

Freely-Chosen Faith? Real Gospel and Human Choice

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“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). In this talk I will try to show that God governs everything, even human wills, yet human wills are in one sense free, in another sense bound.

Augustine (A.D. 354–430)

- vs Cicero’s “open theism”
- “[E]ven if a certain order of causes does exist in the mind of God, it does not follow that nothing is left to the free choice of our will. For our wills are themselves included in the order of causes which is certain to God and contained within His foreknowledge. For the wills of men are the causes of the deeds of men.”¹
- “Far be it from us, then, to seek freedom of the will by denying the foreknowledge of Him by Whose aid we are and shall be free.”²
- There is not just a *compatibility* of our wills with God’s will, but a secret way in which God moves our wills so that our wills will what they will, choosing freely.

Martin Luther (A.D. 1483–1546)

- vs Erasmus’s “humanism”
- “Stretch out your right hand!”
- Erasmus, you keep presenting to us a man that nowhere exists after the fall into sin, a man who apparently can do all manner of good that is presented to him. But the Scripture sets before us a man, who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, dead, but who – through the agency of Satan his prince – adds the plague of blindness to his other plagues, and so thinks himself at liberty, happy, unshackled, able, in health, alive. For Satan knows, that, if man were acquainted with his own misery, he would not be able to retain a single individual of the race in his kingdom.³
- Do Luther and Augustine agree or disagree?
- Compare Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, “It is not in the choice of man’s will to believe or not to believe, . . . in the elect the will is prepared by the Lord.”⁴

John Calvin (A.D. 1509–1546)

- God does not merely permit sin, but wills it; he willed the fall into sin
- The function of the will is, “to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee what it disapproves.”⁵
- “In this integrity [before the fall] man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life.”⁶

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 5.9 (pp. 201–202).

² Augustine, *City of God*, 5.10 (p. 205).

³ In part, this is a paraphrase of Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (London: Hamilton, 1823), p. 169.

⁴ Augustine, *Predestination of the Saints*, ch. 10.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.7. Compare 2.2.12a, where understanding and will are distinguished; 2.2.12b–2.12.25 where Calvin examines the faculty of the understanding; and 2.12.26–2.5.19 where he examines the faculty of the will.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.8.

- “Nonetheless, the will remains, with the most eager inclination disposed and hastening to sin. For man, when he gave himself over to this necessity, was not deprived of will, but of soundness of will.”⁷

A novel . . .

- “God is such a gentleman that He will never come into a place unless He’s invited . . . You see, there’s only one key to the door of every heart, and we’re the only ones who possess it. God may be all powerful, but on the other hand, that’s the one thing God *can’t* do – force open your door . . . our obedience to Him makes it possible for Him to do the changes He wants to do.”⁸

The Reformed Confessions

- “Therefore we reject all teaching contrary to this concerning the free will of man, since man *is a slave to sin* (Jn 8:34) and *a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven* (Jn 3:27). For who dares to boast that he of himself can do any good, when Christ says: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him* (Jn 6:44)? Who will glory in his own will, when he understands that *the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God* (Rom 8:7)? Who can speak of his knowledge, since *the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God*” (1 Cor 2:14)? (Belgic Confession, art. 14)
- “In the beginning man . . . was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge . . . ; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy. But . . . through his own free will, he deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections” (Canons of Dort, III/IV.1)
- “Man through the fall did not cease to be man endowed with intellect and will; and sin . . . did not deprive man of his human nature . . . So also this divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as if they were blocks and stones and does not take away the will and its properties. . .” (CD III/IV.16).
- “And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received” (CD III/IV.12).

Seven Conclusions

1. Fallen humans cannot choose any spiritual good.
2. God maintained the natures of his creatures, even in the fall.
3. God alone can uphold a will to be a will that chooses, yet powerfully make it follow his will.
4. Only the regenerate know true freedom of the will.
5. The experience of regeneration is most wonderful, delightful, and powerful.
6. God’s children pray without ceasing for the conversion of sinners and for their own progress in the faith, confessing that God works through means.
7. Every true child looks up to God as the heavenly Father who loves us so much that in spite of our sin he has made it possible for us to love him in return.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.5.

⁸ Michael Phillips and Judith Pella, *Daughter of Grace* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), 177–78.