

Freedom of the Will

Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training

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Introduction:

Man was created holy and without sin. He was created as both a physical being and a spiritual being—both body and soul. Being sinless he was in harmony and communion with God. He was created as a free agent, that is, he was created with a freedom of the will. As a moral creature he had the freedom of will to choose to please God; in other words, he had the *ability* to please God. When man sinned he became corrupt in all of his being—his heart, mind, conscience, and will. Theologians call this *Total Depravity*. Lost humanity has lost the freedom of will to please God/ Although fallen man still possesses volitional freedom to do that which he pleases, his actions are always consistent with his fallen nature. This study will examine the will of man.

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Definitions:

1. The will is simply the power by which the mind chooses something—the act of choosing or making a voluntary determination.
2. Human beings are moral agents. They possess a sense of moral good and evil, reward and punishment.
3. Moral agents consistently make volitional choices consistent with the inclinations of the heart.

Matthew 7:18 – “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.”

I. Man's Condition Before the Fall

- A. Man was created holy and sinless
Ephesians 4:24 – “And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”
1. In his righteous condition sin had no hold upon man. He had a natural desire for holiness.
 2. James Petigree Boyce described his condition (Boyce, *Systematic Theology*, p.214).
 The moral nature as originally existent must have been:
 - a. Without the taint of sin and tendencies to sin
 - b. Entirely inclined towards the right, with a holy taste for the holiness of God, having the capacity to discern its beauty, and inclination to love Him as its possessor, accompanied by readiness to obey the law of God, an perception of man's duty to serve Him.
- B. Man was created with a freedom of the will which was mutable and subject to change, which made the fall possible
1. This does not mean that man was created with an equilibrium in which it was as easy to choose the evil as the good. Man was created with a holy nature.
 2. If man was created with a holy nature, a natural desire to choose that which is holy, how is it that man fell?
 - a. It must be remembered that even though Adam was holy and sinless he was still a creature. Unlike God his holiness was not essential to his being and so it was possible for it to be lost.
 - b. Although he was wholly inclined to do the good he always had the power to choose the evil.
 - c. It was possible for a desire to be awakened which might not of itself be sin but could lead to wrongful gratification of it.
Genesis 3:6 – “And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.”
 - It isn't wrong to appreciate good food
 - It isn't wrong to look upon things pleasant to the eyes
 - It isn't wrong to desire wisdom
 3. God's law stood to deny the fulfillment of these desires.
NAS **Romans 7:7** – “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."”
 4. Man began to question God's justness in denying his desires.
Genesis 3:5 – “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”
 5. This led man to see the justness in forsaking God's law which led to the gratification of his desires—sin.

II. The Effect of the Fall

- A. Man became morally corrupt
1. Our corruption is on the level of moral perceptions rather than that of the intellect.
 2. With the fall man lost the inclination to do good and is now inclined towards evil.
 “Men are naturally so prone to sin, that none ever fail of immediately transgressing God’s law, and so exposing themselves to eternal perdition, as so as they are capable of it” (Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1*, page 153).
 “If the wills of man are as free to good as to evil, what is it to be ascribed to, that the world of mankind, consisting of so many millions, in so many successive generations, without consultation, all agree to exercise their freedom in favor of evil?” (Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1*, page 169).
 3. Men are not sinners because they choose to sin – they choose to sin because they are sinners. They behave according to the corruption of their heart, thus the will is under bondage to sin.
- B. Fallen man does not possess absolute freedom of the will
1. This does not mean that man lacks all volitional freedom or liberty of agency.
 - a. Man has the power of choice. Men make hundreds of decisions involving the will every day. We choose our own words, we choose our own actions.
 “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” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 331).
 - b. Men are able to make decisions of the intellect. Lost humanity are able to attain to great heights of intellectual understanding. Many scientific discoveries have been attributed to lost human beings.
 “After the apostasy, the understanding of man obeys the same rules of logic as before and possesses the same mathematical and ethical ideas and intuitions. The effect of sin upon the cognitive side of the human soul is to darken, dim, and stupefy, but not to radically change” (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, pages 510-511).
 2. Freedom of the will means that we act voluntarily without compulsion.
 - a. Freedom of the will does not mean that there are no boundaries in what we are able to do.
 - b. There is a difference between freedom of the will and ability. We possess the liberty to act but not the ability.
 3. Morally, man is always affected by his fallen nature. Man always acts consistently with his nature – he can only do what he is able to do.
 - a. This is true throughout the physical realm. Dogs don’t care much for eating straw. Horses don’t savor catfish. Human beings don’t fare well at flying off a cliff.

- b. This is also true in the spiritual realm. Fallen human beings sin by nature. By nature they possess a moral inability or inclination to do good.
Edwards: “Moral inability consists either in the want of inclination; or the strength of a contrary inclination; or the want of sufficient motives in view, to induce and excite the act of the will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary” (*Works of Edwards, Vol. 1, p.11*)
- b. The lost man left to himself and unaided lacks the ability to do that which is necessary to the salvation of the soul. He lacks the power to turn to God in faith.
“Man is not able to apprehend and love spiritual excellence, to seek and do spiritual things, the things of God that pertain to salvation” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, page 248).
1689 Confession, Chapter 9: Of Free Will
“Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”
- c. In addition, the lost man lacks the ability to do good works – i.e. works acceptable to God.
Calvin – “Free will does not enable any man to perform good works, unless he is assisted by grace; indeed, the special grace which the elect alone receive through regeneration” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 1, page 228*).
4. Men consistently seek to satisfy the lusts of the flesh.
- a. Men always do what they want to do and they most consistently choose those things consistent with the fleshly lusts of their sinful nature.
Romans 8:5 – “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh. . .”
- b. Even the regenerate man struggles with fleshly inclinations.
Romans 7:18 – “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. ¹⁹ For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.”
1689 Confession, Chapter 9: Of Free Will
“When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he doth not perfectly, nor only will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.”

- C. The will can be described as the distinction between *Inclination* and *Volition*.
1. Descartes – “Our acts of the will are of two kinds. One are the actions of the soul itself; as when we will to love God. The other kind are the actions of the soul that terminate on the body; as when from the mere will to take a walk, there follows the movement of our limbs, and we go forward” (from *Passions 1.18* as quoted by Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, page 518).
 - a. The first example is inclination, the other is volition. The sinner lacks the inclination to love or serve God because of a bad heart—an evil inclination.
Matthew 7:17 – “Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”
 - b. With regeneration begins a new inclination.
“No volition can be holy if it is the executive of a sinful inclination or sinful if it is the executive of a holy inclination” (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, page 524).
 2. Sometimes a man’s volition will act counter to his inclination
 - a. An alcoholic has the inclination is to drink, yet because of shame or fear of reproach he rejects the drink. By his volition he acts contrary to his inclination. He doesn’t do so out of a love for his Creator but because he loves himself and chooses to reject the drink rather than suffer personal shame – it is a matter of pride.
 - b. A man may be faithful to his church. He doesn’t attend out of a love for God or an inclination to follow Him. He chooses to attend volitionally because of social acceptance, an appeasement of conscience, because of opportunities of leadership, etc. He chooses to do these outward acts, not to glorify his Creator but to satisfy his own selfish desires.
 - c. A philanthropist gives millions to charities. His moral inclination is to spend it on himself, yet he chooses to give, not out of a love for God but out of the desire to be seen as a generous man.
 - d. In all of these examples the ultimate inclination is a selfish one—a desire to satisfy ones self. Actions can sometimes appear to be moral inclinations towards holiness when they are actually only inclinations to satisfy selfish desires.

III. Answer to the claim that God’s commands assume the *ability* to obey

- A. Some claim that it would be unjust for God to make demands upon human beings that they lack the ability to fulfil the demands.
1. Pelagius believed that if God commands us to do something then we must have the ability to do it. “Ought” implies “Can.”
 2. They assert that if man *cannot* repent, it is foolish to command him to repent. If a man *cannot* do good, it is unjust to punish him for doing evil. If God commands men to repent then they must be able to repent.
- B. Our problem is moral.
1. We do not obey God, not because we cannot obey him, but because we *will* not obey God. We make a free choice *not* to follow Him.
Romans 1:32 – “Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.”

- 2 The chief of all of God’s commands is for us to love Him. We do not love Him because we *will* not love Him. This is because we have a corrupt heart—a corrupt will.
- C. As lost human beings, we possess the liberty to obey but not the ability.
1. “Free agency is the power to decide according to our character; ability is the power to change our character by our volition” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 293).
 2. Because we have the liberty we are held accountable for our actions.

IV. The will of man is always subject to the will of God.

- A. God has foreordained all future events from the beginning of the world
- Ephesians 1:11** – “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:”
1. All events flow from the certainty of God’s decree
In response to Erasmus’ claims of free will, Luther wrote, “. . . how much less are we right to call men or angels free; for they live under the complete mastery of God and cannot continue by their own strength for a moment” (Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, page 137).
 2. This is of the essence of foreknowledge. If human actions were not known in advance then when God learned about them He would acquire knowledge He previously did not have. This would be impossible for God is omniscient. If human actions are known by God in advance then it follows that those actions must be immutably fixed – a certainty. But God is not merely a spectator. All of human actions have been determined by God before the world began.
 3. Men have free agency yet God determines every act of man.
“Scripture nowhere says that we are ‘free’ in the sense of being outside of God’s control or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 331)
Proverbs 21:1 – “The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”
Proverbs 16:9 – “A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”
 4. We can surely see this with the crucifixion of Christ.
 - a. Judas Iscariot acted on his own volition. He betrayed Jesus because he wanted to betray Jesus.
 - b. The Pharisees pressed for the death of Jesus because they wanted Him out of the way.
 - c. Pilate was acting of his own volition. He wanted to appease the multitudes so he chose not to intervene. He tried to wash his hands of his accountability, yet still stands condemned.
 - d. All of the participants of the crucifixion acted according to their own desires—according to their own will. Yet, each was acting according to God’s foreordained plan. The crucifixion was no accident or unfortunate turn of events. God determined precisely all that occurred.
Acts 4:27-28 – “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate,

with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, ²⁸ For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.”

e. Even Peter’s actions were foreordained

Mark 14:30 – “Verily I say unto thee, That this day, *even* in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice.”

- B. That God is involved in the thoughts and actions of men is essential in salvation
1. If God is not active in the thoughts and wills of men there can be no conviction of sin, no repentance, and no faith. There will be no progress in sanctification. There will be no guarantee of perseverance until that Great Day. Salvation would be impossible if God did not move upon the minds and hearts of men whereby their wills are turned to Him.
Psalms 110:3 – “Thy people *shall be* willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.”
 2. “If God cannot effectually control the acts of free agents there can be no prophecy, no prayer, no thanksgiving, no promises, no security of salvation, no certainty whether in the end god or Satan will be triumphant, whether heaven or hell is to be the consummation” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 301).
 3. God’s involvement in the thoughts of men was necessary for the inspiration of Scripture. God’s human agents used their own vocabulary while at the same time penning precisely the Word’s God determined they would use.
- C. That God is involved in the thoughts and actions of men in no ways absolves men of accountability.
1. This has often been a place of dispute. If God has determined all things how can we be held accountable for our actions.
Paul answered this question:
Romans 9:19 – “You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?”
 2. The 1689 Confession affirms that God does not compel the actions of men. Men act with full liberty of choice.
1689 Confession, Chapter 3: Of God’s Decree
“God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature. . .”
 3. Divine Decree does not mean God compels a man to act against his will.
 4. We sin because our wicked heart is inclined to sin. God commands obedience and holds us accountable for our sinful actions
 5. God has ordained all things, but men are accountable for their own sinful actions.
Luke 22:22 – “And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!”

- D. That God is involved in the thoughts and actions of men in no way impugns His holy character nor makes Him the author of sin.
1. That God has ordained the actions of men does not mean that God forces men to act against their wills.
1689 Confession, Chapter 9: Of Free Will
1. God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.
 2. God controls the actions of men by the outward workings of Providence and the inward workings of grace and thereby changes the minds of men.
 3. Men act according to their free volition but always consistent with their nature. God is able to use our sinful inclinations to accomplish His righteous ends. Our sin is our own, however. God is not the Author of sin. “Moreover, it should be borne in mind that God has not decreed to *effectuate by His own direct action* whatsoever must come to pass. The divine decree only brings certainty into the events, but does not imply that God will actively effectuate them, so that the question really resolves itself into this, whether previous certainty is consistent with free agency. Now experience teaches us that we can be reasonably certain as to the course a man of character will pursue under certain circumstances, without infringing in the least upon his freedom” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, page 106).

V. Errors regarding free will

- A. Pelagianism denies original sin
1. Adam’s sin serves by way of example (in contrast to Jesus who set a good example) but has no direct affect upon others
“Pelagius, and his immediate followers, Coelestius and Julian, taught openly and explicitly that man’s moral character had received no injury from the fall, and that men were born now with as much ability to do the will of God, and to discharge all the obligations incumbent upon them, as Adam; and in consequence, they denied the necessity of divine grace, or of any special agency or influence upon men. . .” (Cunningham, *Historical Theology, Volume 2*, page 329).
 2. Since the human being is untainted by sin he has a full freedom of the will. Man is capable of choosing good or evil without Divine aid.
 3. Since man is born without sin it is possible for him continue in this sinlessness (through an act of the will) and thus have no need of salvation.
 4. Pelagius was opposed by Augustine and the Pelagian heresy was condemned in several councils and finally condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431.
- B. Arminianism has its roots in Pelagianism
1. Man receives from Adam a corrupt nature but does not receive his guilt
 2. Our nature is corrupted physically and intellectually, but not volitionally thus man is not totally depraved.
“It is a common, and no an inaccurate, impression, that a leading and an essential feature of the Arminian scheme of theology is a denial of man’s total depravity, and an assertion of his natural power or ability to do

something, more or less, that is spiritually good, and that will contribute to effect his deliverance from the guilt and power of sin, and his eternal welfare” (Cunningham, *Historical Theology, Volume 1*, page 387).

3. Man has the ability to seek God and turn from his sin. God’s grace can be resisted by those unwilling to believe.
 4. Arminians believe that due to original sin man is incapable by his natural strength to believe, but God’s *prevenient grace* is granted to all human beings whereby they are then enabled to engage their free will either to choose or reject salvation.
 - a. The will of man is thus in a neutral position in which it will either choose or reject the Gospel.
 - b. The determining factor for salvation thus becomes the will of man.
- C. Open Theism binds knowledge to the will of man
1. God does not know the future since we have not yet made our decisions
 2. God does not ordain human choice but works in cooperation with His creation to bring about His will

VI. A proper understanding of the human will is essential in evangelism.

- A. The Gospel is presented to the mind and an appeal is made to the will
1. Faith and repentance are both acts of the will
 - a. Repentance demands choosing good over evil
 - b. Salvation demands making a decision – we must not shy away from this reality just because some abuse it with methodology such as the invitation system.
 - c. Jesus cried out, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (**John 7:37**). The thirsty man will seek to have his thirst satisfied – an act of the will.
 2. Gospel preaching must powerfully admonish men to turn from their sin and trust Christ.
 - a. Men must be confronted with their responsibility
 - b. The Gospel must be preached in command mode
- B. Although the Gospel is presented to the mind and will it is not dependent upon the act of the human will
1. We know that unless the Holy Spirit moves upon the mind and heart to cause the sinner to understand these things the sinner will never embrace Christ.
 2. The sinner has volitional freedom, he does not have the ability to turn from his sin and trust Christ. Salvation demands a transformation of the heart.
 3. We must remember our dependence upon God in the salvation of souls. Lazarus could not come forth until Jesus enabled him to do so.