

FREE WILL ?

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(“For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth ;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then ? Is there unrighteousness with God ? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

So then it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.”

Romans 9 verses 11 - 16.

It seems that Romans 9 is missing from many Bibles today !

Calvinism and Arminianism are two mutually opposing theological systems. They are systems in that each has its “five points” of doctrine that comprise an inter-related whole : if one of the points is modified, then the whole system is correspondingly modified. They are mutually-opposing systems in that there is NO point of contact between them. It is quite false, for instance, to think of Calvinism and Arminianism as basically identical, except that Calvinism has “a bit of election thrown in.” All attempts at a mediating system, e.g. :”three or four-point” Calvinism end in failure. We must also define what we mean by each of our five points. A Canadian believer testified recently in a Christian magazine: :

“For forty years I thought I was a Calvinist because I believed in the ‘security of the believer’, but not until about ten years ago did the Lord open my spiritual eyes to behold the wonder of His Sovereign Grace.”

Consequently, if one point in either system is shown either to be true or false, then the whole system is shown to be true or false. For example, if it can be demonstrated that men

in some sense possess free will in the state of sin, then it follows that election to eternal life is in some sense conditional, and thus not truly sovereign. Conversely, if the Bible teaches that the will of fallen man is not free, then it logically follows that election is unconditional. Much of the argument has respect to these two points : the will of the sinner and the choice of God.

It is important that we turn to Holy Scripture for our teaching in the first place, and not to men. It is very easy to say, “such and such was a Calvinist, and yet he wrote.....” If we want to know what constitutes Calvinism we may certainly turn to the works of the Genevan Reformer, but we may also consult the historic Confessions of the Reformed Church that sprang out of his labours, for example, the Belgic Confession, Westminster Confession, Savoy Declaration, also the Baptist Confession of 1689. For these are all “calvinistic” Confessions, “calvinism” being the nick - name given to the doctrinal system recovered by Calvin and encapsulated in his “Institutes”.

Calvinism affirms wholeheartedly both God’s Sovereignty (in creation, providence and redemption) and man’s responsibility. It emphatically denies man’s ability to perform what remains his responsibility in the state of sin. This inability is solely the result of sin. For example, Scripture says that God “now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (**Acts 17 : 30**), and thus it is the duty or responsibility of every individual under the gospel to turn to Christ. But Scripture also teaches in many places that men of themselves have no ability to turn to the Saviour, e.g. : “No man can come unto me” (**John 6 : 44**). And it states that repentance, like faith, is the gift of God (**Acts 5 : 31; 11 : 18; 2 Tim. 2 : 25**). Arminianism by contrast affirms man’s spiritual ability as a sinner, and so ends by denying God’s sovereignty in salvation.

Calvinism asserts that fallen man is a free agent, that he has “psychological” free will (i.e. he is unaware of being coerced or forced from without in his willing) :but that he does not have spiritual or moral free will. Luther’s most important work was entitled “The Bondage of the Will”. The truth is that sin has totally corrupted all the faculties of man - the understanding, the affections, and the will. That is why we speak of man as being totally depraved - sin has affected his whole personality, the will not excepted. And sin has totally corrupted every part : **GENESIS 6 : 5** is a devastating judgment on the whole human race; “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” The heart is now evil, extensively, intensively, and protensively. It is simply impossible to find room for any “goodness” in such a heart !

Thus sin has not just had a partial effect upon man’s will, it has completely corrupted

it - man has “wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation” (WESTMINSTER CONFESSIOIN of FAITH [hereafter WCF], IX, para. III). See **Romans 5 : 6; 8: 7; and John 15 : 5.**

The will of man is not a “man within the man”, but acts in accordance with the nature of man, i.e., the state of his heart.....

“Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things ? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things”(**Matt. 12 : 33-35**).

So the will, although endowed by God with a natural liberty as an essential property, that it cannot be compelled by any created external power, yet is not independent of but rather controlled by the nature of the person exercising it. Thus the will of God must always be good because His nature is truly good (**Matt. 19: 17; Rom. 12 : 2**).

We may consider man Scripturally in a *fourfold* state :

1.) The State of Creation or Innocence.

Man had free will to do that which was good, but he was not bound to this as of necessity. He had it mutably, or changeably, such that he might also choose evil. (**Ecc. 7 : 29; Gen.2 : 16, 17; 3 : 6**). Thus : Adam and Eve.

2.) The State of Degeneration or Sin.

Man has become a slave to sin: His nature is wholly averse to that which is good, and necessitated to that which is evil. His will is in accordance with his corrupt heart. (**Gen. 6 : 5; Rom.3 : 10-12**). Thus, all men since the Fall, but Jesus Christ excepted.

3.) The State of Regeneration or Grace.

By the grace of God man is freed from the dominion of sin, and from the love of wickedness, yet because of inbred corruption which remains, he does not perfectly or only

will that which is good, but also that which is evil. (**John 8 : 34-36; Rom. 6 : 14; Gal. 5 : 17**). Thus, all men who are born again and converted to Christ.

4.) **The State of Glorification or Perfection**

Man is perfected in his nature and his will is made perfectly and unchangeably free to do good alone.(**Heb. 12 : 23; 1 John 3 : 2; Jude 24**). Thus, all men who are born again and converted to Christ, at their death or at Christ's return.

In 1.) man is **FREE**;

In 2.) man is **A SLAVE**;

In 3.) man is **SET FREE**;

In 4.) man has **PERFECT LIBERTY**.

It may be seen that *only Adam and Eve* out of the whole human race have experienced all four states (for we have good reason to believe that they were blessed with salvation (**Gen. 1 : 28; 3:15, 21; 4 : 1**). Christians experience states 2.), 3.), and 4.). The rest of mankind remain in state 2.) for the whole of their miserable existence.

The controversy then concerns state 2.) - the STATE OF SIN. Arminians say that in this state sinners even yet have free will to choose good. We say that they are free only to choose evil. This is crucial because to choose Christ is most certainly to choose good - the highest good.

We now look at arguments which demonstrate that fallen men possess no free will to choose that which is good :

A. The nature of the Fall itself.

Adam when placed in the garden of Eden received a specific command from God in **Gen. 2 : 16, 17**:

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat : But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it : for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” .

The day that Adam ate the forbidden fruit he died spiritually. The delightful fellow-

ship he had enjoyed with God was replaced by a carnal fear (**Gen. 3 : 8-10**). Adam acted as head of the human race, and his original sin is reckoned to all his posterity (**Rom. 5 : 12**) : therefore all men come into this world “dead in trespasses and sins” (**Eph. 2 : 1**), “alienated from the life of God” (**Eph. 4 : 18**). The will of man is therefore “dead” and “alienated from” God, and is in no condition to choose Christ.

B. Terms used to describe salvation in Christ.

i). a “**creating**” - “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” (**2 Cor. 5 : 17**).

ii). a “**begetting**” - “Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth” (**James 1 : 18**).

iii). a “**quicken**ing” - “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (**Eph. 2 : 1**).

iv). a “**resurrect**ing” - “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God : and they that hear shall live” (**John 2 : 25**); “And hath raised us up together” (**Eph. 2 : 6**).

v) a “**birth**” - “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (**John 3 : 3**).

All these speak of the sovereign bestowal of spiritual life by God; it is simply impossible for that which is in itself dead to originate life, or to initiate a movement towards God.

C. Other terms used to describe man’s condition as a consequence of the Fall.

“**blind**” - “because of the blindness of their heart” (**Eph.4 : 18**). Men need to be given spiritual sight;

“To open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light” (**Acts 26 : 18**).

“**deaf**” - :

“Why do ye not understand my speech ? even because ye cannot hear my word” (**John 8 : 43**).

Christ must open our spiritual ears;

“He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye

are not of God” (**John 8 : 47 - cp. 10 : 26-27**).

“bound” - :

“For when ye were the servants (slaves) of sin, ye were free from righteousness” (**Rom.6 : 20**). Such prisoners must be released by another; “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (**John 8 : 36**).

“uninstructable” - :

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (**1 Cor. 2 : 14**). He needs Divine instruction: “It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (**John 6 : 45**).

D. Salvation is said to be “of the Lord”

(**Jonah 2 : 9; Cf. Psalm 3 : 8; Isa. 43 : 11**). The origin and accomplishment of redemption are from God. Man does not contribute to this salvation.

E. Salvation is said to be “by grace”.

(**Eph. 2 : 8-9; 2 Tim. 1 : 9**):

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (**Eph. 2 : 8**).

Here we are told that faith, the instrument through which we receive salvation, is itself the gift of God. **Heb. 12 : 2** speaks of “Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (This may refer primarily to the content of what we believe, or to the character of “faithfulness”, but the point nevertheless holds good). Faith is the gift of God to His elect, but it is their act.

“for all men have not faith” (**2 Thess. 3: 2**), i.e. not everyone believes in Christ as Lord and Saviour. Why ? Is it because some choose to believe and others equally choose not to ? If that were the case, Paul’s rhetorical challenge to the Corinthians would be redundant: “for who maketh thee to differ from another ?” (literally . “for who distinguisheth thee ?”).....and what hast thou that thou didst not receive ? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it ?” (**1 Cor. 4 : 7**). The Corinthians might reply proudly; “Paul we made ourselves to differ from other sinners, by exercising our free wills where they did not !”

F. So-called “free-will” leads to many absurdities :

- i.)** It makes man the ultimate cause of his own salvation.
- ii.)** It puts God’s grace under the power of man’s will, rather than man’s will under

the power of God's grace.

iii) It robs God of His honour, praise and glory in salvation and gives this to puny, sinful man.

iv.) It makes the will of man the hinge upon which God's decrees, including the decree of election, must turn.

v.) It means that many scriptures must be rewritten, e.g.:

Acts 13 : 48 should read : "and as many as believed were ordained to eternal life."

And **Romans 9 : 16** should read : " So then it is not of God that sheweth mercy, but of him that willeth and of him that runneth". (!).

There are doubtless many scriptures and arguments that may be raised in favour of "free-will", however, they should be seen in the light of the clear teaching of the above, and resolved accordingly.

How then does a sinner find the willingness to turn to Christ ?

"All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; (**Ezek. 36 : 26**), renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good;(**Ezek. 11 :19; Phil. 2 : 13; Deut. 30 : 6; Ezek. 36 : 27.**), and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; (**Eph. 1 : 19; John 6 : 44-45**), yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace."(**Song 1 : 4; Psa. 110 : 3; John 6 : 37; Rom. 6 : 16-18**), Westminster Confession of Faith **X. I.**

The Father is described as "*drawing*" sinners to Christ (**John 6 : 44**). This is more than a moral persuasion, it is a power put forth by God. Drawing is a bringing of something out of its habitual course by an influence from outside, not from any power within. A man may seek to entice or persuade a bird into his net - rather like some preachers with sinners ! - but the desired result is hardly guaranteed, as the bird may equally fly away. But if a power could be operated upon the bird, its behaviour could be controlled, and the intended aim secured. This God indeed does in the phenomenon known as migration: "Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming." (**Jer. 8 : 7**).

God draws His people strongly, yet sweetly, we are naturally haters of God, but the Spirit gives us a renewed nature in regeneration, and influences that nature to good; He

gives the inclination to our wills, yet we come voluntarily - “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (**Psa. 110 : 3**).

As already mentioned, our attitude to the question of man’s condition as a consequence of the Fall, and specifically the condition of his will, must influence our attitude towards the matter of God’s election of sinners to eternal life. We have insisted upon a picture of man as spiritually dead, blind, deaf, bound, and uninstrutable. A dead man cannot raise himself, a blind man cannot give himself sight, a deaf man cannot produce hearing, a bound man cannot set himself free, and an uninstrutable man cannot teach himself. The remedy for all this must lie totally outside such a helpless individual. If a sinner comes to spiritual life, we must say, “God made him alive !” If a sinner does not come to spiritual life, we must say, “God did not make him alive !” We are bound to conclude that God had chosen to save the former, and chosen not to save the latter.

The Bible is *full* of such **unconditional** election :

- God sovereignly called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees, leaving his countrymen to perish in their heathenism. (**Gen. 12 : 1**).

- God unconditionally chose one nation, Israel, as His “peculiar people” out of all the nations: “The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people : But because the Lord loved you...” (**Deut. 7 : 7**).

Sometimes it is objected that election as above was only to earthly service or privileges, **Rom. 9 : 11 - 13** (quoted at the head of this article), which surely serves as a type for God’s dealings with mankind in general, speaks of Divine love being exercised toward Jacob, and Divine hatred toward Esau, and that before they were born. This must have respect to the spiritual and eternal, not the mere earthly. It will not do to say that God simply loved Esau less than Jacob, giving him a dry and barren country, whereas He gave Jacob the Promised Land.

The whole scope of Paul in this chapter is to show that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (**Rom. 9 : 6**), and why this is so. There are children of the promise (spiritual, regenerate) such as Jacob, and children of the flesh (carnal, unregenerate), such as Esau. There are elect and reprobate children even in the line of Abraham. In order to emphasize that election is of grace and not because of any favourable quality in the individual, God completely disregarded the family laws of Israel, and chose to bless with spiritual blessings the younger son in the place of the elder.

Many hold a kind of election today, basing their thinking on **Rom. 8 : 29**: “For whom

he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” The idea is that “foreknew” means that God foresaw who would “accept” Christ when He was offered to them in the gospel, and that God therefore “elected” them to eternal life.

We may raise a number of objections against this view.

i.) God’s foreknowledge is spoken of in connection with people rather than with any action which they may perform: “For whom he did foreknow”, “Moreover whom he did predestinate” (**Rom. 8 : 29-30**). And this “knowledge” is not in the mere intellectual sense, but in the sense of approbation or love : “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (**Amos 3 : 2**); “And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you : depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (**Matt. 7 : 23**). *These verses indicate a discriminating love.*

ii). We are not elected because God foresaw that we would do something : election does not flow from our believing, but believing flows from our election. (**See Acts 13 : 48**).

iii). If it is said that God foresaw our exercising faith in Christ, and so elected us, we want to ask, “Where did our faith come from ?” We have already seen that faith itself is the gift of God. (**see Eph. 2 : 8**).

We conclude that election to salvation is **UNCONDITIONAL**, and *must be*, else, given the total depravity of man in sin, including the bondage of his will, **NO-ONE** could be saved.

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