

Man's Will - Free Yet Bound

by Walter J. Chantry

For more than fifteen hundred years the Church has engaged in a heated debate over the freedom of man's will. The major issues came to general attention in the early fifth century when Augustine and Pelagius did battle on the subject. Through medieval times the nature of man's freedom received a great deal of attention. As they studied the Scriptures, Bernard and Anselm made significant contributions to the doctrine of the human will. In the sixteenth century the freedom or bondage of the will was one of the chief issues dividing Reformers and Roman Catholics. To the mind of Martin Luther, it was *the* key to his dispute with Rome. In the seventeenth century the nature of man's freedom was at the heart of the debate between Arminians and Calvinists. The conflict surfaced again in the eighteenth century during the Great Awakening. Finney's approach to revival in the nineteenth century led the church astray through a misunderstanding of the human will. So too the nature of man's will continues to bring intense disagreement between Reformed and Fundamentalist believers.

A proper understanding of the content of the gospel and the use of GOD-honouring methods in evangelism are dependent on one's grasp of this issue.

Some theologians, both Arminian and Calvinistic, have been quite lucid in their discussions concerning man's will. Others, for example, Jonathan Edwards, have soared into the lofty clouds of philosophy where many a believer faints in the thin air of difficult logic and complex thought. But none is so refreshingly clear as our holy LORD. His instruction on the subject is laced with vivid illustrations to assist our groping minds:

Matthew 12.33-37 says, '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. But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.'

In this passage are three verbal windows through which the light of Christ's lesson passes. Each presents a familiar scene. (1) A tree that has fruit - v. 33. (2) A man who brings treasures out of a chest - v. 35. (3) A stream that overflows from a fountain. This last is rather more obscure than the first two, but it is suggested by our LORD's choice of words in v. 34. The word 'abundance' suggests superfluity or overflow.

I. *Man has a will* and that will has a certain freedom. Our LORD clearly teaches that man has a power of choice. It is important to begin here to disarm opponents of all the foolish accusations that have been brought against the Biblical doctrine of man's will. Every man has the ability to choose his own words, to decide what his actions will be. We have a faculty of self-determination in the sense that we select our own thoughts, words, and deeds. Man is free to choose what he prefers, what he desires.

No one ties fruit on a tree's branches, not even GOD. The tree bears its own fruit. Evil men sin voluntarily; they take evil treasures out of their chests, that is, evil words and deeds. Righteous men are holy by choice; they select good treasures, that is, good words and works. The person who is speaking and acting is completely responsible for his moral behaviour. This power of the will is a vital part of human personality. It always exists in you and me and in all to whom we witness or preach.

GOD never forces men to act against their wills. By workings of outward providence or of inward grace, the LORD may change men's minds, but He will not coerce a human being into thoughts, words or actions. When GOD in His holy wrath sent the Israelites to drive the Canaanites from their land, He also sent hornets against them. There is a children's song which tells the story of these hornets stinging the Canaanites, causing the pagans to flee the land. The chorus then sings:

*GOD never compels us to go, Oh no,
He never compels us to go;
GOD does not compel us to go 'gainst our will,
but He just makes us willing to go.*

When Saul was converted, the LORD did not compel him to edify the church instead of persecuting it. He added a new factor of inward grace in his soul, consequently Paul changed his decision. GOD may renew the will but He never coerces it.

The Westminster Confession is very careful to assert the liberty of the human will. When it speaks of GOD's eternal decrees, we are told, 'GOD from all eternity did . . . freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is GOD the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.' When discussing Free Will, the Confession begins, '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.' Neither by creation nor by subsequent acts of GOD are man's decisions made for him; he is free to choose for himself.

This sort of freedom of the will is essential to responsibility! Having a will is a necessary ingredient to being morally accountable. This is clearly implied in our LORD's words in verses 36 and 37: 'I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.' A man can be condemned only because the words are his own. He was free to bring them out of his treasure chest. They were the overflow of the fountain of his own heart. They are the fruits of his own tree of nature. No one imposed the words on his lips. He chose them. Society, companions, parents cannot be blamed. Idle words are the product of the man's own will.

It is vital for every minister to appreciate the importance of man's will. For in evangelism the will must be addressed. In preaching the gospel we are not only to shine the light of truth upon darkened minds. We are also to appeal to men's perverted wills to choose Christ. Faith is as much an act of the will as it is of the mind. When by the Spirit a mind understands essential

truths, by the same Spirit the will must trust Christ. Repentance is a selecting of good and a refusing of evil. Volition is central to faith and repentance.

Indeed, in conversion, a man must make a decision. We shy away from that term because in modern jargon a 'decision' has come to be identified with an outward expression, such as raising the hand or going forward to the front. While such external acts have nothing to do with forgiveness of sins, the heart must make a decision to be saved.

When Christ stood to cry 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink,' He was soliciting a willing choice of Himself as satisfying drink for the soul. GOD urges all sinners to come just because they *may* come. And it is our duty to inform the sinner that he has a warrant, a right to choose Christ. Beyond this, we must assure him that he has a positive *duty* to embrace the Saviour.

The great guilt of sinners under the gospel is that they will not come. Christ complained in John 5.40: '*Ye will not* come to me that ye might have life.' And to Jerusalem He sobbed, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and *ye would not* !' There is in the unregenerate hearer of the gospel an obstinate, wilful choice not to come. Hence it is that in flaming fire Christ will come to take vengeance on them that *obey not* the gospel [2 Thess 1.8]. In the free exercise of their uncoerced wills men have rejected the Son of GOD.

In speaking of responsibility we have implied nothing regarding ability, as will be seen below. But the point is that men have wills which must be addressed as powerfully and directly as their minds and emotions in gospel preaching. Men must be confronted with their responsibility. 'This is the work of GOD, that ye believe into Him whom He hath sent' [John 6.29].

II. *Man's Will is not a Sovereign Faculty.* Although man does have a will, it is neither independent of all influences nor supreme over all other parts of his personality. This is the next point to be seen in our LORD's teaching.

Pelagians, Roman Catholics, Arminians and Finneyites have all held one common view of the nature of man. They suggest that the will of man is in some way neutral, that it exists in a state of moral suspension. It is their understanding that with equal ease the will can choose good or evil; it can receive or reject Christ. With only degrees of difference and variety of explanation, this is their common opinion. Pelagians have taught that the will is neutral because man's heart is morally neutral. Arminians, on the other hand, acknowledge the human heart to be evil. But they suggest that prevenient grace has hung the will upon a 'sky hook' of neutrality from which it can swing either to receive or to reject the gospel. The common ground, however, is this idea of neutrality. The will, they tell us, is disinterested. Ultimately this controls their entire view of conversion and of sanctification.

It will be noted that our Master taught that the human will is not free from the other faculties of the heart. Far from the will reigning over a man, the will is determined by the man's own character. It is not raised to a position of dominance over the entire man.

Man is like a tree. His heart, not his will alone, is the root. There is no possible way by which the will can choose to produce fruit contrary to the character of the root. If the root is bad, the tree is bound by its very nature to produce evil fruit. Man is like a person standing alongside his treasure chest. There is no possibility of bringing pure gold out of a box filled only with rusty steel. The contents of the heart determine what words and deeds may be brought out. Far from being neutral, the will must reach into the heart for its choices. Every thought, word and deed will partake of the nature of the treasure within. Man is like a stream which cannot rise above its source. If the fountain is polluted, the outflow will be evil. If the source be sweet, the stream will not be bitter and cannot choose to be so.

These three illustrations alike contain the same lesson. What a man is determines what he chooses. Choices of the will always reveal the character of the heart, because the heart determines the choices. Men are not sinners because they choose to sin; they choose to sin because they are sinners. If this were not so, we could never know a tree by its fruits, nor could we judge a man's character by his acts.

In modern times we observe rockets fired so that they escape from the earth's gravity. To accomplish this there is a great complex of electrical wires all woven into one control centre, called in the U.S. 'Mission Control.'

According to the Bible, the heart is the Mission Control of a man's life. The heart is the motivational complex of a man, the basic disposition, the entire bent of character, the moral inclination. The mind, emotions, desires, and will are all wires which we observe; none is independent but all are welded into a common circuit. If mission control is wired for evil, the will cannot make the rockets of life travel on the path of righteousness. The will cannot escape the direction of thoughts, feelings, longings and habits to produce behaviour of an opposite moral quality. 'Will' may be the button which launches the spacecraft. But the launching button does not determine the direction. Direction is dependent upon the complex wiring system.

If the will were able to make decisions contrary to reason, and to the likes and desires of the heart, it would be a monster. You would find yourself in a restaurant ordering all the foods you detest. You would find yourself selecting the company you loathe. But the will is not a monster. It cannot choose without consulting your intelligence, reflecting your feelings, and taking account of your desires. You are free to be yourself. The will cannot transform you into someone else.

This is most profoundly true in the moral and religious realms. When the mind is at war with GOD, denying His truth; when the emotions hate Christ His Son; when the desires wish GOD's law and gospel were exterminated from the earth; the will cannot be in a position to choose Christ. If it were, a man would not be truly free to be himself. Here is the tragic truth about man's will. While free from outward coercion, it is in a state of bondage. It is not in a stated neutrality. It is not a lever with which to move a man's personality from sin to righteousness, from unbelief to faith. This brings us to the third element in Christ's words.

III. *Man's Will is in Bondage to Sin.* The chains which bind a man's will to sin do not result from the actions of the Omnipotent GOD. The binding chains are the man's own depraved faculties. The prison is his own nature.

Our LORD's rhetorical question in verse 34 brings this home with force: 'O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things ?' Our wise LORD is suggesting that a man must speak as he does because of what he is. To sinners He was saying 'You are unable to choose good words because you possess an evil heart. If the tree is bad, if the treasure chest is filled with evil things alone, if the fountain is bitter, your will cannot produce good words [fruits, treasures, overflow].'

At this point there are very many scriptures which attest to a man's bondage to sin by his own nature. To mention but a few - Jeremiah 13.23: 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil;' John 6.44: 'No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him;' Romans 8.7: 'The carnal mind . . . is not subject to the law of GOD, neither indeed can be.'

Pelagian, Arminian and modern Fundamentalist support for the moral and spiritual freedom of the will usually centres on one point. We have admitted that man has a responsible freedom. He is free to be himself. He is held accountable for his words and deeds, especially for his receiving or rejecting Christ. On all of this we agree. They use this toehold to argue that the will is not in bondage to sin but has the power of contrary choice. It can do either good or evil, at least when confronted with the gospel. They insist that the responsibility of the will to choose Christ implies ability of the will to choose Christ.

There is no scriptural defence of this belief, none that I have ever seen in print. The argument is completely philosophical. It runs as follows: If a man cannot do good, it would be unjust to punish him as evil. Furthermore, if a sinner cannot repent, it would be foolish to command all men everywhere to repent. GOD is not foolish and He has commanded repentance. Therefore men are able to repent.

We can only reply that those who applaud the powers of the will with such arguments have not read the Bible very carefully. To maintain their philosophical premises they will have to argue with Christ their LORD. For our Prophet tells us in verses 36 and 37 of our text that in the day of judgment men will be held responsible for their evil words. Yet in verse 34 our Teacher tells the very same men that they cannot speak good words because they are bound by their evil character.

Lazarus in his tomb had no ability to respond when our LORD commanded, 'Come forth.' The man who had been impotent for 38 years had no native ability to obey when Jesus commanded him to take up his bed and walk. Nor have modern sinners ability to believe when we preach. 'This is his commandment, that we believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ' [I John 3.23].

When a sinner refuses to come to Christ, he is guilty because he has made a free choice. It reflects his own state of mind, feeling and attitude toward GOD and His Son. He has acted

voluntarily without coercion. It is his decision. But the poor sinner, dead in trespasses and sins, could not do otherwise, being evil. It is not necessary for him to have a neutral will, or the ability to do both good and evil, for his action to be held accountable before the Judge of all hearts.

Anselm is very helpful on this matter. This medieval theologian points out that if ability to sin is necessary to true liberty or responsibility, then GOD is neither free nor praiseworthy. For the scriptures teach us that GOD cannot lie. Similarly, saints in glory will be neither free nor responsible; for in eternity the LORD's people have confirmed righteousness. Anselm goes on to show the Biblical emphasis of freedom. True liberty rests in the ability to do good whereas he that does sin is the *slave* of sin. If true liberty rests in the ability to do good in GOD's sight, then the highest liberty rests in the inability to do otherwise. This highest freedom belongs to the sons of GOD in glory. How Biblical were Anselm's insights!

No doubt Anselm's thinking has influenced the Westminster Confession's wording in the chapter 'Of Free Will.' For it says that Adam 'had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and wellpleasing to GOD.' Yet this freedom was mutable, subject to change. Man could and did lose his liberty in the sense of being able to do good. This is not the same as a man's liberty to be himself. '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 prepare himself thereto.'

Bernard was very near the truth when he wrote of our condition in Adam: 'The soul, in some strange and evil way, is held under this kind of voluntary, yet sadly free necessity, both bond and free; bond in respect of necessity, free in respect of will: and what is still more strange, and still more miserable, it is guilty because free, and enslaved because guilty, and therefore enslaved because free.'

We have seen that man is free to be himself and therefore is enslaved to sin by a wicked heart. And this brings us to the most profound truth regarding the salvation of souls. It is crucial to our preaching. It is vital to saving impressions in our hearers.

IV. *Man's Will is not his Hope.* Our LORD has taught that the tree must be made good. Man must be renewed in his entire character. He must have a new heart to bring forth good fruit; the will cannot make the tree good; it may only exercise liberty to be what the tree already is. The will cannot reload the treasure chest with a new kind of goods; it may only freely bring forth what is there. The will cannot cleanse the fountainhead; it may overflow only with the waters available in the soul.

Any gospel preaching that relies upon an act of the human will for the conversion of sinners has missed the mark. Any sinner who supposes that his will has the strength to do any good accompanying salvation is greatly deluded and far from the kingdom. We are cast back upon the regenerating work of the Spirit of the living GOD to make the tree good. Unless GOD does something in the sinner, unless GOD creates a clean heart and renews a right spirit within man, there is no hope of a saving change.

While we address the wills of men in gospel preaching, they are wills bound in the grave clothes of an evil heart. But as we speak, and the LORD owns His word, sinners are quickened to life by divine power. His people are made willing in the day of His power [Psa 110.3]. All who are adopted as sons of GOD were 'born not of the will of man, but of GOD.' [John 1. 13] We stand to preach with no power to make the tree good. The 'trees' before us cannot make themselves good, so no gimmicks or policies of men can persuade them to make the change. But our glorious GOD, by inward, secret, transforming power, can make the tree good, the treasures good, the fountain good. Thus all glory be to GOD and to the Lamb! Salvation is of the LORD!

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"...we allow that man has choice and that it is self-determined, so that if he does anything evil, it should be imputed to him and to his own voluntary choosing. We do away with coercion and force, because this contradicts the nature of the will and cannot coexist with it. We deny that choice is free, because through man's innate wickedness it is, of necessity, driven to what is evil and cannot seek anything but evil. And from this it is possible to deduce what a great difference there is between necessity and coercion. For we do not say that man is dragged unwillingly into sinning, but that because his will is corrupt, he is held captive under the yoke of sin; and therefore, of necessity, [he wills] in an evil way. For where there is bondage, there is necessity. But it makes a great difference whether the bondage is voluntary or coerced. We locate the necessity to sin precisely in corruption of the will, from which follows that it is *self*-determined.

John Calvin from *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, pg. 69-70

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