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Christians say God's in charge of their lives yet they're still free agents. How can this be? It does seem contradictory to say God's in control whilst claiming a free will. Can Christians have it both ways?

Things that are opposed in logic but hold together in experience are called paradoxes. The Christian faith is riddled with them! God being three and yet one, Jesus being God and yet man are the most famous examples.

To say God's a controlling God isn't Christian truth. It's more like Islam. To say God's up in heaven and we're independent of him isn't Christian truth either. It's so-called Deism. *'God's in his heaven and all's right with the world'*. which leaves the world to us alone.

We're not *controlled* by God and we're not *independent* of him. When Christ came into the world the Bible tells us it was through God's choice of the Virgin Mary. *'The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth'* Luke tells us (1:26). God sent Gabriel *'to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'*

Did God control this coming of his Son, Jesus Christ to the Virgin Mary? He didn't! The story in Luke Chapter 1 continues. *But Mary was greatly perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be... You will bear a son and you will name him Jesus, Gabriel said... Mary said to him, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you'... Gabriel says'*

Finally the words that make God's becoming flesh possible. They're *human* words – the generous, obedient words of the Blessed Virgin. *'Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word'*.

This beautiful Annunciation story is frequently depicted in Christian art. The pictures show God's part and Mary's part by a Dove, sign of the Holy Spirit, and a gesture of submission from Mary. It's the story of the new cooperation of God and humanity that started with Mary.

The story of Christ's coming makes it clear God wants believers who're neither controlled by him nor independent of him but ready to cooperate with him.

Human beings are dependent creatures, dependent for life on their Creator whether they know it or not. When the Creator offers us *his own life* we've the choice like Mary as to whether we welcome it or not.

It's the same with the offer of guidance. We've a choice whether we accept that guidance or not. If there are forces at work influencing Christians they're

more like magnetism than the strings of puppetry! If there are invisible strings of influence between heaven and earth they're to be voluntarily accepted.

So Paul can write to the Philippians in Chapter 2: *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (2:12b,13)*. Later at the end of this letter he makes the same point when he says *I can do all things through him who strengthens me (4:13)*.

Throughout Philippians we're made aware Paul sees everything he does as a response to the vision of God he's grasped in Jesus, what he describes as *the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14)*

Christians say God's in charge of their lives yet they're still free agents. How can this be? It can be because this is the nature of love. God is love. In love he's come right down to us and alongside us so we can welcome him or reject him. Christianity's the struggle to go with God where God wants us to go, which is a struggle against self-will.

Love is voluntary obedience. So is Christianity at its best. If you love someone you want the very best for them and you obey the cause of bringing them that very best. This is what God has done for us in Jesus and what he wants us to do for others. The trouble is the very best involves losing yourself to gain the selflessness which is God's heart and it costs.

Coming back to Mary's cooperation with God, it takes you to blood, sweat and tears at the Cross still praying: *'Here I am, Lord, let it be with me according to your word'*.