

Lesson 70: Chapter 9: Paragraphs 1-5: Free Will

Today we recommence our studies in the 1689. You will notice as you look down at the chapter order that we are in chapter 9. This chapter comes in a critical position at the beginning of the confessions exploration of the doctrine of salvation. You might think that the topic of free will would belong to the chapter that dealt with the creation and the fall of man, and we do see it being dealt with in chapter 6. But it must be dealt with here as we deal with the question how is a person to be saved? Before we can look at the benefits of our salvation like justification and adoption, and the ensuing changes of sanctification and good works, we must first look at how salvation is made possible, is it a work of man or a work of God? Historically the two sides of this debate pitted free will against free grace. The teachings of Arminians, Semi-Pelagians; Roman Catholics; Socinians; Anabaptists and others said that man is not completely dead in trespasses and sins, that there is still some native ability in man to either prepare himself for salvation, or perform the spiritual acts of faith and repentance, seeing salvation in part or in whole as man taking hold of God. Over against this are the Reformed confessions which recognize that the fall deeply impacted every part of our humanity and that apart from the sovereign working of God's grace to overcome the effects of sin upon our natures we could not believe.

Let me give a short history of this debate as it spans the ages; and then a quick discussion of the two things the confession does, in paragraph 1 it offers a basic definition of free will; and the rest of the paragraphs explore the will in the four different ways the human will exists in what is called the 'fourfold state of man.'

Historical overview

This famous debate began with a prayer of Augustine 'Give what you command, and command whatever you will,' in his Confessions. The British monk Pelagius objected, because God cannot command us to do something we cannot do, this would be unjust. This sparked a debate. The debate of course had to explore issues like Adam and Eve, the original state of their wills, their sin and how their sin impacted subsequent generations. Are our wills in the same state as theirs, in what way did their sin impact us, was our will impacted, can the child of Adam freely will to do spiritual good, what is the part that God's grace plays, is grace necessary to merely illuminate or illuminate and enable? Pelagius believed that we are all in the same state as Adam and Eve, and the only way Adam's sin impacts us is by being a bad example. We all sin not because we are sinners first, but we become sinners because we sin first. Pelagius out of a good motive to protect our ability to obey and avoid antinomianism rejected much of what we believe in the doctrine of original sin, that Adam's sin had several consequences for us, namely guilt, a corruption of our natures, death, and a cursed world. The human will is able to perfectly obey all of God's commands, and there is no harming of that ability in the fall. Any notion of the bondage of the will was ludicrous to him. As someone has highlighted salvation for Pelagius is a 'human monergism' only humanity does the acts necessary for salvation. How does one get saved? We by our own power obey all the commands of God imitating Christ's good example not Adam's bad example and this is how one is saved. This is not easy so there is lip service to grace as helping us, and there is forgiveness with conditions, Pelagius is credited as saying, "'the inspector of hearts [God] knows concerning the person making a request [of forgiveness], whether he is making it with the sort of mind that means he merits to receive his

request". Augustine defending the biblical view believed that we are sinners by nature, due to the consequences of Adam's sin, that we need the grace of God to help us get saved, and to help us live a holy life. Grace is transforming, necessary and enabling. Augustine's interpretation of the Bible prevailed and Pelagianism was subsequently condemned by various church councils.

This debate famously resurfaced between Erasmus and Luther. Erasmus was a Semi-Pelagian and a synergist believing that even sinful humanity has some ability to spiritual good, and Luther an Augustinian Monk and a monergist who believed that God must intervene due to the impact of sin upon our natures. Here is one summary of the debate: 'Erasmus, a Catholic humanist and respected linguist, argued that the will is free to resist or cooperate with divine grace, even after the fall and affected by original sin. Thus, the will can turn away from the grace of God, and his grace is not irresistible. Luther, on the other hand, argued that man's will could not be free and autonomous in this manner for multiple reasons. First, God foreknows everything, so the will cannot be able to choose autonomously and not based on God's foreknowledge. Second, God wills everything that he knows, so everything that we choose he first wills. Thirdly, apart from Christ, our will is in bondage to sin, and only guilt and corruption are attributed to us. Therefore, a grace that liberates our will and restores in us the capacity to love and obey is necessary for our faith. This grace is not coercive but gently restores in us the ability to love what is truly lovely.'¹ Their views are found in two books, Erasmus who wanted to distance himself from the Reformation wrote a book criticizing Luther, *The Freedom of the Will*; Luther wrote his famous *The Bondage of the Will* in response.

A third round of important debates occurred preparing the way for the 1689, the debates between the Students of Jacob Arminius known as the Remonstrants, who disagreed with the teachings of the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Churches. This culminated in what are called the Synods of Dordt. Here is the nub of the issue, 'The Remonstrants, as they were called, denied that God's grace was given based on God's unconditional election of individuals to salvation. Instead, election was based upon God's foreknowledge of what choice man would freely make, ultimately making regeneration contingent on man's decision. Calvinists, on the other hand, taught that God chose those to whom he would give faith in eternity past, rather than foreseeing who would have faith on their own. Therefore, spiritual regeneration preceded the choice of the will for the Calvinist, while for the Remonstrant, the choice of the will in faith preceded the benefits of salvation.'² As you can see the desire to make predestination depend upon man's choice necessitates that man's will must be free in some way, and so the Arminians rejected the biblical teaching of man's total inability to believe apart from the grace of God. The Reformed Churches published the Canons of Dordt in 1619 once again siding with the Bible against synergistic notions of God's grace.

The 1689 is in full agreement with Augustine; Luther and the Synods of Dordt over against, Pelagius; Erasmus and Arminius.

Confessional overview

Paragraph 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

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/battle-will-part-2-luther-erasmus/>

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/battle-will-part-3-arminianism-synod-dort/>

nature determined to do good or evil.' The first paragraph gives us 3 important points about the bible's teaching on free will. Firstly, we are created by God and God has endowed our humanity with the faculty of will. The faculty of will is an integral part of our humanity, this is part of what makes up the image of God. This faculty of will we will see is not lost, we never become will-less. Secondly, God has endowed the will with natural liberty. Here we come to an important aspect of the Bible's definition of free will, we will in accordance with our natures, we have a liberty in keeping with our nature. We intuit this but it is often forgotten in these discussions. We are not free to deny the reality of our natures. If you are a biological male you cannot deny your maleness and reassign a nature different to your own to yourself. We are not free to live like fish and breathe under water. This is an important aspect which will help us see that when our human nature is dramatically impacted by sin or is glorified, the faculty of will remains, but it will always be dictated to by what we are. We are never free from nature. Some modern definitions of free will work in the abstract and insist that free will implies the ability to act outside of our natures, this is wrong. Even when we fall into sin and become totally depraved we never lose this dynamic of willing in accordance with our nature, but what we will is dramatically impacted by a change in nature. Thirdly, the confession says that having a will from God includes the power of acting according to choice. So whether we view humanity in the garden, after the fall, in salvation or in glorification, we do what we want to do. The confession clarifies that the will is not forced by an external force, it is free from external constraints. And that there is no necessity of nature where good can happen apart from a willing choice, or bad can happen apart from our willingly choosing it. We are not set on auto-pilot to good or evil, but all actions flow from choice.

These are two vital aspects of our biblical definition of free will, that we act in accordance with our natures, and that we act from choice free from external constraint. Here are the proof texts that show this reality, Matt. 17:12, 'But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.'" The text is highlighting that the evil done against Elijah was freely chosen, indicated by the language of doing what they pleased. James 1:14 is referencing those who are trying to blame God for their sins by James highlights that we are tempted by our own hearts and finally choose to sin as we follow our desires not because we were forced by any external trials. Deut. 30:19 is using Joshua's call for Israel to choose whom they will serve as underlining the fact that we make the choice.

The confession now goes through the fourfold state of man. The notion of the fourfold state of man is a longstanding idea in protestant thinking and has its roots in the thought of Augustine. It is a helpful way to think about the successive states that human nature goes through and there are 4 key stages.

Created man: posse peccare-able to sin

Fallen man: non posse non peccare-not able not to sin

Redeemed man: posse peccare et non peccare-able to sin and not to sin

Glorified man: non posse peccare-not able to sin

Thomas Boston in his famous book adds a second dimension to the 4th state because there will be those who will be resurrected to eternal damnation and they will be raised in a sinful body to endure suffering forever, this will be a sinful nature not able not to sin with the added condition of no restraining grace.

Paragraph 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 was unstable, so that he might fall from it.' Adam and Eve were created sinless, and had the full ability to do all the will of God required of them. They were in a covenant of works but were fitted with a sinless nature, many good gifts, God's clear commands, and well understood threats. They were under probation and had yet to enter into God's rest and partake of the tree of life where they would be confirmed in righteousness, hence they were able to sin. The 1689 uses 'unstable' instead of the WCF 'mutable' but means the same thing. According to our criteria of free will, they will from what they are, they will free from external constraint, and all action flows from choice.

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.' Please notice that it does not say that fallen man has lost the ability to will, but to will spiritual good. This is a key distinction. Fallen man can choose who he wants to marry, what car he wants to buy, who to vote for, to do anything that is natural to a fallen image bearer. This includes civil and moral goods like giving to beggars, loving one's family, having pity towards the suffering, all of these capacities are natural to the image of God. They are still resident within us, even after the fall. However, there are spiritual goods like repentance, and faith, and submitting our wills to the God of all things giving Him His due and humbling ourselves before His will as a creature and sinner are no longer natural abilities. We still find those who are unbelievers being religious, but it is often a self-made religion that agrees with their ideas about God and their ideas about salvation. The scriptural evidence in support of this is incontrovertible. Sam Waldron lists 32 proof texts to show this, I will only list a sampling: Rom. 3:10-12, 'as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." These verses are key because Paul uses them to conclude his discussion in Rom. 1-3 where he is proving that all need the righteousness of God by faith, because all are law breakers under the wrath of God. In light of this we can only conclude that there are no sincere seekers after God, no innocent bushmen who are following nature and conscience and finding God on their own apart from special revelation and the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Rom. 8:7, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.' This verse is describing the unbeliever who has not experienced the spiritual birth, they are hostile to God and they will not submit to His law, because they cannot. What was once possible for Adam and Eve, now there is no ability. Note that the unbeliever does not because of a prior condition indicated by a cannot. It is because they cannot due to having their wills and their whole being impacted by sin that they do not. Paul says the same sort of thing in 1 Cor. 2:14, 'The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.' The natural and spiritual are opposed, and only those who are spiritual, taught by the Spirit of God can respond to the gospel. It is not within our natural ability because of sin. It is this inability in regard to spiritual things that necessitates that the Spirit draws us to Christ and enables our faith and repentance, John 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.'

Paragraph 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 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.' Where the sinner was unable to do any spiritual good, because of the monergistic and sovereign grace of God, through a work of regeneration, they are brought into a state of grace. This results in a freedom from some of the effects of sin. Where we were unable and unwilling to do the spiritual good we are now fitted by being given a heart of flesh in the place of a heart of stone to do spiritual goods like faith, repentance, and pursuing holiness. You will notice that this paragraph recognises regeneration and a new ability to obey; but it denies perfectionism recognising the imperfect doing of good and the continuing presence of sin. We are saved by Jesus righteousness credited to us, not how good we are now that we are saved.

Paragraph 5. 'This will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone in the state of glory only.' And here we come to the final state of man, glorified man, and where we were sinless but able to sin in Adam, here we will be sinless and unable to sin. We will be perfected in glory. And in case anyone worries over whether we have free will or not we must remember that God who cannot sin, who truly has a free will, defines the image of God in which we are made. An equal opportunity to good or evil, or to deny our natures is not freedom but a violation of God defined reality. We will be free in an analogous way to God's freedom.

We can see that the confessions teaching on the will is biblical as it defines the freedom of the will as a freedom in acting according to its nature, and a freedom from external constraint. It is also sensitive to the 4fold state of the will. All of this is preparation for how the doctrine of salvation is worked out by God and provides the logic for the following chapters. You will notice that effectual call is next because of this reality.