

# The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture

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When one thinks of the topics that create friction among Christians, the subject of divine sovereignty is probably high on the list. We all have experienced heated discussions over the nature of divine sovereignty, especially as it relates to the issues of divine election and salvation. Many Christian people, even seminary students, have expressed to me time and again that they wish the subject would somehow disappear. But that is hardly likely since the subject of divine sovereignty is so foundational to one's entire theology and praxis.

In fact, within evangelical theology today, the perennial polemics over divine sovereignty-human freedom are heating up more than ever given the rise of the view entitled "open theism." At the heart of the "open view" proposal is a reformulation of the doctrine of divine sovereignty that has massive, and in my view, damaging implications for how we think of God and his relation to the world.<sup>1</sup> That is why, given the recent trends, it seems unlikely that discussion over the sovereignty-freedom relationship will fade into the background. Instead, the subject, because it is so critical, must be revisited once again with a renewed sense of vigor and determination as we seek to test our proposals, whether new or old, against the standard of God's Word.

The goal of this essay is to do just that, but not in the typical way of evaluating this issue. Often our discussions of divine

sovereignty-human freedom merely collapse into the age-old Calvinist and Arminian debates over divine election, free will, and the nature of human depravity. No doubt these debates are important and they must be handled with care and faithfulness to the biblical text. However, what is sometimes lost in these discussions is the fact that one's view of divine sovereignty has massive implications for one's *whole* theology, not simply for issues of soteriology. Theology, as J. I. Packer reminds us, is a "seamless robe, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God."<sup>2</sup> In other words, theological doctrines are much more organically related than we often realize and that is why a reformulation in one area of doctrine inevitably effects other areas of our theology. This is important to remember, especially in evaluating old and new proposals regarding the nature of divine sovereignty.

In this regard, there are at least two ways to evaluate theological proposals. First, does the proposal do justice to *all* of Scripture? Second, does the proposal lead us to affirm and not contradict other areas of our theology that we know to be true, or, at least, are more confident of? If the answer is yes to both of these questions, then we may be assured that our theological proposal is on track and faithful to Scripture. However if our answer is

negative on both counts, then it should encourage us to reject our proposal or, at least, rethink it through very carefully before embracing it as a correct view. In this essay, I want to apply the latter option of evaluating theological proposals to the subject of divine sovereignty. I want to investigate the question: What is the relationship between one's view of divine sovereignty-human freedom and one's view of Scripture? More specifically, I want to ask whether different conceptions of the sovereignty-freedom relationship make any difference in how we view Scripture and what we may affirm about it. In other words, are all views of divine sovereignty equal when it comes to upholding a high view of Scripture?<sup>3</sup> Or, will some views of the sovereignty-freedom relationship undermine Scripture's own testimony about itself, namely, that it is nothing less than God's Word written?

Now before we turn to our investigation, we must first define some key terms. Probably the most important reason for the diversity of opinion regarding the nature of divine sovereignty is due to how one defines the nature of human freedom. In fact, how one construes the sovereignty-Scripture relationship will also greatly depend upon how one understands and defines human freedom since Scripture is both the words of God and human authors, that is, a divine-human product. As a result, let us first begin by defining two different conceptions of human freedom that will preoccupy our attention throughout this essay. After that is done, we will then relate those definitions to the subject of divine sovereignty in order to clarify what people mean exactly by divine sovereignty. Finally, we will then turn to the critical concern of this essay—an evaluation of whether different

conceptions of the sovereignty-freedom relationship make any difference in how we view Scripture and what we may affirm about it.

## Two Views of Human Freedom

In the current philosophical literature, there are two basic views of human freedom that are primarily discussed and adopted—an indeterministic notion referred to as incompatibilism or libertarian free will (among various labels), and a deterministic notion referred to as compatibilism or soft determinism. Let us look at each of these views in turn.<sup>4</sup>

First, there is the view of incompatibilism or libertarian freedom. What do philosophers and theologians mean by this concept of freedom? The most basic sense of this view is that a person's act is free if it is not causally determined. For incompatibilists this does not mean that our actions are random or arbitrary. Reasons and causes play upon the will as one chooses, but none of them is *sufficient* to incline the will decisively in one direction or another. Thus, a person could always have chosen otherwise than he did. David Basinger states it this way: for a person to be free with respect to performing an action, he must have it within his power "to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will actually occur has not yet been determined."<sup>5</sup>

Second, there is an alternative conception of human freedom known as compatibilism or soft determinism.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to incompatibilism, the most basic sense of this view of human freedom is that human actions are causally determined, yet free. In other words, unlike incompatibilism, a compatibilist view of freedom perceives the human will as

decisively and *sufficiently* inclined toward one option as opposed to another, yet it is still free as long as the following requirements are met: “(1) The immediate cause of the action is a desire, wish, or intention internal to the agent, (2) no external event or circumstances compels the action to be performed, and (3) the agent could have acted differently if he had chosen to.”<sup>7</sup> If these three conditions are met, then even though human actions are determined, they may still be considered free. John Feinberg summarizes this view well when he states, “if the agent acts in accord with causes and reasons that serve as a sufficient condition for his doing the act, and if the causes do not force him to act contrary to his wishes, then a soft determinist would say that he acts freely.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom**

It is quite evident that incompatibilism and compatibilism are two very different ways of viewing human freedom. It should not surprise us, then, that when these two views are combined with divine sovereignty, they lead to two very different conceptions of how one views God’s rule and Lordship over his creation. Given the above definitions of human freedom, let us now think through how God’s sovereignty is first construed with incompatibilism and then with compatibilism.

### ***Divine Sovereignty and Incompatibilism***

Given the most basic sense of incompatibilism, what, then, is the relationship between an incompatibilistic view of human freedom and God’s sovereign rule over the affairs of humanity? Most theologians who argue for humans having incompatibilistic freedom tend to “limit”

God’s sovereignty in some sense. Now it must quickly be added that by the use of the word “limit,” I am not necessarily using the word in a pejorative or negative sense. Instead, “limit” is being used in the sense that God freely chooses to limit himself by virtue of the fact that he has chosen to create a certain kind of world, that is, a world that contains human beings with incompatibilistic freedom. In this sense, then, “limit” does not refer to a weakness or imperfection in God; rather it refers to a self-imposed limitation that is part of his plan, not a violation of it.<sup>9</sup>

But it must still be asked: how does God’s creation of people with incompatibilistic freedom “limit” his sovereignty? What exactly is the nature of God’s sovereign rule over the world given incompatibilism? David Basinger states the limitation well when he acknowledges that incompatibilists are quite willing to admit that a sovereign God “cannot create a co-possible set of free moral agents without also bringing about the possibility that states of affairs will occur which God does not desire but cannot prohibit.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, this particular proposal of the nature of divine sovereignty entails that God cannot *guarantee* that what he decides will be carried out. Of course, the important word here is *guarantee*. Given the incompatibilist’s view of human freedom, it is not possible to affirm “that the exercise of the gift of freedom is *controlled* by God.”<sup>11</sup> John Feinberg concurs with this observation when he writes, “no matter how much God inclines someone’s will toward what he has chosen, such inclination, *on an indeterministic account of freedom*, can never be sufficient to produce God’s decreed action.”<sup>12</sup>

At this point, it might be helpful to illustrate this proposal of divine sovereignty by giving two examples of thinkers who have commented on it. The purpose of looking at these two individuals is to help us better grasp and clarify the precise nature of the sovereignty-freedom relationship, given incompatibilism.

First, let us look at the example of philosopher Bruce Reichenbach.<sup>13</sup> Reichenbach begins by defining God's omnipotence and sovereignty in a fairly traditional fashion. When we say that God is omnipotent or sovereign, he asserts, we mean that he meets the following two conditions: "(1) he can do any action which is not contradictory or absurd; and (2) no being with greater power can be conceived."<sup>14</sup> Now, given that definition of omnipotence, how does Reichenbach relate it to incompatibilistic freedom? Reichenbach first reminds us that from an incompatibilist's perspective, it is contradictory "for an act to be free and caused by another."<sup>15</sup> That, of course, as we have discovered, is the basic understanding of incompatibilism. But, as Reichenbach insists, given that understanding of incompatibilism, there is *necessarily* a limit placed on God's sovereignty. Reichenbach states the limit this way: "God limits himself in the creation of individuals who are free. God cannot, without destroying our freedom,<sup>16</sup> control us or compel us to choose to act in ways that accord with his will or plan."<sup>17</sup> In this sense, God cannot *guarantee* that what he wants done will be carried out, and as such, his sovereign control is limited over the affairs of humanity.

A second example of a theologian who limits God's sovereignty due to an acceptance of incompatibilism is open theist, Clark Pinnock.<sup>18</sup> What does Pinnock con-

clude about the sovereignty-freedom relationship? Pinnock is very straightforward in his answer. He admits that as creator, God is unquestionably the superior power. For example, God has the power to exist and the power to control all things. But almightiness, according to Pinnock, is not the whole story. As Pinnock states,

Though no power can stand against him, God wills the existence of creatures with the power of self-determination. This means that God is a superior power who does not cling to his right to dominate and control but who voluntarily gives creatures room to flourish. By inviting them to have dominion over the world (for example), God willingly surrenders power and makes possible a partnership with the creature.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, due to God's own free choice to create creatures with incompatibilistic freedom, God limits himself. But, as Pinnock states, this is not to be seen as a limitation "imposed from without,"<sup>20</sup> it is a self-limitation. In fact, for Pinnock, he does not view this self-limitation of God as a "weakness" since, as he argues, it requires more power to rule over an undetermined world than it does over a determined one. But as a result of God's own self-limitation, it does entail that God is a risk-taker. What does this mean? In the end it means that God must respond and adapt to surprises and to the unexpected. As Pinnock states, "God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B."<sup>21</sup> Thus, says Pinnock, because of God's creation of human beings with incompatibilistic freedom, the sovereign God delegates power to the creature, making himself vulnerable. Sovereignty does not mean that

nothing can go contrary to God's will, but that God is able to deal with any circumstances that may arise. As Pinnock asserts, "by his [God's] decision to create a world like ours, God showed his willingness to take risks and to work with a history whose outcome he does not wholly decide."<sup>22</sup> Hence, to a large extent, reality is "open" rather than closed. For Pinnock and other open theists this ultimately means that "genuine novelty can appear in history which cannot be predicted even by God. If the creature has been given the ability to decide how some things will turn out, then it cannot be known infallibly ahead of time how they will turn out. It implies that the future is really open and not available to exhaustive foreknowledge even on the part of God."<sup>23</sup>

### ***Divine Sovereignty and Compatibilism***

Thinkers who opt for compatibilism, in contrast to incompatibilism, have a far different understanding of the nature of divine sovereignty. In fact, compatibilists, such as myself, argue simultaneously that God rules absolutely over his world—i.e., God is able to guarantee and accomplish everything that he has ordained—and that this rule does not take away the freedom of his creatures. Compatibilists, who are much more Calvinistic in their theology, agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith when it states: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."<sup>24</sup>

Of course, one of the crucial challenges

facing this view is exactly how a strong sense of divine sovereignty and human freedom can be logically reconciled. In this regard, there are a number of different strategies compatibilists utilize. But what is central to all of these strategies is the attempt to demonstrate that even though there is some tension in attempting to answer all the "hows" of the sovereignty-freedom relationship, in the end, there is no logical contradiction.

One illustration of the compatibilist strategy is that of John Feinberg.<sup>25</sup> In his article "God Ordains All Things," Feinberg is clear about his commitment to a compatibilistic view of human freedom and a strong view of divine sovereignty. In regard to divine sovereignty, Feinberg appeals to such texts as Ephesians 1:11 in order to argue that God's will is not only the basis of his eternal plan, but also that it is all-inclusive. And as a result, God's sovereignty means that he is able to *guarantee* that his plan will come to pass without eliminating human freedom. Exactly how this is so is linked with the fact that God's plan includes not only God's chosen ends but also the means to such ends. Such means include whatever circumstances and factors are necessary to convince an individual (without constraint) that the act God has decreed is the act he or she wants to do. Thus, given the sufficient conditions, the person will do the act.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, then, a compatibilist view of divine sovereignty attempts to maintain that God is able to render certain what he ordains, without removing human freedom.

### **Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Scripture**

With definitions and explanations aside, we are now in a position to turn to

the main concern of this essay—an evaluation of whether different conceptions of the sovereignty-freedom relationship make any difference in what we may affirm about Scripture.

An excellent place to begin our evaluation is with a short but very insightful article by David and Randall Basinger entitled “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defence.”<sup>27</sup> What is significant about this article, at least for our purposes, is the Basingers’ argument—“one cannot consistently affirm the total inerrancy of Scripture and yet *also* utilize the Free Will Defence as a response to the problem of evil.”<sup>28</sup> Now at first sight this argument might seem somewhat removed from our investigation regarding whether different construals of divine sovereignty make any difference in what one may affirm about Scripture, but it is really not. In fact, if we carefully unpack the Basingers’ argument, we will soon discover that it has a direct bearing on our investigation.

The Basingers begin their article by observing that “one of the stock arguments employed by the challenger to the inerrancy position is that inerrancy implies a dictation theory of inspiration.”<sup>29</sup> That is, in order to obtain a verbally inspired and inerrant Scripture, one must affirm, so says the critic, that the human authors were reduced to impersonal instruments, and as such, in the writing of Scripture their freedom was taken away.

In response to the critics, the Basingers rightly acknowledge that modern proponents of inerrancy emphatically deny that dictation is necessary in order to accept the inerrancy position.<sup>30</sup> In reply, proponents of inerrancy insist that the reason one can affirm verbal inspiration and inerrancy is precisely because the Scriptural writers’ “thinking and writings were

*both* free and spontaneous on their part *and* divinely elicited and controlled.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, it is for this very reason that proponents of a traditional view of Scripture have argued for a *concurrent* theory of inspiration, in contrast to a dictation theory. The rationale for this is to emphasize that *both* God *and* the human author are active in the process, thus guaranteeing that what God intended was written.

Now at this point, the Basingers insist that in order for the proponents of inerrancy to succeed in their reply to the critics, they must accept as true the following proposition: “Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.”<sup>32</sup> If this proposition is accepted, maintain the Basingers, then the argument for a high view of Scripture must look something like this:

- (1) The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity (are human utterances).
- (2) Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.
- (3) God totally controlled what human authors did in fact write.
- (4) Therefore, the words of the Bible are God’s utterances.
- (5) Whatever God utters is errorless (inerrant);
- (6) Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless (inerrant).<sup>33</sup>

But, contend the Basingers, there is a major problem with this argument. The problem is not so much with the argument itself, but with its implications. For example, if one accepts premise (2), then this will have major implications for how one attempts to answer the problem of evil, especially if one adopts the Free Will Defense (FWD). In fact, the Basingers argue that the acceptance of (2) is incom-

patible with the FWD. Why is this the case? In order to answer that question, let us look briefly at the FWD.

Among Christian theologians and philosophers, the FWD is probably one of the most popular ways of defending the goodness of God, given the fact of moral evil in the world. The object of the FWD is to absolve God of the responsibility for moral evil in the world in light of its own theological commitments. How does it do that? The Basingers succinctly summarize the basic strategy of the defense: "The object of this 'defence' is to absolve God of the responsibility for moral evil by arguing that moral evil is the result of free human choices and hence the responsibility of humans rather than God. God, by the act of creating free creatures, is responsible for the possibility of evil, but the actuality of each given instance of moral evil in the world is due to the free will of humans."<sup>34</sup>

Now as the Basingers rightly point out, in order for the FWD to be successful, it must assume a specific conception of human freedom, namely *incompatibilism*. The Basingers state it this way:

The assumption behind this argument [FWD] is the belief that God *cannot* both create free moral creatures and still bring it about (infallibly guarantee) that they will perform the specific actions he desires. For once it is assumed that God *can* control the actions of free creatures, it follows immediately that God could have created a world containing free moral agents but absolutely no moral evil—i.e., God could have brought it about that every individual would always freely choose in every situation to perform the exact action God desired. But if God could have brought it about that every instance of moral evil was freely not performed, then we must conclude that God is directly responsible for each

instance of moral evil in the world and the free will defence fails. In short, the free will defence can only work—i.e., divine responsibility for the actuality of moral evil in the world can only be absolved—by denying that God can totally control free creatures, that is, by denying premise (2).<sup>35</sup>

Given the fact that the FWD is bound up with the acceptance of incompatibilism (and its particular construal of divine sovereignty), it should now be quite evident why an adoption of the FWD is incompatible with (2). Premise (2) assumes that God can *infallibly guarantee* that human beings will perform the specific actions he desires without violating their freedom, whereas incompatibilism denies this possibility. Thus, the Basingers conclude their article with the following dilemma: either affirm (2) and thus inerrancy, but at the cost of making God responsible for all the moral evil in the world; or adopt the use of the FWD, thus absolving God of any responsibility for evil, but at the cost of rejecting (2) and thus being "left with the seemingly impossible task of showing how God could perfectly control what the biblical writers uttered without removing their freedom."<sup>36</sup>

How are we to evaluate the Basingers' argument? Two points need to be emphasized. First, we need to acknowledge that their argument has very important implications for our discussion of the relationship between divine sovereignty-human freedom and Scripture. Basically, the Basingers are underscoring the fact that an *incompatibilistic* view of human freedom entails that God cannot *both* create free individuals *and* still bring it about (infallibly guarantee) that they will do the specific actions he desires. The Basingers, in my view, are highlighting a genuine inconsistency between both affirming

incompatibilism (and its construal of divine sovereignty) and maintaining (2), which, of course, is essential in upholding a high view of Scripture.

However, secondly, it needs to be stressed that the Basingers's argument is reductionistic. Why? Because there are more options available to us than what they seem to allow. For example, the FWD is *not* the only way to absolve God of the responsibility for evil in the world. No doubt, for a person who embraces an *incompatibilistic* view of human freedom, the FWD is a logically consistent and attractive option. Nonetheless, it is not the only defense available to an incompatibilist.<sup>37</sup> And for other theological viewpoints that do not embrace incompatibilism, there are certainly more options than just the FWD.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, along a similar line and more importantly for our purposes, the Basingers are reductionistic in presenting incompatibilism as the only option for a defender of inerrancy. To be sure, the Basingers' dilemma is certainly valid for one who embraces a view of divine sovereignty and also embraces incompatibilism. However, their dilemma is *not* valid for a person such as myself who adopts a view of divine sovereignty that incorporates a compatibilistic understanding of human freedom. Why? Simply because a compatibilistic view is able to affirm premise (2) without contradiction, and as such, is able to defend a high view of Scripture.

### Concluding Reflections

What, then, are we to conclude from our investigation of the sovereignty-Scripture relationship? Are all views of divine sovereignty equal when it comes to upholding a high view of Scripture or will some views of the sovereignty-freedom relationship undermine it? Let me

offer two concluding reflections, one pertaining to incompatibilism and the other to compatibilism.<sup>39</sup>

First, if one accepts incompatibilism (and its particular construal of divine sovereignty), I would agree with the Basingers that one must reject premise (2). But with the rejection of premise (2) there is a very serious entailment, namely, that the theological underpinnings for a high view of Scripture have been greatly weakened. Why? Because if God cannot infallibly *guarantee* what the human authors freely wrote was precisely what he wanted written, without error, then it seems difficult to substantiate the traditional view of Scripture at this point. In fact, most defenders of a high view of Scripture have viewed premise (2) as bound up with a proper defense of inerrancy. As E. J. Young wrote many years ago, "inspiration is designed to *secure* the accuracy of what is taught and to keep the Lord's spokesman from error in his teaching ... inspiration is designed to *secure* infallibility...."<sup>40</sup> But with the undermining of premise (2), incompatibilism greatly weakens the theological defense for an infallible and inerrant Bible.

But does this then entail that the person who adopts incompatibilism cannot *logically* affirm inerrancy? In terms of logical possibility, the answer is no. It is *logically possible* that the biblical authors "just happened" to write everything that God wanted them to write, without God *guaranteeing* it.<sup>41</sup> For it is true, as Norman Geisler contends in his response to the Basingers, that "it is not essential (necessary) for humans to err whenever they speak or write . . . human free choice only makes error *possible*, not necessary."<sup>42</sup> But even if it is logically possible to affirm incompatibilism and inerrancy, it must be



acknowledged that it is highly improbable. For without an infallible *guarantee*, given the diversity of the biblical authors and the nature of the content of Scripture, the probability that the biblical authors “just happened” to get everything correct, thus resulting in an infallible and inerrant text, is indeed very low.

Moreover, a commitment to incompatibilism also raises an important epistemological issue. What happens when we find an apparent mistake or contradiction in Scripture? What should our attitude be toward the Bible? Should we seek to resolve it because we are convinced that Scripture is inerrant? And if we are so convinced, from whence does this conviction come? For if God *cannot* guarantee that what he wanted written was written, then our conviction on these matters certainly does not stem from the view that the Scriptures were “divinely elicited and controlled, and what they [biblical writers] wrote was not only their own work but also God’s work.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, when we do come across an apparent contradiction or problem in Scripture, do we then admit that it is an error? For after all, given incompatibilism, it may be true that it is logically possible to affirm inerrancy, but the probability of it is so low that we have no overwhelming reason to think that the apparent problem is not really an error after all. And if we move in this direction, can Scripture then serve as its own self-attesting authority by which we evaluate all theological proposals?

Indeed, these are serious implications for one’s view of Scripture given a commitment to incompatibilism and its particular construal of divine sovereignty. How do evangelicals who are also incompatibilists respond to such problems? Many, I believe, are not even aware

of the issues, but if they are, there are at least three main responses. First, there is a commitment to incompatibilism and its implications with a corresponding move away from an inerrancy position to an “essentially reliable message” position.<sup>44</sup> But, it may be questioned, whether this is a helpful position at all. In the end, can it do justice to the historic confession of the church regarding Scripture, let alone Scripture’s view of itself?<sup>45</sup> I would argue in the negative on both accounts.

Second, there is a commitment to incompatibilism and a high view of Scripture along with the affirmation that it is simply a “paradox”<sup>46</sup> as to how God can *guarantee* that what the human authors write is what he wants written.<sup>47</sup> The problem, however, with this view is that it forces us to believe in logically contradictory states of affairs. If one thinks in terms of logical consistency, it does not seem possible to affirm simultaneously incompatibilism and God’s ability to guarantee an infallible and inerrant text, unless, of course, he takes away the freedom of the author by dictating the text. Thus, if one attempts to give a logical explanation regarding the sovereignty-freedom and Scripture relationship, then the paradox alternative is not really an alternative after all.

Third, there is a commitment to incompatibilism and a high view of Scripture along with some other plausible account of how God can control free human activities in such a way as to guarantee an inerrant Scripture. What is that other plausible account? In a recent article on this issue, William Craig argues that it is the theory of middle knowledge.<sup>48</sup> I do not have the space to do justice to this view, except to say that if the theory can be substantiated, then it does provide a way to

reconcile incompatibilism and inerrancy. Nevertheless, the problem with the view, as many have pointed out, is that it depends upon knowing what we *would* freely do, not just could do, were we placed in different circumstances, and on the basis of that knowledge, God then freely decides to actualize one of those worlds known to him through this middle knowledge. What is the problem? It is simply this. Given *incompatibilism*, it is very difficult to explain how God can *know*, even counterfactually, what we *would* do if we can always choose otherwise. Hence, in the end, I do not think middle knowledge will be able to deliver what it promises.<sup>49</sup>

The second concluding reflection pertains to compatibilism. Since this particular view of divine sovereignty-human freedom is able to substantiate premise (2), then it best provides the necessary support for upholding a high view of Scripture. It, in other words, helps make sense of how God can *guarantee* what he intends to be written, through the free agency of human authors. In fact, I would claim that it is this conception of divine sovereignty alone which best accounts for the concursive theory of inspiration, a view which is at the heart of a high view of Scripture. Why? Because it is only this view of divine sovereignty that truly allows both God and the human author to be active in the process of inspiration so that the final result is exactly what God intended. On the other hand, other views that tend to weaken divine sovereignty have a much more difficult time accounting for the confluent authorship of Scripture.<sup>50</sup>

What shall we then say in the end? Does it matter what view of divine sovereignty we hold to? Are all views of the

sovereignty-freedom relationship equal when it comes to upholding a high view of Scripture or will some views undermine it? The conclusion of this essay is that all views of divine sovereignty are *not* equal. In fact, this is not only true when we furiously debate points of election and soteriology, but it is also true when we engage in discussions over the nature of Scripture. For if one desires to ground a high view of Scripture on a strong foundation, while maintaining a concursive view of inspiration that incorporates free human agency, one would be better to employ a compatibilistic view of divine sovereignty.

Furthermore, there is one final observation that I must make that is a corollary to what has already been stated. Not only is it important to evaluate views of divine sovereignty in light of whether they can uphold a high view of Scripture, but it is also crucial to maintain that in defending any view of Scripture, one cannot adequately do so unless one self-consciously thinks through one's view of divine sovereignty. In fact, without the discussion of divine sovereignty being brought to the table in our doctrine of Scripture polemics, I am convinced that we will not make any headway in our contemporary bibliology discussions. Indeed, J. I. Packer summarizes this observation well when he argues that,

The customary apologetic for biblical authority operates on too narrow a front. As we have seen, faith in the God of the Reformation theology is the necessary presupposition of faith in Scripture as "God's Word written," and without this faith *sola Scriptura* as the God-taught principle of authority more or less loses its meaning.... we must never lose sight of the fact that our doctrine of God is decisive for our concept of

Scripture, and that in our controversy with a great deal of modern theology it is here, rather than in relation to the phenomena of Scripture, that the decisive battle must be joined.<sup>51</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The literature on “open theism” is growing by the month. For two helpful summaries of the view see Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); David Basinger, *The Case for Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, “Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture,” in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. James M. Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 61.

<sup>3</sup> In this essay I am taking “a high view of Scripture” as my given. By this expression I am referring to what Kevin J. Vanhoozer has labeled, “The Received View” (see “God’s Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today,” in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scriptures*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 143-181), that is, the orthodox, historic view of Scripture held by the church throughout the ages, at least up until the present time. This view affirms that Scripture is nothing less than God’s Word written through the free agency of human authors, the product of God’s mighty action through the Word and by the Holy Spirit whereby human authors freely wrote exactly what God intended to be written, without error. For a sample defense of this view of Scripture, see the following two works edited by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) and *Hermeneutics, Authority, and*

*Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Scripture does not precisely define the nature of human freedom, but philosophers and theologians discuss it. As stated, there are two main notions of freedom—incompatibilism and compatibilism. As we shall see, these two conceptions of human freedom clearly contradict one another, but both are possible views of freedom in the sense that there is no logical contradiction in affirming either view. Supporting the notion that both views of freedom are coherent and defensible is Thomas Flint, “Two Accounts of Providence,” in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 177-179. Ultimately the view of freedom that one ought to embrace should be the view that best fits the biblical data, not our pre-conceived notions of what human freedom is or ought to be.

<sup>5</sup> David Basinger, “Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986) 416. Also see William Hasker, *Metaphysics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983) 32-44; Ledger Wood, “Indeterminism,” *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert Runes (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1983) 159; Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford Press, 1991) 59-61; Thomas Talbott, “Indeterminism and Chance Occurrences,” *The Personalist* 60 (1979) 254.

<sup>6</sup> Even though compatibilism or soft determinism is a view of human freedom that fits under the broad category of determinism, it is important to distinguish it from the concept of “hard” determinism found in the natural sciences and from the concept of fatalism. For more on these distinctions see John

S. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986) 21-26; Richard Taylor, "Determinism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 359-373. For more on compatibilism in general see Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 157-158 and *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 59. The third requirement that Peterson, et al. lists is very important—the agent could have acted differently if he had chosen to. Incompatibilists, as noted, argue that no one is free who could not have (actually) done otherwise. On the other hand, compatibilists argue that the meaning of the phrase "could have done otherwise" must be carefully defined. The key issue here is the meaning of *can* or *could*. There are at least seven ways that this expression can be understood. And it is only in one of these ways that the compatibilist can not affirm "could have done otherwise." However, in the other six ways, it is perfectly appropriate for the compatibilist to affirm that the "agent could have done otherwise," and if being able to do otherwise is the criterion for being free, then a compatibilist can legitimately speak of freedom. On this important point see John Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," 26-28.

<sup>8</sup>John S. Feinberg, "Divine Causality and Evil: Is There Anything Which

God Does Not Do?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 16 (1987) 400.

<sup>9</sup>On the issue of "limit" in regard to divine sovereignty see the helpful article by John Frame, "The Spirit and the Scriptures," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, 217-235. For the outworking of this view in relation to divine sovereignty and incompatibilism see Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of Divine Sovereignty," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: The Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 108-110.

<sup>10</sup>David Basinger, "Human Freedom and Divine Providence: Some New Thoughts on an Old Problem," *Religious Studies* 15 (1979) 496.

<sup>11</sup>William Hasker, "God the Creator of Good and Evil?" in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 139.

<sup>12</sup>John Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," 30-31.

<sup>13</sup>See Bruce Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 101-124.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>"Without destroying our freedom" is an important phrase. Incompatibilists do argue that God can and does at times restrict human freedom in order to accomplish his purposes. But they are quick to add, in those cases, human beings are not acting freely. However, normally, in order to preserve our freedom, God allows human beings to make their own choices, which, necessarily, limits the kind of control God is able

to exert in the world. See *ibid.*, 109.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>18</sup>See especially two of Pinnock's works for a statement of his position: "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 143-162, and "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 101-125.

<sup>19</sup>Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 113.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* For a further development of God as a risk-taker see open theist John Sanders's treatment of divine providence in his work *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>23</sup>Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," 150. It is worth noting that for Pinnock and other open theists, the acceptance of incompatibilistic human freedom not only leads them to limit God's sovereign control over the world, but also leads them to deny what even traditional Arminian thought has affirmed, that God is able to know future free actions of human beings. It is at this crucial point that open theism is not Arminian in its theology, even though it attempts to present itself as a variation of Arminian thought.

<sup>24</sup>G. I. Williamson, ed., *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964) 30.

<sup>25</sup>See John Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," 19-43. For other illustrations of compatibilism see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); *How Long O Lord?*

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 371-390.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>27</sup>David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defence," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983) 177-180. See also the exchange of articles that the Basingers' article has generated between themselves and Norman Geisler. See Norman Geisler, "Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger," *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (1985) 349-353; Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts," *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986) 351-354; Geisler, "Is Inerrancy Incompatible with the Free Will Defence?," *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990) 175-178.

<sup>28</sup>Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts," 351.

<sup>29</sup>Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and The Free Will Defence," 177. For two contemporary examples of the charge of dictation see William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 28-38, and James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1981) 290-293.

<sup>30</sup>For denials that the traditional view of Scripture implies a dictation theory of inspiration see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4 (Waco: Word Books, 1979) 138; J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1958) 78-79;

B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," in *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 2., ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973) 614-636. For a discussion as to why the dictation theory of inspiration is contrary to the biblical evidence and thus why it should be rejected see I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 32-33.

<sup>31</sup>Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*, 80. Also see John Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984) 174-176; Gordon R. Lewis, "The Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 227-264; A. N. S. Lane, "B. B. Warfield on the Humanity of Scripture," *Vox Evangelica* 16 (1986) 77-94.

<sup>32</sup>Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and The Free Will Defence," 178.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and The Free Will Defence," 179. In the contemporary literature, no one has done more to develop and defend the FWD than Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. On this same point cf. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 166-167.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>37</sup>On this point see John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 111-123. However, regardless of which way an indeterminist attempts to solve

the problem of evil, it is still true that if one adopts incompatibilism, there is a problem with holding premise (2).

<sup>38</sup>See John Feinberg's defense of a compatibilistic theological position in *The Many Faces of Evil*, 124-155. Also see John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994) 149-190; Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready* (Texarkana: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996) 163-175.

<sup>39</sup>I am assuming in the following discussion that the dictation theory of inspiration is not an option. No doubt, one could always defend inerrancy and incompatibilism by affirming that in the special case of Scripture, God took away the freedom of the authors and dictated the text. But for anyone who takes the phenomena of the Scripture seriously, this is not really a viable option.

<sup>40</sup>E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 41-42 (emphasis mine).

<sup>41</sup>The Basingers admit this possibility as a mere possibility, but then correctly argue that if (2) is false then "God can never guarantee that any human will freely do what he wants" ("Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts," 354).

<sup>42</sup>Norman Geisler, "Inerrancy and Free Will," 350.

<sup>43</sup>Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*, 80.

<sup>44</sup>This seems to be the position of Clark Pinnock in *The Scripture Principle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 100-101. Also see Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, C. S.

*Lewis and Francis Schaeffer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 129-138. For a very helpful discussion of these issues from a non-evangelical perspective see Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Interestingly, Farley correctly analyzes that the traditional view of Scripture has rested upon a strong view of divine sovereignty. However, he also admits that if God's sovereignty is weakened in any way, then it becomes much more difficult to conceive of how God can *guarantee* that the human words collected in Scripture will reflect his Word. In the end, Farley opts for a weakened sense of divine sovereignty along the lines of process theism. However, in so doing, he also sees that it is necessary for him to give up the traditional view of Scripture and affirm another formulation of it due to his weakened sense of God's rule over the world.

<sup>45</sup>On the Scripture's view of itself see Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture" in *Scripture and Truth*, 19-59; John Frame, "Scripture Speaks for Itself" in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1974) 178-200; Sinclair Ferguson, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, ed. Harvie Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 47-66.

<sup>46</sup>I am using the word "paradox" in the sense of contradiction and I am assuming that Scripture does not present us with "paradoxical

truths." This does not mean that all theological truths are totally comprehensible to our intellects or that our theological proposals do not contain a great deal of mystery. But it does mean that since the God of Scripture does not contradict himself, we should then affirm the same truth about his revelation. And as such, our theological proposals may contain "mysteries" and "tensions" but not contradictory statements. On this see John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987) 242-260.

<sup>47</sup>I. Howard Marshall seems to take this approach in *Biblical Inspiration*, 44.

<sup>48</sup>William L. Craig, "'Men Moved By the Holy Spirit Spoke From God' (2 Peter 1:21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration" *Philosophia Christi*. Series 2, 1:1 (1999) 45-82.

<sup>49</sup>For similar critiques of middle knowledge at this point see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, 55-61; J. A. Crabtree, "Does Middle Knowledge Solve the Problem of Divine Sovereignty?" in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 429-457; John Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 89-90.

<sup>50</sup>In this regard, it is interesting to compare the early-Clark Pinnock with the current-Clark Pinnock. The early-Pinnock, by his own admission, was a strong advocate of both inerrancy and a Calvinistic view of divine sovereignty. The current-Pinnock, now an advocate of open

theism with its weakened view of divine sovereignty, has also shifted to a weakened view of inerrancy. The early-Pinnock maintained that the concept of confluent authorship is only intelligible within the context of biblical theism. By this he meant, "God and man can both be significant agents simultaneously in the same historical (Acts 2:23) or literary (2 Pet 1:21) event. The Spirit of God worked concursively alongside the activity of the writers, Himself being the principal cause and they the free instrumental cause. The result of this concursive operation was that their thinking and writing were both free and spontaneous on their part and divinely elicited and controlled, and what they wrote was not only their own work, but also God's work. There is a monotonous chorus of protest against the biblical concept of inspiration on the grounds that it involves mechanical dictation. The only way to explain the repetition of this false charge is to recognize the sad eclipse of biblical theism today. Men seem unable to conceive of a divine providence which can infallibly reach its ends without dehumanizing the human agents it employs. According to the Bible, the sovereignty of God does not nullify the significance of man" (*Biblical Revelation* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1985 (1971)] 92-93). However, the current-Pinnock views the traditional emphasis on *concursum* as suggesting total divine control, tantamount to saying God dictated the text (see *The Scripture Principle* [New York: Harper & Row,

1984] 100-101).

<sup>51</sup>J. I. Packer, "'Sola Scriptura' in History and Today," in *God's Inerrant Word*, 60.