

# Is One's Will Free or Not?

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The questions regarding freedom of the will have been debated both in and out of the Church for centuries. That issue has produced great divisions between members of God's household of faith ever since the controversy first arose between Pelagius and Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. It became the cornerstone of debate at the 17<sup>th</sup> Century synod of Dort when Jacob Arminias was chastised for his strong Pelagian convictions and out of which came the famous, or infamous (depending on one's theological position) "Five Points of Calvinism." The eponym is interesting in that Calvin had died in 1564. The most lasting effect of this Arminian doctrine was propagated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century by John Wesley whose theological teachings concerning freedom of the will, the lack of assurance of salvation, God's limited sovereignty in the salvation of sinners and second works of grace (i.e. the baptism of the Holy Spirit and utter, instant sanctification) have become known in Christian circles as Wesleyan-Arminianism. Ever since that time these doctrinal differences have spurred a perpetual debate and argumentative atmosphere between Baptists and Pentecostal, Methodists and Presbyterians, Orthodox-Reformed and Liberal Protestants, Lutherans and Roman Catholics, etc; the deliberations too often producing more heat than light. This essay will attempt to hopefully shed some light on this most divisive and poorly understood question.

## Freedom versus Ability

Freedom of the will means that one is able to do whatever one perceives is in the best interest of one's self at any given moment. One thus will always logically choose that which one deems best, or that which seems to be in one's best interest. Of course that "best", self interest choice will be made only if one happens to be in his or her right state of mind; that is sane. Ability, on the other hand has to do with one's physical, intellectual or moral capacity to accomplish what one desires. For example, one might wish to fly and

soar like an eagle, however, being human that is utterly impossible. One might desire to play golf like Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods, but lacking the physical ability that is also an impossibility. One might wish to master differential calculus yet lack the IQ to do so. Likewise, before being born again, or spiritually regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, a person does not have the moral ability to know God, understand His Word or carry out His will. Paul clearly taught us this principle of the lack of moral ability in the unregenerate soul when he wrote, *The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he **cannot** understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* (I Corinthians 2:14, emphasis added.)

## Adam's State

Adam was created with complete freedom of the will. God said he was “free” to eat any of the fruits from any of the trees in the Garden of Eden with one exception. The fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had placed in the middle of the Garden, was strictly “off limits.” Adam had the ability to either sin or not sin; to obey or disobey God in regard to the only commandment that he had been given by his Creator. Unfortunately he chose the former and sinned.

As a result of Adam's sin all of his posterity lost freedom of the will in regard to spiritual matters. However all humans still retain the capacity to choose what they feel is best suited to their interests in a given moment of time, but Scripture teaches that the “interest” is self-centered and does not include God or His will. The Bible teaches that prior to the Flood in the time of Noah *“The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that **every inclination** of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”* (Genesis 6:5, emphasis added) Even the Flood had no effect on that evil inclination, for when only eight persons remained to replenish Earth's population, one reads of God saying, . . . *Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though **every inclination** of his heart is evil from his childhood.* . . . (Genesis 8: 21, emphasis added.) The Flood had changed everything on earth but mankind's proclivity toward evil. It must

be obvious that an inclination toward evil will not permit the turning of a person's heart toward God; for He is good, righteous, merciful, loving, kind and holy; the very antithesis of evil.

## The Will

The soul is the seat of one's intellect, emotion and personality: More importantly it is also the seat of one's will. 17<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Jonathan Edwards said, "The will is the mind choosing." He further taught that a person's choices always depend on one's affections or inclinations. In an unregenerate person one's affections are always ego centric or selfish, rather than God centered. That is, one chooses what one deems best for one's self at a given moment in time; that person is inclined to please himself more than God because he loves himself rather than God. One's affections determine one's actions. The Bible makes clear the fact that all of an ungodly person's actions are seen by God as totally self-serving because even though they may appear to others\_ on the surface\_ to be "good" they arise from an improper motive deep down inside. David stressed this point in Psalm 14 where one reads, . . . *there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is **no one who does good**, not even one.* (Psalm 14:1-3, emphasis added)

Before a person is saved by grace that person's will is in bondage; it is a slave to sin. Jesus said, *I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.* (John 8:34) Peter also taught that . . . *a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.* . . . (II Peter 2:19) In each person's unregenerate state, the master is best interest of himself or herself; those affections or inclinations directed toward pleasing one's self. As Pogo might have said regarding this spiritual bondage, "We have met the enemy, the master of our souls, and he is us." It was for this very reason that Jesus taught, . . . *if anyone would come after me he must **deny himself**.* . . . *for who ever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.* (Luke 9:23-24, emphasis added) The losing of one's life means abdicating absolute control over one's will and yielding to the will of God. The denying

implies seeking what God's will is for us and not what is entirely based on self-serving and self-loving inclinations and gratifications. That transformation only comes about through the miraculous work of God as He changes our inclinations and affections from a love of self to a love of God. That is what is called conversion, a tilting of one's inclinations away from sin and self and toward God and His perfect will. If you will picture a teeter totter inclined toward sin, selfishness, a life of destruction and eternal damnation, that represents the inclinations of an unregenerate soul. At the moment of one's new birth God enlightens our sin darkened soul (II Corinthians 4:6), tips the balance toward Christ , causing a recognition of one's sinful state and an act of repentance, thus resulting in God's forgiveness, an immediate and inevitable desire to do God's will and the gift of eternal life. At that point in time, with one's inclinations now leaning toward God and His will one can finally echo the words of David who said, *I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.* (Psalm 40:8)

## Free Indeed

Jesus taught his disciples, *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*(John 8:36) These men weren't bond slaves and so this statement was not an "Emancipation Proclamation" ala Abraham Lincoln. Rather, the freedom of which Jesus spoke was a freedom of the will. He set their wills and our wills free from the bondage of sin and death. David, who was a king and not a slave, whose body was chained only by sin, said this, *O Lord, truly I am your servant; I am your servant the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.* (Psalm 116:16, emphasis added) David's enslaved will and evil inclinations had been altered by God such that he was no longer self-serving or a slave to himself, but rather a God serving believer. In another place one reads of David saying, *In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free.*(Psalm 118:5, emphasis added) Once a person is born again he or she is free to either obey through a "willing spirit" (Psalm 51:12) or to disobey; that which David called "willful sins". Of course, there are always undesirable consequences to the latter, and that is why David pleaded with the Holy Spirit to *Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. . .*(Psalm 19:13) One's proclivity to sin is due to the innate sinful nature that

each believer will continue to possess until heaven becomes home. As Anglican theologian J.I. Packer wrote, within the Christian's soul this sin nature is "dethroned but not destroyed; dying but not dead." It is that reality which the apostle Paul teaches us throughout the seventh chapter of the book of Romans.

Another part of that spiritual freedom which the Christian enjoys involves being morally able to comprehend God's Word. Contrary to the person without the Spirit who "**cannot** understand", the newly re-born Christian immediately has the moral ability to comprehend God's Word and obey God's will. That is why Jesus also taught. . . *If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*(John 8:31-32) The "truth" of which He spoke is the Word of God (John 17:17) Even Christians who have the moral ability to read and understand God's Word will remain in a some degree of bondage if they never take the time, or expend the energy, to learn the truth; the truth that frees. Instead they sometimes listen to people who would impede their freedoms by non-biblical, legalistic and pious demands.

## Form and Freedom

David knew God's Word and that is why he could write, *I walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.*(Psalm 119:45) Too many believers simply listen to those who practice a form of legalism much akin to that which was practiced by, and insisted upon by the Pharisees of old and many cults today. They never bother to seek out the truth in the pages of God's revealed will. James too makes this point when he refers to the Bible . . .as *the perfect law that gives freedom.* . .(James 1:25)

Francis Schaeffer, 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, apologist and prolific author spoke a great deal about form and freedom. In government he likened the one extreme of form to totalitarianism or dictatorships. At the other extreme\_ abject freedom\_one finds anarchy. The end result of each is an inevitable rise of the other. Oppress a people and they rebel. Allow rebellion to run rampant and sooner or latter martial law, a police state, sets in. The "happy medium" is a democracy or a democratic republic, such as our founding fathers

providentially established in the United States Constitution.

I recall a time when as a small boy I saw a dress **form** in my grandmother's sewing room. It was there with her foot powered Singer that she made her own clothes. My grandmother's dress size remained the same from the time she was married at age 17 until she died 75 years later; aside from the four times when she carried her children in her womb. When ever grandma made here dresses she had the **freedom** to use whatever kind of material that pleased her particular fancy at a given moment. She had the **freedom** to embellish it with lace, buttons or bows and the **freedom** to choose from numerous colors. The only thing that she could not change was the **form**, for if she did the dress would not fit.

So it is with religious practice. Too much adherence to piety and non-biblical form and one finds legalism and freedom is lost; too much freedom and one finds "antinomianism"; a disdain for both moral and biblical law. Paul warned believers to not use freedom to indulge their sinful nature. (Galatians 5:13) On the other hand God's Word provides a perfect balance between form and freedom; the perfect "fit", so to speak, for the Christian's particular lifestyle and success. That is why David could say, *I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.* (Psalm 119:32) The "commands" are the form within which the believer is free to "run." As quoted above, in another place David wrote, *I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.* (Psalm 119:45) When some Christians place extraordinary demands and restrictions upon themselves and others, a sense of "freedom" is not one's experience. However, once a believer turns to God's Word, what David called His "precepts," that believer's walk (life style) becomes truly free.

## Conclusion

In answer to the original question posited in the title of this paper, it is thus apparent that one has always been free to do whatever one has the inclination and the ability to do. The only exceptions to that freedom arise when one says that someone is free to do that which

one is incapable of doing; I.e fly like a bird or turn to Christ as Lord and Savior when one's inclinations are congenitally and innately angled acutely away from Him. Jesus Himself said, *No one **can** come to me unless the Father draws him.*" (John 6:44 emphasis added). Later on He repeated the same message when He said, *No one **can** come to me **unless** the Father has enabled him.*(John 6:65) That enabling comes about when the Father changes our inclinations and affords us the moral ability, through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, to see Christ for who He really is. (II Corinthians 4:6)

Adam was created, and we Christians are recreated through the new birth, with the freedom to decide whether or not to obey God. When Adam fell, he and all of his posterity lost the ability to please God; by virtue of their perpetual evil inclinations. The apostle Paul, when he was Saul of Tarsus, could not please God, though he thought he did through the persecution of the church of Christ and zealous religious works. After he was born again, Paul struggled between his desire to please and obey God and the ever present contrary inclination to please himself (Romans 7:19-25). However, being a child of God, and born again, he was still free to please God, for Christ had set him free. In the midst of that spiritual battle within one's soul, one hardly senses freedom. However, when the believer reaches heaven in a glorified state, the freedom to choose the wrong will be lost forever, for in that perfect state every inclination to do that which is contrary to the will of God will have vanished, as ". . .*the old order of things has passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4) That perfect obedience to the will of Almighty God will be **the final and consummate freedom of the will** and it will last eternally.

Soli Deo Gloria

