is against the preference of the person.

J. Gresham Machen summarizes why this finding is so significant when he writes:

The will of man is not free in the sense that it operates independently of the feelings and the intellect. Indeed, if we regard the will as a sort of separate [entity] inside of a man, going about its business in its own way, capable of taking advice from other parts of man’s nature but also capable of acting quite independently of such advice when the mood strikes it – if we think of the will thus, we are getting very far away from reality indeed. We are really making of something we call the will a little separate personality; we are doing away with the unity of the man’s personality. As a

⁵³ Mt. 6:21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Heb. 5:14: “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

2 Peter 2:14, 19: “They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! ... They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.”

*matter of fact, there is really no such thing as the will out of relation to the other aspects of the person.*⁵⁴

Free Human Choices Are Necessary

Another discovery we make, one that follows from the others, is that genuinely free choices are necessary in some sense. Since choices are caused by the strongest motive at the time, there can be a relationship between the strength of inclination or motive(s) and the choice that is one of a kind of necessity.⁵⁵ In other words, there is an obligatory connection between intellect, desire, and will (and these can even be strongly and certainly decided by physical or biological causes) such that the choice of the will is a consequence of these.⁵⁶ Put in another way, such necessity “refers to acting according to one’s internal nature, i.e. spontaneously in light of what a thing is.... I act as I can, given my nature.”⁵⁷

Returning to our illustration of hospitalized Mary earlier in the chapter, the lack of food over her last couple days, the hunger at the moment, the appealing nature of her lunch choice, and the absence of any other compelling reason to refuse lunch all combined to create the kind of necessity I mean.⁵⁸ It is not the kind of necessity that is forced upon a person from outside them and against their will (holding a gun to the head and saying, “You must eat this or else” or actually force-feeding). But it is a kind of necessity nonetheless.

⁵⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View Of Man* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1999, repr.), 29.

⁵⁵ Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 4 (page 19).

⁵⁶ Taken and reworded from Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, I, 4 (page 19).

⁵⁷ Feinberg, *No One*, 636.

⁵⁸ For the fact that the absence of a reason or influence can be a kind of cause, see Edwards, *Freedom Of The Will*, II, 3 (page 35). He offers the example of the sun’s withdrawal at night and the negative causative effect this has on morning dew vs. the more positive and active influence of the sun’s beams on vapor in the day, or the sun’s lack of warmth in the winter vs. its more active influence of warming in the spring.

Now, when we combine this kind of necessity (which also implies determination)—that which is formed by previous free choices of the individual, as well as previous circumstances and yet still flows from the person’s will—with what we have learned about God’s meticulous providence in all things through immeasurable combinations of permissive and causative governance that enables humans to make responsible and genuine choices, we can begin to see how God can be absolutely sovereign over all things and yet humans make genuinely free choices.

One of the biblical passages that emphasizes this kind of necessity more than any others is John 8:34, where John records the words of Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” This verse is found in the sixth of seven discourses located in John 2-12. A combination of seven discourses and seven signs is designed to give a picture of who Jesus is and what he does from his days of ministry prior to the Farewell Discourse (13-16), High Priestly Prayer (17), and the Passion Narratives (18-19). In this sixth discourse Jesus speaks of himself as “the light of the world” (8:12) and pronounces that trust in him is necessary for life and forgiveness of sins (8:24). We are told many believed in him (8:30) and so he addressed and told the Jews who had believed in him they must abide in his word to be his true disciples (8:31). As a result, the truth they know will set them free (8:32).⁵⁹ This statement leads many of them (we must note many of those with whom he dialogues do not believe in him with saving faith) to ask him what he means about being set free since they are physical offspring of Abraham and they have never been enslaved to anyone (8:33). In 8:34 Jesus explains what he means by slavery

⁵⁹ Most likely, in light of the immediate (cf. 8:36) and the far (14:6) contexts, the truth is not merely a set of propositions, but a person—the Son. Of course, there are many propositions made by John regarding this Truth in his Gospel.

It is important to the understanding of this chapter that that reader grasp that Jesus assumes the persons he is addressing do not all believe in him with true saving faith (cf. 8:31ff.; see 6:64, 66). As the pericope moves on, the focus changes to those who do not believe in and accept him. This is especially confirmed by the time the reader comes to 8:48.

that creates a need to be set free and then affirms that only through him can true freedom come (8:35-38).

The participle translated, “everyone who commits sin,” most likely speaks of those who are chiefly characterized by sin and so continually practice sin as a way of life, without any saving transformation (see also 1 John 3:6).⁶⁰ The clause, “is a slave to sin” describes one who is unable to break away from his sinful patterns apart from the help of Jesus (cf. 8:36).⁶¹ Later in the chapter we discover that the very will-shaping character of the person moves their choices: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires (*epithymias*) of your father you want (from *thelō*) to do” (8:44, author’s own translation). Though the wording does not mean a person can never say, “No,” to temptation, it does mean that at the level of desires and intent (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5), the person is sinful through and through and it also means that the overall pattern of life is one of sinning against God. There is a moral inability to do the things God desires in the ways he wants, and for the purposes he wants. We will look at this inability more in Chapter Eight.

Conversely, the person who has trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and therefore wants to follow God’s will sees a 180 degree change of their desires, choices, and actions. They want to trust in and obey God (John 3:36), which means carrying out God’s will, as well as loving God and loving other people (1 John 2:17; 4:7-12)—even though this is not done perfectly (1 John 1:8). Though God has not decreed that such transformed persons will follow him perfectly and without sin in this age (see our discussion of this in Chapter Two), nevertheless, God so transforms the person that the overall direction of their strongest motives behind their choices and actions is necessarily changed, and yet this is done in a way the choices are truly coming out

⁶⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 458.

⁶¹ Andreas Kostenberger, *ESVSB*, 2040; Morris, *John*, 458.

of the person's will and so they are free, genuine choices. What is more, when they do sin, it bothers them and they agree with God that what they are doing is wrong (1 John 1:9). As Paul Helm says of this text (esp. 8:36): "The New Testament appears to find no incoherence in the idea of being made [i.e. being determined] to be free, and has little concern with the prospect that any person whose action is caused cannot be free in performing that action."⁶²

Free Human Choices Do Not Require Actual Alternativity

Rather than the Bible asserting that a genuinely free choice is one in which the person could also have made an alternate choice from what they preferred, it takes us in a different direction for what a genuine free choice is. One place we see this is in Philemon 14.

As Paul and Timothy write to Philemon (v. 1)—the latter being the primary author (in light of the use of the first person singular from v. 4 on)—Paul appeals to Philemon, a wealthy Colossian Christian (see Col. 4:9, 17) and host of a house church (vv. 1-2), to receive back and be reconciled to Onesimus, a slave who most likely stole from Philemon and then fled. In the providence of God, Onesimus meets Paul in Rome, becomes a Christian, and now there is a desire to make things right with his master. In the midst of Paul's appeal in behalf of Onesimus (verses 8-20), Paul describes the transformation of Onesimus (vv. 8–12) and then affirms how helpful the slave would be to Paul in his current imprisonment (vv. 13–14). Yet, he then turns his attention to the relation of Onesimus and Philemon, asserting that God has been sovereignly involved in this situation perhaps so that the master may receive the slave back now as a fellow Christian (vv. 15–16) who will therefore be all the more useful to Philemon. He concludes with a direct appeal for Philemon to take Onesimus back as he would receive Paul himself (vv. 17–20).

⁶² Helm, *Providence*, 55.

In verses 13-14, Paul clarifies that though he would very much like to keep Onesimus with him as a helper—by implication treating him as a freedman—nevertheless, Paul knew this would not be right. Paul does not want Philemon to be forced into treating Onesimus differently. He wants the master to treat him differently because he truly wants to do so (14). Verse 14 reads: “but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.”⁶³ There are three terms Paul uses in this verse to address free choice on the part of Philemon. We will look at each of them in turn so we can grasp how Paul views human freedom.

To begin, Paul did not want to do anything without Philemon’s “consent” (*gnōmē*). Elsewhere Paul uses *gnōmē* to refer to the results of the thinking process—i.e. a judgment or opinion—what one believes to be true (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10; 7:25, 40; 2 Cor. 8:10). In this particular context the translation “consent” (ESV; RSV; NASB; NKJV; HCSB; NIV; NLT) is good. In other words, Paul desires Philemon to have heard Paul’s rationale for having Onesimus stay and to have agreed that it was good and thus to have agreed before Paul kept the slave with him.⁶⁴

It appears that what Paul is writing here in v. 14 not only applies to having Onesimus stay with Paul (which Paul did not pursue), but also to Philemon receiving Onesimus back with a different relationship. This is implied from the likelihood that this letter was sent to Philemon by Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9) and so as Philemon read it, Onesimus would have already been back in his presence. So, what Paul says in v. 14 refers not merely to the possible scenario (if he had kept Onesimus in Rome), but also to the actual situation—i.e. what Philemon will do with Onesimus now. The implication is that Paul desires Philemon to think through the rationale

⁶³ Note that an older version of the ESV ends the verse this way, “but of your own free will.”

⁶⁴ If my understanding of this verse is accurate, this point also supports my contention above that the use of reason is compatible with the soft determinism and compatibilistic freedom I am advocating.

from Paul and to treat the slave differently than he had previously—because this truly is his desire.

The second significant term Paul uses to speak of Philemon’s free choice is this: Paul did not want goodness shown to Onesimus to be “by compulsion” (*anagkē*). This term is used elsewhere by Paul to refer to a decision and action that one carries out that he has not truly come to desire in his heart (2 Cor. 9:7). That appears to be the meaning here. Paul does not desire that Philemon would engage in a decision or good action that is forced upon him and that goes contrary to what he truly wants. It appears that in these first two terms used by Paul he is primarily emphasizing that he would prefer Philemon to make a choice to change his view of and relationship with Onesimus—and most likely to forgive him—that does not by-pass Philemon’s intellect and affections. However, before moving on, we must not miss that in verses 6 and 21 Paul clarifies that the good actions are ones which Philemon should do; they are ones which would be to Christ’s glory! So, there is very strong influence and causation present in the context of this lack of will-by-passing-compulsion.

The third significant term Paul uses is found in the last phrase: “but of your own accord” (*hekousios*). The word *hekousios* is used only here in the New Testament. It is used several times in the LXX to refer to a “freewill offering,” i.e. an offering for which there is no specific obligation to make it, but is made simply because one desires to do it (Lev. 7:16; Nu. 15:3; 29:39; Ps. 119:108). It is used in classical Greek literature to refer to something that is opposed to legal compulsion (BAGD, 243).

Because this last term is one of the few places in the Bible where explicit mention is made of “free will” or a concept very close to this, it is important to focus in on this word even further. I

believe there are nine reasons why this word should be understood to refer to a concept more resembling compatibilistic freedom rather than libertarian freedom.

- Philemon is a brother in Christ, a “fellow worker,” who hosts a church in his home. Paul believes him to be one who is changed and therefore can and should love others graciously, with a changed heart (Philemon 1-2 [cf. Rom. 12:1-21; 15:1-7; Eph. 4:1-5:2, et al.]). In other words, the fact that the indicative precedes the imperative in Paul’s theology elsewhere would suggest at the very least that Paul is not expecting Philemon to make a decision whose movement starts in his heart apart from God’s previous saving and transforming grace. What is more, there is nothing in this letter that would suggest Paul believes this decision by Philemon would be done in such a way that it is not accomplished as part of the all things which God works after the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11).
- Paul believes Philemon to be one who has love toward Jesus Christ and the saints already (5). This undergirds the love and action toward Onesimus to which Paul is calling the wealthy saint. It is a motive that should move or determine his choices in regard to Onesimus.
- Similarly to the previous reason, Paul himself has experienced the love of Philemon and it has brought him joy and comfort (7). He believes that Philemon will respond to Onesimus in a similar fashion. In other words, there exists in Philemon antecedent character, convictions, and affections which should move him to make the choices Paul also would desire.
- Paul seems to utilize significant rhetorical strategy (or at least intentionality) in order to persuade Philemon to act toward Onesimus with a changed relationship and brotherly love (cf. the entire letter, especially 16, 17). As in all Paul’s epistles, he believes the Holy Spirit will use the very reasoning and word of God he shares to bring readers to Christ-like and God-glorifying decisions.
- The language of verses 8-9, 14 does not demand that the movement must start in the heart of Philemon apart from the work of God’s Spirit, apart from the decisive decree of God, and apart from any decisive persuasion on the part of Paul. It is preferable (especially in light of what we discovered about the first two terms) to take the language as primarily focusing upon the need for true desire and willfulness on the part of Philemon that does not by-pass his own intellect and affections, rather than as a contra-causal choice.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a (esp. 1-3) suggests that one can go through the right actions without truly loving God or others. Such is most likely also behind his message to Philemon. He does not want Philemon merely to do the right thing. He wants him to do the right thing for the right purposes and with the desire of benefit and good will toward Onesimus, with the affection toward him of a brother in Christ to a brother in Christ, and for the sake of Christ’s glory (6). Paul’s wording in the letter appears to support this and to work intentionally toward that end—i.e. to persuade him to accept Onesimus back and to treat him graciously from his heart in love because he wants to do so.

- In v. 21 Paul writes, “confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” Even though Paul is not commanding Philemon how to act toward Onesimus and even though he wants Philemon to act in accordance with what he truly wants to do, he also believes that changing his view toward Onesimus and acting graciously toward him in Christian love is the right thing to do—i.e. what the Spirit of God would have him to do. Since this is the case, Paul believes Philemon will do what is right, what he should do because he wants to do it—and this because he wants to please God and God wants him to do it. This verse, as much as any in the short letter, implies that Paul believes Philemon will do what is right because he is a changed man and because he wants to please God. As such, though Paul wants the movement to come from Philemon’s heart, it does not have to be ultimately from his heart and not decided by previous movements (both divine and human)!
- According to verse 6, part of doing what is right in this case is doing it “for the sake of Christ” (*eis Christon*). This is part of Paul’s appeal to the spirit of Philemon, which has been transformed by the Spirit of God and is now being led by that Spirit. Paul believes the Spirit will use these words to persuade Philemon freely to do what is right.
- Paul’s closing words, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,” strongly suggest that Paul believes the transforming grace of Jesus Christ must be behind true Christian action (including love) and thus moves the heart of the saint (in this case Philemon) to do what God desires (see Titus 2:11-14).
- Finally, Paul’s means of persuasion and what he desires from Philemon are very similar to the manner in which he seeks to persuade the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Similarly, there he brings to bear upon them strong reasons for giving, wants their giving to be something they truly want to do, and believes God’s Spirit will graciously work in them so that their actions will show the reality of their profession and will glorify him.

If the understanding of Philemon 14 that I have just set forth is accurate, the end result is this:

If Philemon freely (i.e. not without his consent, not by compulsion, and of his own accord) chooses to accept back Onesimus as a brother, treat him differently, and be reconciled to him—as he should do for the glory of Christ—the following antecedents would have moved, caused, and determined this choice: God’s predestination, regeneration, and justification of Philemon; his transformation by the Holy Spirit; his conviction that what pleases God is important; his desire to glorify Jesus Christ; his love for Onesimus; and perhaps a respect for the the Apostle Paul, just to

name a few. As can be seen, this entire process of choice on the part of Philemon is very consistent with soft deterministic or compatibilistic freedom.

We don't know with certainty how Philemon responded to Paul's appeal. We could say that Philemon possessed the ability of hypothetical alternativity throughout the process leading up to and including his ultimate decision. However, at that point, there also would have been a preference caused by antecedent movements, circumstances, influences, God's revealed moral will, the Spirit, and the nature of Philemon. Since he would have had a preference for whatever choice he made, actual alternativity at that point would not be possible. What I have argued in my explanation of this text is that how Paul sought to influence Philemon, what he believed about the transformation of the wealthy Christian, and the expectation of how he would respond, all are in line with compatibilistic freedom—and that the choice Philemon would prefer to make is the one Paul sought to convince him to make, and, at that point he could not genuinely make the alternate choice, because he would not want to do so.

Since there may still be a lingering objection on the part of some readers, I want to address it. That objection has to do with a person's relationship to God: If there is such strong movement in the heart toward a choice to love and trust in the Savior, movement that is caused, necessary, and that flows from the strongest motive at the time, and there is also the lack of actual alternativity, this could not be a genuine relationship of love or even a relationship at all.⁶⁶

To answer this objection we can begin by agreeing that there is a kind of constraint, coercion, or determination that does remove genuine relationship and love from acts that can be often associated with relational and loving activities. Rape would be a strong example. Another would be the constraint by parents upon their daughter to go on a date with a young man for whom she

⁶⁶ I am very much dependent upon Paul Helm, *The Providence Of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 149-153, for how I answer this objection in what follows.

knows she has no affections, she does not want to go on the date, and even while on the date there is no desire to be there. Even if she is reasonably cordial during the evening, it would be easy to imagine such a scenario in which little by way of relationship or love happens.

Yet, it also must be acknowledged that strong influence, some level of constraint, and even determination can be compatible with genuine loving relationships. Imagine the same daughter I just mentioned being coerced by her college roommate to meet at a coffee shop, only to find out that the roommate brought her there to meet a young man whom the roommate thought was perfect for her friend. Though the couple did not choose to be there for the reason of meeting each other, imagine that antecedent movements within each lead to the conclusion that: (1) “The other person is attractive enough and has enough of the kind of personality to which I am drawn not to run the other way,” and, (2) Since they are already there and cannot think of a compelling reason to leave, and because neither is in a relationship with someone, they decide to stay. Now, imagine they hit it off, begin to date, and end up getting married. There is nothing in this scenario that would lead us to think that it could not be a genuine loving relationship—simply because there was strong causal influence outside themselves that led to and even determined their meeting.

Let’s take this further with that couple. Once they are married, there will be all kinds of situations in which they are strongly influenced and constrained from outside and inside themselves—and in ways that we can imagine do not include alternativity in the strict sense—that are part of their home and yet do not threaten the genuineness of their love and/or relationship.

Suppose the husband does not like cats at all and yet his wife loves them. We can imagine a scenario in which the fact she so loves cats and the fact he loves her dearly has a causal and determinative impact upon him such that he gives a cat to her for her birthday.

We also can image a scenario in which the husband, out of concern for the safety of his wife, strongly appeals to her to call or text him before she leaves work each day and when she gets home (if he is not already home) just so he can have the peace-of-mind nothing is wrong. Again, we can imagine a scenario where the wife may have balked at this with anyone else, yet she is touched by his love and concern and so she makes the choice gladly to abide by his wishes, even though what moved her to do so was shaped from outside herself.

Now, some may object: “Ah, but Tom, in each of these scenarios, alternativity was still present. The husband could have chosen to prevent cats from ever being in his home or at least not taken action to get one for his wife. The wife could have chosen not to call or text.” And, hypothetically we can say, “Yes, the husband and wife could have made these alternate choices.” However, in that case, there would have been at least some alternatives present in the set of antecedents that would have formed different preferences in each case.

All the soft determinist is arguing is that the presence of antecedents and strong motives that necessarily determine the choice is compatible with: genuine free choices (in both the scenarios just stated we can imagine the person genuinely desiring to do what they do), genuine relationships, and genuine love. And, what is more, for God to govern causatively and permissively, having decreed an immeasurable combination of antecedent circumstances, choices, character-shaping influences, convictions, habits, and character-transforming influences (through the prayers of others, the gospel, and the work of the Spirit, as well as union with Christ) that determine a person will freely choose to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and thus enter

into a relationship with God, does not prevent the relationship from being a genuine relationship or from having genuine love on the part of the convert.

The Freedom Of Jesus

One additional biblical insight favors this view of how free human choices are made, and that is the case of Jesus himself. Several biblical truths need to be stated about Jesus in order to discover how he impacts the present discussion.

We know that though the Son of God, was, is, and continues always to be fully God (e.g. Mt. 28:19; John 1:1; Phil. 2:6; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:1-13; Rev. 5:9-10, 12-14; 7:9-10), he also took on flesh and became man (John 1:14; Phil. 2:7-8) and so from that time on Jesus was, is, and continues for all eternity to be fully man (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 2:5-18; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). What is more, the Chalcedonian statement on Christ (A.D. 451), affirms what the Bible teaches—namely that the distinction of the two natures of Jesus Christ was in no way annulled by their union and that neither nature was changed or confused in their union. We also know that though Jesus faced temptations to sin (e.g. Matthew 4:1-11), in fact, he faced all the same kinds of temptations as any other human (Heb. 4:15), yet he never sinned (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26). In other words, he always did the will of the Father (e.g. John 5:19).

So, what we discover is a genuine human being exercising genuine free choices throughout his life in this age, and yet when it came to sin and righteousness, he never chose the alternative to the Father's will. Now, whether we believe that ultimately it was not possible for Jesus to sin (*non posse peccare*) due to his divine nature and how sin would have infringed on that nature,⁶⁷ or whether we believe simply it was possible for him not to sin (*posse non peccare*), the fact is that he

⁶⁷ Bruce Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections On The Humanity Of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, Kindle Edition), Ch. 5, rightly affirms that virtually all orthodox Christian theologians acknowledge a sinning Jesus would have infringed upon his divine nature.

never chose that alternative. And, the reality, which is in line with what we have argued in this book, is that there is a difference between why something could not and did not occur.⁶⁸ I believe Bruce Ware is correct when he argues that given the divine nature of Jesus (and I would add also the fact that God had ordained the impeccability of the God-man as the perfect Redeemer),⁶⁹ sin was not going to happen. Nevertheless, this does not mean he did not face genuine temptations, nor does it mean that he did not make genuine free choices. Additionally, as part of his role as humanity's redeemer, who must be like humanity in every way, yet without sin, it is accurate to affirm that, "Jesus resisted these temptations and in every way obeyed the Father, not by recourse to his divine nature but through the resources provided to him in his full humanity—empowered by the Spirit...."⁷⁰

So, with Jesus we discover some interesting theological conclusions. To begin, sinfulness is not inherent to genuine humanity. Related to this, actual alternativity—at least in relation to sin and righteousness—is not necessary to be a genuine human and to make genuinely free choices. This point also will be looked at further in Chapter Ten, in regard to glorified humanity. In the case of Jesus, as a non-glorified human, living in this non-glorified age, and as the redeemer who was genuinely facing temptation, we can argue there was hypothetical ability to sin, but in every case, his preference (his strongest motive) was always to do the will of the Father. Additionally, like with every other human, these choices by Jesus emerged out of his nature as a continually sinless human being and, in this way, fully reflected the image of the Father in his will and

⁶⁸ Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus*, Ch. 5.

⁶⁹ Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus*, Ch. 5.

⁷⁰ Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus*, Ch. 5.

choices. As the Second Adam, then, he not only passed his tests, but also lived as humanity is supposed to live.

Is it possible that God merely and inherently knew that given all the circumstances that Jesus would be in he would always choose to do the Father's will (middle knowledge) and that God, as a result, ordained these outcomes? Based upon all the ground we have covered so far, this hardly seems credible.

Another revealing point about Jesus is as follows. For the indeterminist, as we just covered, the argument is often that genuine love cannot be present when there is strong compulsion or a determined outcome. Yet, we know that the Son has loved the Father (and vice versa) throughout all eternity (Prov. 8:27, 30; John 10:15, 17; 14:31; 17:24). This love was in no way infringed upon by the strong compulsion or divine determination of his life on this earth or his salvific events.

One final revealing point about Jesus has to do with applying to him the indifference (i.e. the uncaused nature) that indeterminists demand for a genuine free choice. Writing in *Miscellanies* no. 830, Jonathan Edwards:

...argued that by this formulation of the will's freedom, any natural disposition that might be found in a person – whether the maliciousness of an ill nature or the good cheer and virtue of an excellent spirit – would count as evidence that the person could not be accorded any responsibility, whether blame or praise for these acts because they arose not from indifference but from a determining nature. In particular, Christ himself would be unworthy of praise on the grounds that his actions do not arise from a freedom of indifference, but are determined by his holy state.⁷¹

What Edwards insightfully understood was that in the indeterminist view not only would the holy choices and actions of a transformed Christian (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:22-23) not be

⁷¹ Donald J. Westblade, "The Sovereignty Of God In The Theology Of Jonathan Edwards," in Sam Storms, Justin Taylor, Ed's., *For The Fame Of His Name: Essays In Honor Of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 115.

genuinely free and praiseworthy,⁷² but Jesus' choices and actions would not have been genuinely free and thus worthy of praise. The flipside of this, however, is that the soft deterministic Calvinist can affirm both the freedom and the praiseworthiness of the holy actions of a Christian, as well as the sinless life and obedience of Jesus Christ.

The case of Jesus Christ appears to be one more bit of evidence for the view of free human choice we have outlined in this chapter.

More Evidence

As we go forward in looking at how God works upon the human will in salvation (Chapter Eight), sanctification and perseverance (Chapter Nine), and then glorification (Chapter Ten), we will discover more evidence for the view set forth here on how the human will functions. At the same time, in these areas, we will find some of the strongest reasons why soft determinist Calvinists believe the subject of how the human will functions and how the sovereign God works upon it are so important.

Free Human Choices Are Significant

Though the soft-determinist is convinced that free human choices are "causally determined by events outside the...agent" and so are causally determined by God, nevertheless, he is also convinced there is a sense in which they are also "self-determined."⁷³ Yet, the determinist means something different than the indeterminist in this phrase. The latter intends by it "both that the choice was made by the individual and that it was not caused by anything outside the individual."

⁷² We could also add that humans would not be responsible for their sinful choices, since they arise out of a heart that is so bent on wickedness. Consider what Genesis 6:5: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

⁷³ Laing, "The Compatibility," 455.

The former intends to say by this that "the choice was made by the individual in accordance with his or her will, desires, or wishes, but there [can be] sufficient causes for the action, and these causes are either external or internal to the individual."⁷⁴ The fact that such decisions and activities come about because God ordained them, in no way means they cannot be free. There is not the kind of determination or necessity that "is a force...not part of a person's nature, a force which moves them to act against their wishes..."⁷⁵ As we saw in Chapter Six, though Scripture sets forth that human choices arise from the strongest motive, are determined, and necessary, nevertheless, this is no fatalism or naturalistic determinism.⁷⁶

Given what we have asserted about God's causative and permissive governance, his ordaining both the ends and the means, as well as how human choices are made, it must be realized that the choices a person makes are significant. What we think about (Rom. 12:2; Col. 3:1-3); how we reason (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1); the fact God appeals to us to change our minds (Ezek. 18:30-31; Acts 2:38; 3:19);⁷⁷ that God affirms whether or not we choose life is crucial to having life or not (Deut. 30:11-20);⁷⁸ that if we don't choose to share the gospel with people, they won't come to Christ, and so our choosing to share with them can be decisive (Rom. 1:16; 10:13-17); that whether or not we choose to take in the Bible's content can have major shaping impact, for good or for bad on our growth (John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17); that we must train ourselves and form habits to be godly and make good choices (1 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 5:14); that

⁷⁴ Laing, "The Compatibility," 455-56.

⁷⁵ Feinberg, *No One*, 637.

⁷⁶ Feinberg, *No One*, 632-35.

⁷⁷ This is true, even though God's antecedent work is necessary to respond positively to his will (antecedent work that makes our work possible [Ezek. 11:19; 36:26-27]).

⁷⁸ This is true, even though this very choice is dependent upon God's grace (Deut. 30:6).

Christians are exhorted to endure to the end or else they will not be saved (Mt. 24:13b; Col. 1:23-24; Heb. 2:1; 6:1-12)⁷⁹—all this demonstrates our choices are significant.

If I have any corrective to offer to my Calvinist brothers and sisters, it is at this very point of the importance of our choices and actions—in other words, our responsibility. Certainly, there has been no lack of emphasis in this area among the best of Calvinist teaching and literature. However, it has been my experience that among many who hold this theology, we can easily slip into passivity and a fatalism, especially if this teaching on the significance of choice is not kept in mind. I will offer an example from my own life to explain.

Even though I have had a lifelong battle with times of depression, for many years I have been aware of the reality that God not only wants us to be happy in him (Ps. 37:4; Mt. 5:3-12; Phil. 4:4), he also has graciously provided for that happiness through the saving work of Christ (Is. 52:7; Luke 2:10; Gal. 5:22).⁸⁰ And so, on the one hand, happiness should well up in us if we know Jesus Christ (it is a fruit of the Spirit!). Yet, on the other hand, what I have been reminded of, especially over the past year is that there is a very real sense in which we must work toward, pursue, and choose to be happy.

Nowhere is this dependent responsibility to be happy seen with greater clarity than in John 15:1-11. In that passage we discover that Jesus came, in part, to fulfill the role as the fruit-bearing vine or vineyard of the LORD (15:1), a role that Israel was supposed to fulfill and did not (cf. Is. 5:1-7). What is more, when his followers, united to him, live by dependence upon him (15:2-5, 9)—which includes a life of Word-directed prayer and obedience (15:6-7, 10)—they too

⁷⁹ The need to persevere is to be seen by the Christian concurrently with the truth that those who are truly saved will be preserved (e.g. John 6:37, 39; 10:28-29; Rom. 8:31-39; Jude 1, 24).

⁸⁰ I do not ascribe to the notion that joy is spiritual or godly, whereas happiness is necessarily something that is evil at worst or unimportant at best. Happiness in God is a godly trait and something God wants for his children. For this defense, see Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2015), especially chapters 1-11.

can produce God-honoring fruit that displays they are his disciples (15:8), and all of this results in a growth of disciples' joy (15:11). So, on the one hand, joy can only come by the grace of our Savior, but yet on the other hand, he uses means—the means of faith, prayer, and his Word, just to name a few.⁸¹

Now, at this point, it is very important that we do not miss this faith in our Savior that leads to a growing joy is not passive. James gives clarity to the active nature of this faith, when he writes, “Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2). In other words, we are to think about who God is, how he works, the results that he brings forth through trials (cf. James 1:3-4), and to conclude that since he is orchestrating all things together for our good (cf. Rom. 8:28), even difficulties in life are for our benefit. The hard reality is that in the midst of a trial, it may be hard to reason through all the particulars of the situation we face—the circumstances of which can scream at us, “This is horrible, painful, and brings no hope!” yet, we can still know God is good, faithful, keeps his promises, and so we can trust and hope in him, even in spite of surmounting painful situations that push totally in the opposite direction (e.g. Rom. 4:18). Sometimes all we may be left with, is the ability to call out to God to help, to give us the godly skill for getting through this, and he will do that (James 1:5). In such times, God can and does use the very reality that he calls us to be happy in him, to learn to be content (Phil. 4:11), to trust that he is working toward our good, for us to cry out, “O God, I don't understand this, but help me to trust in you, help me to find my joy in you, even in the midst of this!”

We live with a sense of dependent responsibility in all we are and all we do. Though God is often gracious and works good in and for us, even in spite of our irresponsible passivity, nevertheless, typically, God uses means to bring about this happiness. So, the right heart

⁸¹ Elsewhere we discover that God uses fellow followers of Jesus to bring forth joy in us (2 Cor. 1:24; 2:2-3).

response of the Christian is not to sit by passively in the midst of hard situations, waiting for God to make us happy while we wallow in our negativity. It is, rather for us to ask, “Why am I not happy in him? How can I be happy in him, which is what he deserves?” And, then to cry out to God for help (James 1:5).

Too often, those who hold to soft deterministic Calvinism, do not like to say things like, “It is our choice whether or not we are happy,” for the fear that we are somehow belittling God’s sovereignty or not acknowledging the need for his grace. Given what we have set forth in this book, I believe we not only can make that statement, but we should make it, not in a way that we are asserting that it is only up to our choice (after all, we are dependent upon him). Yet, it still remains a truism that because God works through means and our choices are significant, “It is our choice whether or not we are happy.” In other words, we have a dependent responsibility to be happy, to live out this fruit of the Spirit.

To take this one step further, habituation in pursuing happiness (or any other Christian virtue) can shape our character such that it either becomes harder to be happy (we see this kind of negative habituation in 2 Peter 2:14-19) or it becomes easier to be happy (e.g. 1 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 5:14). We will take up this topic in more detail in Chapter Nine.

One final way we can see that human choices are significant is found among all humans, even those who are unregenerate. The Bible makes it clear that even those who do not have the new life of the Spirit of God are created in the image of God and so can make free and significant choices (e.g. Rom. 1:19-23). This also fits with our experience. For example, whether a person is a Christian or not, if they are unwilling to do their homework, they will not get into, much less finish medical school, and become a physician. Also, whether an athlete is a follower of Jesus or not, whether she chooses to eat a healthy diet and to be disciplined in workouts will

have an impact upon how she performs. And, we also have known of unsaved scientists who have chosen to work hard in research and have come up with cures for diseases or even preventions. Truly, it is amazing what mankind, created in God's image, has been able to achieve by his common grace and through free choices (yet, at the same time, choices ordained by God)!

It is for all these reasons that I agree with those philosophers and theologians who argue that genuinely free human choice is not only an indication we are created in God's image, but it also is evidence of the fallacy of those atheists who deny genuine human freedom and argue for naturalistic determinism.⁸²

Conclusion

Given the picture of free human choice we have set forth in this chapter, there are a few concluding truths that emerge, ones that we do not want to miss.

Man's Will Reflects God's Will

Our first conclusion is to verify that the way the human will functions mirrors how the divine will functions. Like God, humans make choices based on the greatest motive and flowing from their character. Yes, there are differences. For example, God's decretive will cannot be thwarted. Man's choices can be. Nevertheless, created in the image of God, it should not surprise us that our choices are not made apart from our character and are not made out of a sense of indifference (in the philosophical sense).

Related to this, as with God, so with humans, to say that choices are determined by the antecedents of character, for example, in no way infringes upon freedom. Augustine rightly understood this: "It is absurd to say that it does not belong to our will that we want to be happy,

⁸² See Robert B. Stewart, "What Is Wrong With The New Atheism?" *The City*, 8, 2 (Winter 2015): , who though he is an indeterminist, nevertheless shows the fallacy of the argument of the new atheist against free human choices.

simply because by some good constraint in our nature, we are incapable of not wanting to be happy.... Nor, do we dare to say that God does not possess the will but the necessity to be just, because he cannot want to sin.”⁸³

Absolute Divine Sovereignty And Free Human Choices Are Compatible

J. Todd Billings has written:

Although “free will is the cause of its own movement,” it does not necessarily follow that “what is free should be the first cause of itself.” A creaturely action can have the providential power of God as a primary cause, yet the creature still has agency that moves freely. Indeed, God “does not deprive their actions of being voluntary: but rather He is the cause of this very thing in them; for He operates in each thing according to its nature.”⁸⁴

This is a good summary of what we have learned in this chapter about how what is genuine free will (or a free choice) is compatible with God’s absolute sovereignty that is exercised through his meticulous providence. So, we have not only supported soft determinism throughout the study, we have also now affirmed compatibilism.

Soft Determinism And Soft Libertarianism Have Significant Similarities

It is Molinist Kenneth Keathley who has advocated a view he calls soft libertarianism.⁸⁵ Keathley’s version of Molinism not only has in common with Calvinism a strong sense of God’s meticulous providence, it also has in common descriptions of how the human will and choices are viewed. The main similarity is that Keathley asserts human choices are impacted by human character and so each free human choice is not absolutely indifferent. What this means for his position is that he can give strong place to the impact of habits on choice, as well as recognize

⁸³ Baker, “Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians,” 464.

⁸⁴ J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing In Lament: Wrestling With Incurable Cancer And Life In Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Bezos, 2015), 68.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation And Sovereignty* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010, Kindle Edition), 63-78.

the strong impact that the sin nature has on the person and their ability to choose that which is righteous. What is more, as we will discover in Chapter Nine, soft determinism comes especially close to soft libertarianism when it comes to how the non-glorified Christian makes choices regarding evil and righteousness in this age.

Where his view differs from soft determinism is in asserting that the specific choice is not determined by the character of the person, but rather, the character determines a set of choices available to him and so he can still exercise contra-causal free choice that includes actual alternativity. He also emphasizes that humans can make free choices which, in turn, change the character. So, it is not a one-way street in humans—i.e. it is not merely that the character shapes the decisions and not the other way around.

Though I appreciate Keathley's attempt to deal thoroughly with the biblical material and to modify some of the weaknesses of the libertarian (or indeterministic) view of human choice, nevertheless, his view still contains the primary flaws at the heart of indeterminism. These would include viewing the will as almost an independent entity in the person that operates independently of the person, as well as having to assert that a genuinely free decision must be one made against the preference of the person, which, as argued above, does not make sense, and finally, the reality it is hard to see how God can truly exercise meticulous providence when specific choices are left open and not determined.⁸⁶

Humans Are Responsible For Their Choices

The final conclusion we come to on human choice is that, though all human choice is made underneath the strong governance of God, nevertheless, under normal circumstances humans are responsible for their choices. “The maintenance of human responsibility is crucial for a

⁸⁶ For this last point, see Helm, *Providence*, 59.

Christian understanding of providence. Without personal responsibility for human failure there is no personal sin, and personal sin is an essential precondition of the very idea of redemption.”

There are three central conditions for human responsibility:⁸⁷

- Knowledge. If a person chooses to do something, without an awareness of what they are doing (e.g. they are unknowingly drugged by someone else; they are a child without awareness; or have mental deficiencies that prevent their reasonable knowledge of the act), this is not an act for which someone is accountable. David Ciocchi agrees. He argued two decades ago that the person must reasonably be aware of his own beliefs, desires, and other mental states to be responsible. The less this is true, the more the person is either deceived into making a choice that he would not want to make if he truly understood the situation or he is compelled against what would otherwise be his will to make a choice, the less he is responsible.⁸⁸ Of course, knowledge or awareness is not enough in itself to make one responsible. “While I know and am aware of hundreds of other actions performed by other people, this fact does not make me responsible for any of them.”⁸⁹ There must be more.
- Consent. “Those who bring about some action, or fail to do so, must, in order to be responsible for that action, identify themselves with it. They must make it their own in the sense that it is the action, and the sort of action, that in these circumstances they overridingly want to do.”⁹⁰ David Ciocchi helpfully adds that there must be both knowledge and consent all along the way in each of the steps leading up to and including the choice.⁹¹
- Control. The point here is that if there is a control that leads to a voluntary act, then responsibility is present. If not, then it is not. Certainly, there are degrees of control and responsibility. For example, if someone who is intoxicated gets into a car and ends up in a wreck that kills someone because they lacked control over the driving event, they are still responsible because they chose to drink and, to some degree, have control over that and so are held morally responsible.

⁸⁷ The following is taken from Paul Helm, *The Providence Of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 186-189. It should be noted that these conditions are set forth in light of the kind of biblical material and arguments we have made in this chapter. So, in other words, for someone to say that an action for which someone is responsible must come from a choice that is not caused or one that contains alternativity in the strict sense, they are missing the point. These conditions need to be understood both in light of the above material and also, to a lesser degree, in light of whether or not they appear to make sense as the kinds of things that lead to or retract from moral responsibility. This latter and lesser test is sometimes referred to as “the moral intuition test.” I am dependent upon David M. Ciocchi, “Reconciling Divine Sovereignty And Human Freedom,” *JETS*, 37, 3 (September 1994): 395-412, for this phrase.

⁸⁸ Ciocchi, “Reconciling,” 395-412.

⁸⁹ Helm, *The Providence*, 187.

⁹⁰ Helm, *The Providence*, 187.

⁹¹ Ciocchi, “Reconciling,” 395-412.

Throughout my years as a pastor I have heard many Christians say something like this: “Well, of course we have free will!” The exclamation can come in different contexts, but in the majority of cases, the person has not been advocating in an informed manner one philosophical or theological view of freedom over another (such as contra-causal freedom or a freedom that includes alternativity). They simply have been affirming two truths. To begin, they are affirming Scripture clearly teaches humans are responsible for their choices. But also, they are affirming their own experience that they make free choices. After all, in the majority of cases, they are not aware of constraining forces upon them as they make decisions. And, I would contend it is more likely that the kinds of things they would have in mind that constitute a free and responsible decision are more in line with the three conditions just mentioned.

Conclusion

In these seven chapters and the first four theological truths, we have covered in detail how God exercises absolute and free sovereignty through meticulous providence and, at the same time, humans make free choices. We are now ready for the last three truths, which also display why adherence to soft deterministic Calvinism is so crucial for rightly understanding salvation, sanctification, and our future glorification. We turn now to those truths in the final three chapters.