

## Newsletter September 2013

This newsletter contains edited excerpts from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 3.2, *Man's Will in Bondage*. The human will can be defined as the internal cognitive motivation of the mind that determines conscious thought and dictates deliberate action; it is the center of moral intent to prefer that that is good or that that is evil. Although all men and women should go about glorifying God, their Creator, in their own lives here on earth, it is apparent that the natural man (i.e. man as he is physically born into this world) does not do so. Rather, he stubbornly seeks to do only those things that satisfy the dictates of his own will. God's moral law, as He gave it to mankind in the Decalogue, fully demonstrates that man's own thoughts and works fall far short of the perfection of the righteous standard that God requires of him (Ro.3:23). The fall of Adam totally destroyed man's ability to properly respond to his Creator's will as the greater extension of his own will such that he cannot attain this state of righteousness. Nevertheless, the fall did not in any way absolve man of his responsibility to glorify and serve God by responding to his will with perfection of thought and action (cf. Mt.5:48). Although fallen man is fully responsible to God for the sinful acts of disobedience that he so readily commits, he is not naturally responsive to God's call to repentance. He is morally deaf and blind to that call, and he lacks any ability to respond should he recognize it.

Man's spirit, which walked in peaceful communication with his Creator prior to Adam's fall, though still present in him, is now effectively dead. It is both unresponsive to the things of God, and silent with regard to enlightening man's soul with God's Truth. Therefore, fallen man finds himself totally dependent upon the five physical senses of the flesh to guide him. He cannot respond, indeed cannot even see the will of God without insight coming from his spirit, which in the natural man does not radiate light, but rather emanates a cloud of darkness that shrouds his mind. Fallen man therefore cannot perceive any need for the redemption of his soul; as long as his flesh is appeased, his soul appears to be healthy and satisfied. He does not lament his lack of spiritual guidance; but actually rejoices in it. He considers himself a free man who is able to do things his own way to decide his ultimate destiny without hindrance of the absolute restraints of the law of God. Man has become a slave to the needs of his own flesh because of the specter of its impending death, and his will is steadfastly bound by the servitude of self-preservation. As the Apostle Paul made clear about the natural man, there is none that understands the bondage of his fallen nature such that he seeks after God and His righteousness of his own volition (cf. Ro.3:11). Man is helpless, hopeless, and morally depraved, thus even rendering him incapable through his natural thought processes of turning to God to solicit his mercy.

This miserable condition is perpetuated through all generations by what the Apostle Paul referred to as "...the law of sin which resides in our members" (Ro.7:23). Man is by his fallen nature in bondage to that law of sin and has no means to escape its control over him. He cannot will to do good, because while there appears a way that seems right to him the path is strewn about with sin, and at the end of it looms the ever-present specter of eternal death (cf. Pr.14:12; 16:25). Seeing the power that the "law of the flesh" has upon the human mind, the Apostle Paul cried out, "Oh wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death" (Ro.7:24). Our only and sure deliverance from that condition is to be found in the atonement of Jesus Christ offered up in full payment for our sins, not from any of our own efforts to escape it through our own works, which can only come about from a will that is in bondage to sin (cf. Ro.7:25).

Many say that they do not believe they share any responsibility in Adam's sin, and are therefore only responsible for sins that they personally commit. Obviously, if we had no sin nature, we would not ever commit sin, and if we were accountable only for our own sins before God and never committed any personal sin of our own, we must be found righteous in his sight. Nevertheless, as the Apostle Paul pointed out there is none who have not committed sin (Ro.3:23). There is none who can stand before a purely righteous God in his own inherent or self-acquired righteousness (Ro.3:10). Therefore, we find that we are accountable to God not only for our personal sins, but also for our offensive fallen nature from which they come forth. Although we could never have repeated Adam's initial sin of disobedience as a one-time event in the garden, we have fully inherited his sinful inclination, which he attained through the illicit partaking of the forbidden knowledge of evil. Because of Adam's initial sin, the entire human race has the contamination of that sin imputed to it — inasmuch as we all seek to determine for ourselves what is good and what is evil from a will that is in bondage

to sin itself (cf. Is.53:6a). This obstinate effort toward self-determination is what is commonly referred to as “original sin,” which is perpetuated as an overwhelming contaminant throughout all of man’s offspring.

The denial of our defilement by original sin leads us to consider the false philosophy commonly referred to as “free will.” That is, that all men and women have an innate ability to continually commit good deeds while avoiding evil ones through an act of their own natural volition or will. Even God’s redemption of his own would therefore be left fully up to man himself as he exercises the power of his own will to accept the salvation offered in Christ. As we have shown, this is not possible. This false teaching is not to be found anywhere in Scripture; it actually stands directly in opposition to the extensive and express teachings of the Apostle Paul found in his many epistles (cf. Book I, Chapter 3.4). In many churches today, the notion regarding the free will of man has become a central doctrine such that the belief in this non-biblical philosophy has become a litmus test for what is considered to be genuine faith.

The fact of the matter is that only God has freedom of will. God is a supreme ruler having sovereign rank and power and is superior to all other beings (which He created). He is completely independent in his actions, power, and authority. God’s dominion is over all, and his will is paramount. By God’s will, we mean that His thoughts are conscious and deliberate, and that those faculties are fully governed by God’s own internal moral and mental capacity, which is both unchangeable and infinite. Therefore, God has complete freedom in making decisions, and since his will is at the heart of his own pure and holy substance, his choice cannot ever result in evil, but good only. Furthermore, there is not, nor can there be, any external influence upon God’s will and his choices and decisions that emanate from it. As James said, “...God can not be tempted with evil...” (Ja.1:13). Equally significant is the infinite power within God’s will by which He is able to carry out fully any dictates He makes regarding his creation with impunity. So much so, that He has preordained his determinations to come to pass in the time that He created for that very purpose (cf. Book I, Chapter 3.1).

We have just described free will, since for the will to be truly free it must have at its root holiness and righteousness that is completely free of all external influence. Both Scripture and human experience deny that a man’s will stems from a state of innate holiness and righteousness. Moreover, it must have at its disposal the power to carry out all of its dictates with impunity. Surely, we must recognize that man does not have a free will, because his will does not fit this criteria. Initially, man has no control over the conditions of his birth; he may be born male or female into poverty or into riches, to good parents or bad. He cannot alter his inherited traits nor can he avoid the external influence of his surroundings upon his mind and will after he is born. Therefore, the so-called free will of man is a myth. Worse than that, this delusion ascribes to man those attributes that belong to God alone (Ge.3:5). Ultimately, it is only God’s will that must prevail in everything. Therefore, only God truly has free will. The will of fallen man opposes the will of God, the absolute standard, such that man’s will, corrupted as it is by his sin nature, must be opposed by God’s will at every turn, thus rendering it powerless.

The philosophy of free will originates from a false sense of human pride, which contributed directly to Adam’s fall, but it also persists because of the misinterpretation of various Bible verses that place an emphasis upon the necessity for a positive human response to the Gospel in order to be saved. Nevertheless, that necessary response in the redeemed is actually the result of an awakening of the mind by the Holy Spirit as the redeemed experience a spiritual rebirth (cf. Newsletter, November 2012), which is received as a gift from God, not as a consequence of an act of our own volition to bring our own spiritual conversion about. This false philosophy of free will has become a difficult one to oppose in some circles because it would appear to some that if we do not teach free will, none could be convinced to turn to Christ and be saved. It is apparent that many erroneously believe that man contributes in large part to his own faith and redemption, as well as the redemption of others, through a process of human reasoning and persuasion to coerce a fallen man’s will into accepting Christ. However, this teaching carried to its logical conclusion must actually exclude everyone from coming to Christ! This is true because man’s fallen nature and will, which is blinded by sin, obstinately stands in direct opposition to the acceptance of salvation in Christ without hope of alteration.

Much of the continued argument over man’s free will is a matter of semantics. Confusion comes about by falsely equating “will” with “choice.” While man does not have a free will, he does have freedom of choice. That is, within the limits and dictates of his own nature and will, a man is free to choose that which is most

pleasing to him. That freedom of choice extends from choosing what color of socks to wear in the morning to choosing a wife or a life-time career. In addition we all are faced with making thousands of smaller decisions every day, but we can only make our choices from various situations that we encounter. In some instances, our previous decisions may have precipitated the current situations we encounter, but most frequently along the way, we are faced with making a choice in a situation of which we had no influence whatsoever. If we look more closely, we observe that we actually do not in any way control the alternatives that are set before us, but must merely choose from one of them. As Jeremiah confessed before the Lord, “O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Je.10:23). From the exercise of our own will, we cannot create specific paths before us that are purely of our own liking. God is in full control of the paths placed before us and from which we must choose. Through this means, He directs by his perfect foreknowledge and pre-ordination which alternatives we will actually select!

Therefore, we must make a strong distinction between “freedom of will” and “freedom of choice.” Man has full individuality; he is a living soul, which means that he acts as a free agent in the matter of making choices in accord with his own nature. Those choices are made according to the dictates of his own will to be sure, but unfortunately his will upon which those choices are made is not free. The will of fallen man is held in bondage to sin, the influence of the world, and ultimately by Satan who is this world’s present ruler. That bondage adversely influences man’s choices resulting in his complete failure to willingly respond to God’s will. Accordingly, we find that a man cannot come to Christ through a choice made from his wretched nature ruled over by his fallen will. His mind obstinately refuses to accept the truth regarding his sinful nature, and he therefore rejects the Gospel of redemption in Christ as fanciful and completely unnecessary. He cannot forsake his intrinsic lusts for the sinful things of this world and turn to God in search of divine mercy.

Consequently, we find that only divine intervention can save man from the judgment to come and the darkness of eternal Hell that follows. God in his mercy, which is exercised through an amazing act of grace, has provided many with salvation as an unconditional gift. Only those come to believe in the depths of their heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He is the sole source of their salvation. That realization leading to firm substantive belief is not the result of a choice springing out of our own bound will, for our own nature and the world that manipulates it denies Him — our own lusts reject Him. God miraculously and unilaterally brings about a spiritual rebirth (cf. Newsletter November 2012) in his own thus rendering them receptive to the Gospel message. The prophet Jonah wrote, “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jona.2:9). David wrote, “In God is my salvation and my glory...” (Ps.62:7). The Apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore, I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2Ti.2:10).

There can be no question that salvation is God’s completed work alone freely offered to mankind, not the works of men offered to God. When man is born anew, through immersion in the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt.3:11; Lu.3:16), he begins to respond to God’s will rather than continually look to his own for guidance. As that comes about his own will is freed from bondage, and he soon begins to live by faith in God’s eternal purposes, not by his human senses and wits. Man turns about from his course of self-destruction as he repents of his corrupt nature, which has then become abhorrent to him. That response to God’s work in us is what many have erroneously interpreted as the exercise of fallen man’s free will in making a decision to follow Christ. However, that decision was not made from an act of our own will at all; it was made in response to God’s will at work in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit who has opened our eyes to the truth of the Gospel.

The redeemed are called to inherit a glory that they in no way deserve that they may follow Christ as their Lord and Savior and in doing so forever glorify Him with great joy. We are still sinners; we were born sinners, and we have committed sin; nothing can change that fact. We are, rather, now justified to God by the blood of his Son who becoming as one of us took on the form of our flesh, and taking upon Himself our sins, fully satisfied God’s wrath against us in his own body on the cross. Therefore, we cannot praise our “decision” to accept Christ; we cannot even praise our knowledge of God’s will, rather we must only praise God for his mercy and love that has brought us to the realization and acceptance of the redemption we now have in Jesus Christ. To God alone belongs all the glory! © Arthur J. Smith, September 2013