

"PREDESTINATION, FREE WILL, AND THE NATURE OF LIGHT"

(Romans 10:1-21)

(Chuck Swindoll)

For centuries, philosophers and scientists argued over the nature of light. Some claimed that light behaves like a wave traveling through space, much like sound. Others disagreed, stating that light is a stream of tiny particles emanating from its source. Unfortunately, experimentation didn't help. When tested as a wave, light proves to be a wave. When tested as a particle, light proves to be a particle. And as people who understand such things explain it to me, one experiment should disprove the other. Yet, experiments don't lie.

The debate divided the world's most brilliant minds into opposing camps, each experimenting, calculating, theorizing, and writing to prove the other wrong. Then, in 1905, a scholastic undesirable—a relative unknown who worked as a patent examiner during the day and spent his nights unraveling great mysteries—published an article in Germany's leading physics journal that would change everything. Albert Einstein put forward the idea that light is both a wave and a particle. His theory made no sense at all, yet his calculations satisfactorily answered every objection.

As scientific laymen, we can barely appreciate the effect his idea had on the world. His theory, which eventually won him a Nobel Prize, defies the laws of physics as we understand them. This "dual nature of light" should not be possible. Yet, somehow, in a dimension beyond our intellectual capacity, the mystery of light is as simple as two plus two.

The world of theology has its unsolvable puzzles as well. How can God be one and three yet One? We really cannot comprehend it. Nevertheless, the Bible clearly presents Him as a tri-unity. It is a paradox that threatened to divide the Christian world soon after the apostles died, simply because many teachers preferred a deity they could comprehend. Many of those early heresies exist now as cults, which cleverly disguise themselves to appear authentically Christian.

Another paradox has been described as "the sovereignty of God versus the free will of humanity." Theologians past and present have been guilty of bending one to serve the other, which inevitably leads to non-biblical belief and practice. For example, the Calvinist Baptists of eighteenth-century England believed that evangelism presumed to interfere with God's sovereign predestination. When a young William Carey suggested that missionaries be sent to foreign lands in obedience to the command of Christ in Matthew 28:16-20, an older minister scolded, "Sit down, young man. You are an enthusiast! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting you or me!"



On the other extreme, teachers of "free will" believe that salvation is entirely in the hands of each person—hands that may grow weary clinging to Christ, lose their grip, and allow the believer to fall away into unbelief. A person may or may not be declared righteous by faith at any given moment and may either plunge into hell or fly up to heaven, depending, of course, upon his or her mental and spiritual state at the time of death. People in these sects continually struggle with fear and doubt, which inevitably lead to works-based religion—the very opposite of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

So how do we reconcile these great truths—the sovereignty of God and the free will of humanity? According to J. I. Packer, someone put that question to the great Calvinist preacher C. H. Spurgeon. "'I wouldn't try,' he replied; 'I never reconcile friends.'" What a sensible approach! Neither position ceases to be true simply because we cannot accept the paradox.

In Romans 9, Paul confirmed that salvation is the work of God. He has elected some and He has "hardened" others. Naturally, this doctrine of election or predestination prompted a reasonable question: "How can God justly condemn those who did not choose to believe if their choosing was not the will of God?" (my paraphrase of 9:19). After defending the Lord's absolute sovereignty, upholding His perfect righteousness, showing us His mercy, and defending His fairness, Paul appropriately turned his attention to the responsibility of humanity.

Putting chapters 9 and 10 together, we see two sides of this issue. Truth be told, we must uphold each without diminishing the other:

Side A: God rejects rebellious people because they have rejected Him (Romans 1:28-32; Matt. 10:33; 21:42-44; John 15:22-24).

Side B: We love God because God first loved us (Rom. 5:8; 8:28-30; 1 Jn. 4:10).