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FREE WILL



The Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 9: Of Free Will

Sec. 1. God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.

Sec. 2. Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Sec. 3. 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.

Sec. 4. 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

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spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.

Sec. 5. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only.



We come now in our study of the confession to a separate treatment of the subject of free will. Every time Reformed theology is presented in open discussion, it seems inevitable that the subject of free will arises. For many, the idea of God's sovereignty is antithetical to one of the most precious and axiomatic principles of human understanding—the idea of free will.

When we examine the question of free will from the viewpoint of biblical theology, we are pressured by the massive impact that secular views of free will have had on our thinking. If there is any place where secular humanism has undermined a biblical view of human nature, it's with respect to the idea of free will. The prevailing view of free will in the secular culture is that human beings are able to make choices without being encumbered by sin. On this view, our wills have no predisposition either toward evil or toward righteousness, but remain in a neutral state from birth.

This view of human freedom is on a collision course with the biblical doctrine of the fall, which speaks of the radical corruption of our human condition. The whole person is caught up in the fall, including the mind, the soul, the will, and the body. The ravages of sin have affected us profoundly and deeply. Nonetheless, we are still able to think. Similarly, although the will has been tragically marred by the fall, we have not lost our ability to make moral choices. We still have wills, which are able to make choices without being coerced by God. The

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fact remains, however, that when the Bible speaks of our condition, it speaks of bondage or slavery to sin, which the confession addresses.

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Here the confession speaks of **natural liberty**, a liberty that is part and parcel of our nature as human beings. We were given a will that is not coerced or forced to make any decision **by any absolute necessity of nature**. Here the confession distances itself from every form of moral determinism, which would subject human choices to fixed, mechanical, or physical forces, or even to the arbitrary influences of fate. In a word, Reformed theology categorically rejects fatalism and any determinism based upon the forces of nature. We are not coerced or forced by natural causes, or by our environment, either to do good or to do evil.

Section 2, however, goes on to make an important distinction between the state of the human will as it was created and its state after the fall.

Sec. 2. Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Here the confession asserts and affirms that in creation the human will had freedom and power to do what is good, to do what is well pleasing to God. Before the fall, human beings had the moral capacity or the moral ability to choose righteousness and obedience before God. But this endowment from God was mutable. Man was capable of change and falling away from his original disposition.

Saint Augustine stated that in creation we had both the *posse peccare* (the ability to sin) and the *posse non peccare* (the ability not to sin). After the fall, we continued to have the ability to sin, the *posse*

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peccare, but we lost the power or ability not to sin, the *posse non peccare*. We were left in what Augustine called a state of moral inability.

This truth can be illustrated from a rational perspective and from an analytical perspective. According to Jonathan Edwards, free will is our freedom to choose what we want—our ability to choose according to our own inclinations. Not only are we able to choose according to our strongest inclinations, but, in a very real sense, we must choose according to our strongest inclination in order to be free. This is the essence of freedom: to be able to choose what you want, rather than what somebody else wants for you. We also recognize that we are creatures who have multitudes of conflicting desires. We are torn in more than one direction, and the intensity with which we want things changes and vacillates.

If we desired only to obey God, we would never sin. As Christians, we have some desire in our heart to please Christ. Unfortunately, we still desire to please ourselves, to gratify our own lusts, and to do what we want to do, rather than what Christ wants us to do. Now we are confronted with a choice between obeying Christ and disobeying Christ. If our desire to please Christ is greater than our desire to please ourselves at this point, what will we do? Whenever our desire for obedience is greater than our desire for sin, we will obey Christ. However, whenever our desire for sin exceeds our desire to please God, we will sin. In a real sense, we are slaves to our own freedom. We not only can be free, but must be free. We are volitional creatures, and to be volitional means that we choose according to our will. We make choices according to what seems best or most pleasing to us at the moment of decision.

What does that say for our sanctification? Is there any way that we can fool ourselves? This is important for our realization of how we function as sinners, having conflicting desires in our soul. We want to grow in grace, we want to please God, we want to obey Christ, and yet we still have desires for self-fulfillment that are sinful. We are told in the New Testament to feed the new man and

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starve the old man. Put the old man to death and seek the renewal of the new man, the strengthening of the inward man.

What can we do to strengthen our sanctification? The level of our desire to obey Christ has to increase, and the level of our desire for the things of this world has to diminish. Because we are always going to follow our strongest inclinations or desires, the only way to grow in grace is to feed and strengthen our positive desires for God and to starve our negative desires.

What are some things that we can do to strengthen the inner man? It certainly helps to spend time in the Word of God. Paul says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). When we read Scripture and hear the Word of God reinforced, we begin to understand that certain behavioral patterns that are acceptable in the culture in which we live are totally unacceptable to God. When we sin, we know that we are sinning, but we trivialize our sin. We say, "I know I am not supposed to do that, but it's not a big deal." As we come under the scrutiny of the Word of God, we begin to see that things that we do not regard as a big deal are indeed very important to God. We get a deeper understanding of righteousness and of evil.

The Scriptures also encourage us to obey God and discourage us from sin. So the Word of God is what we call a *means of grace*. When we spend time in the Bible, something happens to the inward man. Our mind gets changed. We start to think differently, and we approach decisions in a different way, all because our minds are saturated with the truth of God.

Have you read the whole Bible at least once all the way through? I have asked this question all over the world, and the overwhelming majority of professing Christians have never read the whole Bible. We all know that we should read the whole Bible, and we all know that spending time in the Word will have an impact on our souls and on our decisions. Many times we resolve to spend time in Scripture, but we do not, because something else comes up that we want to do more

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than we want to read Scripture. The desire is not compelling enough to cause us to act in a diligent and disciplined manner to feed the new man in Christ on the Word of God.

What can we do about that? What do we do about dieting? When we are really struggling at the table and can't lose weight, even with the best resolve, we go to Weight Watchers, spend money, make a commitment, and enter a group. We become part of a group that is going to root for us every week and cheer when we succeed.

This is not a promotion for Weight Watchers, but in many ways it is an image of the church. We come to church partly to lose the excess baggage that we brought into the kingdom of God with our conversion. We come to church for help in killing the old man. We come to church so that our souls can be nurtured, and so that we can be instructed in the things of God in a way that is going to change our life. It changes our life by strengthening our resolve to do one thing rather than another. If you want to learn the Bible, and you are not doing it on your own, get into a Bible study group. If you want to learn the things of God and you do not have the discipline to start, get into a Sunday school class, not just for one hour a week, but to study and work on assignments for the rest of the week. The whole Christian battle is a battle of the will. It is a battle to overcome a will that by nature is bent in the wrong direction.

I am amazed when I hear people say the will is free, as if our will were indifferent to good or evil, with no inclination to go to the left or the right. I wonder if these people have spent any time in the Christian life or have struggled in the inward man to overcome the appetites, desires, and inclinations that drive our choices all our life. No, the will is not neutral.

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The Reformers believed that the will, although in a fallen state, could still achieve civic virtue or civic righteousness. Fallen man can still obey the traffic lights and so on, but he cannot incline himself to the things of God.

Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (John 6:65). “No one can” means “nobody can.” Remember your third-grade teacher? You raised your hand and asked, “Mrs. So-and-So, can I go to the pencil sharpener and sharpen my pencil?” She replied, “I’m sure that you can, but the question is not whether you *can*, but whether you *may*.” *May* has to do with permission; *can* has to do with ability. “No one can” means that no one is able.

We argue and discuss the doctrine of *sola gratia*, “of grace alone.” Does fallen man have the ability to turn to Christ and to choose him before he is born of the Holy Spirit? Most professing evangelical Christians today believe that faith comes first and then rebirth. This presupposes that the unconverted person has the ability to incline himself, or to choose to come, to Jesus Christ. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards said that no one is able to do that. I don’t care if you disagree with them, but you should not stand in defiance of the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you continue to think that in your fallen state you have the moral ability to come to Christ apart from the grace of God, you do so at your own peril. In John 6:65, our Lord clearly says that no one is able to come to him unless the ability to do so is given to him by the Father.

Fortunately for us, Jesus puts the word “unless” in that statement. That word points to what we call a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*. A necessary condition has to be met before a desired result can occur. The desired result is coming to Christ; the necessary condition is that the ability to come must be given to the person by the Father. Only God gives that ability. Nobody can come to Christ on his own; we are just not able to, unless God gives us the moral ability to do it.

Now, even Arminius agreed with that. How could he not, when he read the same Bible that we do? God, he agreed, has to do something

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to make it possible for a person to come to Christ. In a narrow sense, even Arminius would say that the Spirit must work in a person before he can choose Christ. However, his understanding of what the Holy Spirit does here differs radically from the Augustinian tradition. Arminius says that God makes people able. However, in his view, even when God gives you the grace to come to Christ, you still have the ability to refuse that grace. Some people accept that grace, that assistance to come to Christ; other people reject the help. Those who cooperate with the offer of grace are saved, and those who refuse the offer perish. So, in the final analysis, the reason why one person perishes and another person is saved is that one person cooperates with grace and is saved, while another person refuses to cooperate with grace and perishes. Once again, it all comes down to a person's choice. One person makes the righteous choice, and another makes the unrighteous choice.

The problem with this kind of thinking is that in the end you must say that you are saved, while your neighbor isn't, because you are more righteous. You have done the right thing to get saved, while your neighbor has not—and now you have something to boast about. But the Bible says that you may not boast before God, because it is God and God alone who enabled you to choose Christ. He actually worked faith in your heart, not only giving you release from prison, but giving you the positive inclination by which you then willingly came to Christ. Since the fall, the human will has been in bondage to sin, until liberated by God. He gives you what you lack, a positive desire for Christ.

The next chapter of the confession is on effectual calling. When the Holy Spirit gives you the grace of regeneration, its purpose is to bring you to Christ. God does not just give you the ability to come to Christ (John 6:65), but also draws you to him: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (6:44). Many evangelicals look at that text and say, “That means they will never come on their own initiative unless they are enticed or lured or encouraged or wooed. The Holy Spirit comes and woos people, encouraging them

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and drawing them like the flame draws the moth. But all of that enticing and drawing is merely the external influence of the Holy Spirit. He will not invade your soul or shape your will. He will just try to encourage you, saying, ‘Come on now; it’s a beautiful thing. Come to Christ.’ Some will be persuaded, and some will not.”

I was asked to debate this question at an Arminian school several years ago with the head of the New Testament department. When he quoted John 6:44, I mentioned to him that the Greek verb translated “draw” in this verse is the same verb that is used in the book of Acts when some men in Philippi dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities for casting an evil spirit out of their slave girl (Acts 16:19). Those men did not try to entice them to come before the magistrates; they compelled them to come. The professor interrupted: “But there are references in the Greek poet Euripides (or somebody) where this same verb refers to drawing water out of a well.” Smiling to the audience, he asked, “And Dr. Sproul, does anybody *compel* water to come out of a well?” Everybody laughed, and I responded, “How do you get water from a well? Do you stand at the top of the well and call, ‘Here, water, water, water’? Or is that water dead in the pit and absolutely inert unless you lower the bucket into the water and you drag it up to the surface?”

Jesus’ point in John 6:44 is that people cannot come to him unless they are compelled to come by the Father—unless God drags them. If you are in Christ, that is exactly how you came to Christ. The Holy Spirit dragged you there. He did not drag you kicking and screaming against your will, because he had changed your will before you came. Had he not changed the disposition of your heart, had he not put into your heart a desire for Christ, you would still be a stranger and an alien to the kingdom of God, because your will, while free from coercion, is still in bondage to sin. That will that you think is so free is, in fact, a slave imprisoned to yourself. You are your own slaveholder. Your will is enslaved to your dispositions, to your desires, which, the Bible says, are wicked continually, prior to conversion.

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That sounds like determinism. B. F. Skinner, in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, argued that human decisions are the result of materialistic determinism. He claimed that people have no control over their destiny and no real freedom, because their decisions are determined by the physical forces around and within. I am saying that you do have freedom in the sense that you have the capacity to do what you want to do, but that you are also subject to a kind of determinism, which we call self-determination.

Self-determination is virtually synonymous with freedom or liberty. To be self-determined means that you are not forced or coerced to do something against your will; you are able to do what you want to do; you determine your destiny and make your choices, so it is the self that determines the will. But the problem is that the self is fallen and spiritually dead. It gives us desires and inclinations that are sinful. If we accordingly make sinful decisions, they may be made freely (from coercion), but they are still made in bondage to sin. Therefore, the capacity to make our own decisions does not give us the liberty we need.

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Sec. 5. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only.

Before conversion, we are free to sin; after conversion, we are free to sin or to obey God. In heaven, when we are in glory, we are free only to obey. That is what we call royal freedom, the most wonderful freedom, where our choices will only be good. We will have no

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inclination whatsoever to do anything wicked or evil. The humanistic view, that true freedom means that we have an equal ability to go to the left or to the right, to do what is sinful or what is righteous, is a myth. It is not only unbiblical, but irrational. We must rid our minds of that notion and realize that at the heart of this matter is original sin. Prior to our conversion, we are enslaved to wicked impulses. But when the Spirit sets us free from bondage to sin, then we are truly free.