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God's Will, Man's Will, and Free Will

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Introduction

This book contains a brief study on a very important but neglected subject, that is, the subject of free will. We will be considering in what sense the will is free and how important this subject is to the Christian faith.

Does salvation depend upon man's willingness to be saved apart from a prior work of the Holy Spirit? We will see that no one is saved against his will; however, God changes the "willer" so as to make the sinner willing. We will see that

the subject of free will is at the very heart of Christianity and has a profound effect on our message and method of evangelism. We will see that “whosoever will may come.” We will see that the Bible teaches that salvation depends not on man’s willingness but on God’s willingness, God’s grace, and God’s power—and if God did not have power over man’s will the whole world would go to hell. We will see that God does not exclude anyone in His invitations; however, sinners do exclude themselves.

Listen to these lines from Philip P. Bliss’s hymn “Whosoever Will”:

*“Whosoever heareth,” shout, shout the sound!
Spread the blessed tidings all the world around;
Tell the joyful news wherever man is found,
“Whosoever will may come.”*

*Whosoever cometh need not delay,
Now the door is open, enter while you may;
Jesus is the true, the only Living Way:
“Whosoever will may come.”*

*“Whosoever will,” the promise is secure;
“Whosoever will,” forever must endure;
“Whosoever will!” ’tis life forever more;
“Whosoever will may come.”*

*“Whosoever will, whosoever will!”
Send the proclamation over vale and hill
’Tis a loving Father calls the wanderer home:
“Whosoever will may come.”¹*

If you cannot sing this hymn from the heart, then you do not understand the biblical teaching on free will and this book should help you. You will note that the songwriter was very prudent when he wrote “whosoever will” *may* come. He did not say whosoever will *can* come.

One of the first questions that faces us in any serious study of the freedom of the will is whether there is power of the will to obey God and to do that which is spiritually good. This question is intimately connected with the subject of man’s spiritual condition before God. We must begin with how man was created and his state as an unregenerated being. It is also necessary to know what ability man possessed before the fall and what ability man lost because of the fall. The doctrine of free will brings us to a consideration, not of the ability and excellency of man, but to his weakness, misery, and inability to do spiritual good.

No man is saved against his will. No man is pardoned while he hates the thought of forgiveness. No man will have joy in the Lord if he says, “I do not wish to rejoice in the Lord.” Do not think for a moment that the angels will push anyone into the gates of heaven. We are not saved against our will, nor is the will taken away; but the work of the Spirit of God is to change the human will and so make men willing in the day of God’s power (Ps. 110:3), working in them to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil 2:13). “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The Spirit gives life to the soul and reveals God’s truth to it, enabling the soul to see things in a different light from what it ever did before. Then the will cheerfully bows the neck that once was stiff as iron, accepting the yoke it once despised and wearing it gladly.

Man is not acted upon as a machine; he is not polished as a piece of marble; he is not planed as a piece of wood, but his mind is acted upon by the Spirit of Life. Man is made a new creature in Christ Jesus, by the will of God, and his own will is blessedly and sweetly made to yield. If you *are* willing, depend upon it that God made you willing. If you have one spark of love for Him, it is a spark from the fire of His love for you “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). When the crown is brought out and we are asked, “On whose head shall we put it?” every child of God will say, “Crown *Him*; *He* is worthy; *He* has made us to differ.” “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it” (1 Cor 4:7).

The subject of man’s will is not a new topic of debate in the Christian church nor among theologians and philosophers. For hundreds of years there have been serious and ardent debates and discussions on the subject of the freedom of man’s will. As far back as the fifth century, one of our heroes, Augustine, debated Pelagius on this subject. It was also one of the key issues of the Reformation.

Martin Luther began the Reformation with a denial of free will. This was, and is, fundamental to the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. At the outset of the Reformation, Erasmus, a brilliant scholar, wrote a Diatribe called *Discussion on the Freedom of the Will* defending the Roman Catholic doctrine. In response to Erasmus' Diatribe, Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will*. (Every minister should study this classic.)

When most Christians think of the Reformation, the first thing that comes to their minds is *justification by faith alone*—and for good reason: Justification by faith alone was the key doctrine that came out of the Reformation. However, it was not the key issue at the foundation of the Reformation. A careful study of the historical facts will clearly show that the issue of *man's will* was at the heart of the theological difference between Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church.

To emphasize the importance of this subject, it may be profitable to quote J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston from their "Historical and Theological Introduction" to Luther's masterpiece. Packer and Johnston translated *The Bondage of the Will* from German and Latin to English.

The Bondage of the Will is the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen. This was his own opinion. Writing to Capito on July 9th, 1537, with reference to a suggested complete edition of his works, he roundly affirmed that none of them deserved preservation save the little children's Catechism and *The Bondage of the Will*; for only they, in their different departments, were "right" (*justum*). Others have agreed with Luther in giving this treatise pride of place among his theological productions. B. B. Warfield, for instance, endorsing the description of it as "a dialectic and polemic masterpiece," styles it "the embodiment of Luther's reformation conceptions, the nearest thing to a systematic statement of them that he ever made...it is...in a true sense the manifesto of the Reformation." And Professor Rupp quotes with approval the description of the book as "the finest and most powerful *Soli Deo Gloria* to be sung in the whole period of the Reformation." In its fertility of thought, its vigor of language, its profound theological grasp, its sustained strength of argument and the grand sweep of its exposition, it stands unsurpassed among Luther's writings. It is the worthiest representative of his mature thought that he has left us, and is a far finer memorial of his theological prowess than are the smaller tracts of the preceding years, which are so much better known.

Its character stands out in relief when we compare it with the booklet to which it is a reply. Erasmus' Diatribe is elegant and gracefully written, but for all that it is by no means a significant production. There is ample evidence, as we have seen, that Erasmus had no desire to write it and no particular interest in its subject. His book suggests as much. It exhibits much learning but little insight. It makes plain what its author would not have been concerned to deny—that Erasmus of Rotterdam, the learned biblical scholar, was no theologian. It is brief and superficial. Erasmus is deliberately noncommittal on the question which he discusses. He writes on the "free-will" debate, so he tells us, as a commentator and critic rather than as a contributor to it. His chief point is that it is not a very significant issue, one way or the other; and his main complaint against Luther is simply that the latter shows a defective sense of proportion in laying so much stress on an opinion which is extreme and improbable in itself and relates to a subject which is both obscure and unimportant. *The Bondage of the Will*, on the other hand, is a major treatment of what Luther saw as the very heart of the gospel. It was no mere pot-boiler, written to order; Luther welcomed the opportunity which the appearance of the Diatribe afforded for a full written discussion of those parts of his teaching which to his mind really mattered, and plunged into his subject with zest. "You alone," he tells Erasmus, "have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not worried me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like—trifles, rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood...you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot. For that I heartily thank you; for it is more gratifying to me to deal with this issue." "Free-will" was no academic question to Luther; the whole gospel of the grace of God, he held, was bound up with it, and stood or fell according to the way one decided it. In *The Bondage of the Will*, therefore, Luther believes himself to be fighting for the truth of God, the only hope of man; and his earnestness and energy in prosecuting the argument bear witness to the strength of his conviction that the faith once delivered to the saints, and in consequence the salvation of precious souls, is here at stake. "As to my having argued somewhat vigorously," he writes, "I acknowledge my fault, if it is a fault—but no; I have wondrous joy that this witness is borne in the world of my conduct in the cause of God. May God Himself confirm this witness in the last day!" It is not a part of a true theologian, Luther holds, to be unconcerned, or to pretend to be unconcerned, when the gospel is in danger. This is the explanation of what Warfield calls "the amazing vigor" of Luther's language. The gospel of God is in jeopardy; the springs of Luther's religion are touched; the man is moved; the volcano erupts; argument pours out of him white-hot. Nowhere does Luther come closer, either in spirit or in substance, to the Paul of Romans and Galatians than in *The Bondage of the Will*.

Why did Erasmus and Luther approach the discussion of “free-will” in such contrasting attitudes of mind? The answer is not far to seek. Their divergent attitudes sprang from two divergent conceptions of Christianity. Erasmus held that matters of doctrine were all comparatively unimportant, and that the issue as to whether a man’s will was or was not free was more unimportant than most. Luther, on the other hand, held that doctrines were essential to, and constitutive of, the Christian religion, and that the doctrine of the bondage of the will in particular was the cornerstone of the gospel and the very foundation of faith.²

This issue came alive in the eighteenth century during the Great Awakening. The subject of free will was also at the bottom of Charles Finney’s theological error and unbiblical evangelistic methods. The battle still exists between Reformed and Fundamentalist believers and their respective methods and message of evangelism.

I hope in the following pages to whet your appetite to read and study Luther’s masterpiece, *The Bondage of the Will*. Most importantly, though, my goal is to set forth clearly the vital importance of our subject as it relates to the Christian faith and other important doctrines, such as total depravity, election, and effectual calling. It is my hope these discussions will have a profound effect on your methods of evangelism.

1. Free Will and Man’s Four-fold State (Part One)

IN the introduction I emphasized the importance of our subject and pointed out that the subject of the human will is not a new issue, but, as history teaches us, it has been a heated debate for centuries and was one of the chief issues that divided the Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians.

The question of the freedom of the will, or the power of the human will to obey God and to do that which is spiritually good, is inseparably connected to man’s sin and misery (total inability). It is also necessary to know what ability man lost by the fall and what he possessed after the fall.

An important question, then, is whether man can now, in the same way in which he separated himself from God, return to God by his own strength and ability? Can man, by his own will and in his fallen condition, accept the grace that is offered him by God, and recover himself to the position which has been lost by sin? In other words, can the will of man be the *cause* for men to do good or evil?

The Pelagian reply to this question is that so much grace is given by God and left by nature, to all men, that they can in and of themselves return to God and obey Him. The Holy Scriptures, however, teach us no such thing. Rather, the Scriptures clearly teach that no work acceptable and pleasing to God can be performed by anyone without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, all actions of the will, both good and bad, are performed freely and in no way coerced.

To put it another way, the Bible teaches that man, since the fall, in his natural corrupt state, has lost all ability of the will to do any spiritual good accompanying salvation and is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself.

The State of Innocence or The State of Creation

How great was the liberty of the will before the fall, that is, as God made Adam? The testimony of Scripture answers this question: “Truly, this only have I found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29).

In this state of innocence, Adam had a mind enlightened with the perfect knowledge of God and a will yielding entire obedience to God by its own voluntary act and inclination. Yet this will was not so confirmed in this knowledge and obedience that it might not fall by its own free exercise, if the appearance of any good were presented for the purpose of deceiving and effecting a fall. In other words, the will of man was free to choose good and evil. It might continue to stand in good, being preserved by God; or it might also incline and fall over to evil, if forsaken by God. Adam had a copy of God’s law written on his heart. As a key is fitted to all the wards of a lock and can open it, so Adam had power suited to all God’s commandments and could obey them perfectly.

Pelagianism, Arminianism, Roman Catholicism, and present day Finneyism all have this one thing in common: they all teach man’s will is neutral—that it is still free to choose either good or evil. But the Scriptures teach that by his fall

into a state of sin, man has lost all ability of will for any spiritual good accompanying salvation. Therefore, as a natural man, altogether averse to good and dead in sin, he is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself or to prepare himself for salvation.

The Calvinist does not believe that the will is neutral, but rather, what the Bible teaches: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). Paul, Augustine, and Calvin have as their starting point the fact that all mankind sinned in Adam and that all men, therefore, are “without excuse” (Rom. 2:1).

This doctrine of total inability, which declares that men are dead in sin and are therefore unable to choose any good leading to salvation, does *not* teach (1) that all men are equally bad, (2) that any man is as bad as he could be, (3) that anyone is entirely destitute of virtue, (4) that human nature is evil in itself, (5) that man’s spirit is inactive, or (6) that the body is dead.

It does teach, however, that fallen man, while unable to perform what is good, is never compelled to sin. Instead, he does so by his own depraved will—he wills to sin.

The State of Nature or The State of Degeneration

In his natural corrupt state, man freely chooses evil, without any compulsion or constraint upon his will. Indeed he cannot do otherwise, being under the bondage of sin. When Adam sinned, he and all his posterity fell into this state of nature and were corrupted. He will stay in this state unless he is recovered by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where you are if you have not been converted (“born again”).

The biblical description of this state of nature is as follows:

The sinfulness of man’s natural state: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

The misery of man’s natural state: “We...were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Eph. 2:3).

Man’s utter inability to recover himself: “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

In this unregenerate, fallen state, man has no ability to do anything spiritually good. Man is a slave; he is in Satan’s prison house and does not have the key to get out. Second Timothy 2:24–26 says, “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape *the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will*” (emphasis mine).

In this unregenerate state, men are spiritually blind and cannot see, spiritually deaf and cannot hear, and what is worse, they are dead in trespasses and sins. *But* there is a God in heaven who can open blind eyes, who can unstop deaf ears, and, bless His holy name, who can and does raise the dead.

How does God influence the will of man? He presents objects or circumstances to the understanding, and through these, effectually moves and inclines the will. Therefore, although they choose that which God wills, they do it nevertheless from their own deliberation and choice and therefore act freely. So men may be said to act freely, not when they disregard every form of government and restraint, but rather when they act with deliberation and when the will chooses or rejects objects by its own free exercise, even though it may be excited and controlled by someone else (God).

If some of you think this is a little heavy, let me give you a little illustration that sets forth how God changes the “willer.” I remember hearing an old country preacher pick his guitar and sing a kind of “hillbilly” song, and though he may not have understood it, that song clearly sets forth a great theological truth, that is, that *God makes man willing*. I call it:

The Hornet Song

*When the Canaanites hardened their hearts against God,
And grieved Him because of their sin,
God sent along hornets to bring them to terms,
And to help His own people to win.
If a nest of live hornets were brought to this room,
And the creatures allowed to go free,*

*You would not need urging to make yourself scarce,
You'd want to get out, don't you see!
They would not lay hold and by force of their strength,
Throw you out of the window, oh, no!
They would not compel you to go against your will,
But they would just make you willing to go.
When Jonah was sent to the work of the Lord,
The outlook was not very bright.
He never had done such a hard thing before,
So he backed and ran off from the fight.
Now, the Lord sent a great fish to swallow him up,
The story I am sure you all know.
God did not compel him to go against his will,
But He just made him willing to go.*

CHORUS:

*God does not compel us to go, oh, no!
He never compels us to go.
God does not compel us to go against our will,
But He just makes us willing to go.*

This song is teaching the truth found in the Psalms: “Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts” (65:4); “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (110:3 kjv).

What can the will do in the state of sin with reference to good? Some strength still remains in the unregenerate to do some civil good, such as, exercising justice and temperance. He can do acts of mercy and charity. He can abstain from theft and homicide. Some heathens have some virtue; however, they cannot do spiritual or supernatural good—pleasing and acceptable to God. Even “the plowing of the wicked [is] sin” (Prov. 21:4).

The unregenerate has no strength for heavenly things—either in his intellect or will—from which the free will arises. The unregenerate cannot do any spiritual good because he is spiritually dead: he must first be made alive by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

This state of depravity is proof of how we are born into this world since the fall. Man is not born neutral. He is born with a sinful nature. Parents should have no difficulty in believing that children are born with something other than a neutral nature. Parents do not find it necessary to teach their little children to lie. They soon learn what the Bible has to say about the inclinations with which their children are born. “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies” (Ps. 58:3). Parents do not have to teach their children to get angry—we have all seen children get very angry before they can talk or walk—and according to our Lord’s teaching, anger is the mother of murder. (Matt. 5:21–22.)

Children are not sinners because they sin; they sin because they are born sinners—it is in their nature. This underscores the fact that the will, in this state, can only act according to its nature. It is true they are free but only free to act according to their nature. We are not free to fly because we do not have the nature of a bird. A sheep will not eat garbage like a hog. Why? Not because the sheep does not have a mouth and teeth but because of its nature. A hog will not eat grass like a sheep for the same reason: not because it is not free, but because it is free only to act according to its nature. So it is with the freedom of the will in the state of depravity—men are only free to act according to their nature.

Our Lord makes this point very clear when He states that a tree is known by its fruit (Matt. 12:33–37). Our Lord’s illustration of free will here will assist us in understanding a very important but controversial subject. (Walter Chantry of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, has an excellent exposition of this passage entitled *Man’s Will Free—yet Bound*.)

We also see this truth in the most pessimistic verse in all the Bible in which Jesus says to a crowd who are in the state of nature: “But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” (John 5:40) “You *are not willing*”—this is the will in the state of nature.

The unwilling in this state must be made willing by a mighty power outside themselves—by the power of the Holy Spirit. Man’s will is not his hope. “Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

The Spirit of God declares that:

- every imagination of man’s heart from infancy is evil (Gen. 6:5; 8:21)
- there is none righteous, none that understands, none that seeks after God (Ps. 14:3; Rom 3:10–11)
- all are useless, corrupt, void of the fear of God, full of fraud, bitterness, and all kinds of iniquity, and have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3)
- the carnal mind is enmity against God and does not even leave us the power of thinking a good thought (Rom. 8:7; 2 Cor. 3:5)

Therefore, we maintain with Augustine that man, by making a bad use of free will, lost both himself and it. Since the will is overcome by the corruption into which it fell, man’s fallen, depraved will has no real liberty. No will is free which is subject to lusts which conquer and enchain it.

In like manner, God declares that it is His own work to renew the heart (Ps. 51:10), out of stone to make it flesh (Ezek. 11:19), to write His law on the heart and put it in the inward parts (Jer. 31:33), to make us to walk in His precepts (Ezek. 11:20), to give both good will and the results of it (Phil. 2:13), to put the fear of His name into our hearts, that we may never withdraw from it (Jer. 32:39), and in fine, to finish the work which He has begun in us until the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6).

From this we conclude, again with Augustine, that:

- the children of God are actuated by His Spirit to do whatever is to be done
- they are drawn by Him, out of an unwilling state to be made willing
- since the fall it is owing only to the grace of God that man draws near to Him
- it is owing only to the same grace that God does not withdraw or recede from him
- we know that no good thing which is our own can be found in our will
- by the magnitude of the first sin, we lost the freedom of the will to believe in God and live holy lives
- therefore “it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs”—not because we ought not to will and to run, but because God effects both the willing and the running.

A Calvinist does not believe that God’s decision to save man by a decree leaves man passive or inert. Rather, the very opposite takes place! The covenant of grace does not kill man—it does not regard him as a tin can or a piece of wood or a robot. It takes possession of the man, it lays hold of his whole being, with all his faculties, and his power of soul and body—for time and eternity.

God’s sovereign grace does not annihilate man’s will: it overcomes his unwillingness. It does not destroy his will but frees it from sin. It does not stifle or obliterate his conscience but sets it free from darkness. Grace regenerates and re-creates man in his entirety, and in renewing him, causes him to love and consecrate himself to God *freely*.

In the next chapter we will consider man’s will in his regenerate state, that is, the state of grace; and also man’s will in the glorified state in which man will be both freely and necessarily good—both perfect and happy.

2. Free Will and Man’s Four-fold State (Part Two)

In this chapter, we will continue to consider free will and man’s four-fold state. In the last chapter, we considered man’s will in the state of innocence and man’s will in the state of degeneration (his unregenerate state).

The State of Grace or The State of Regeneration

In this state the person is both a saint and a sinner at the same time. In this third state the free power of choice belongs to a man as a regenerate person, but his will is not yet perfected as it will be in the glorified state.

In this state of grace, the will no longer uses its liberty openly for doing that which is evil, as it did before regeneration. Now the will chooses both—partly the good and partly the evil.

In this state of regeneration, there is freedom from the love of sin and from the dominion of sin. “Sin shall not have dominion over you” (Rom. 6:14). Our Lord said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Zacharias Ursinus, in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, gives us an excellent exposition on the will of man in the state of grace:

The regenerate man does that which is good, because the Holy Spirit, by his special grace, has renovated the nature of man through the Word of God—has kindled new light and knowledge in the understanding, and has awakened in the heart and will such new desires and inclinations, as are in harmony with the divine law; and because the Holy Spirit effectually inclines the will to do those things which are in accordance with this knowledge, and with these desires and inclinations. It is in this way that the will recovers both the power of willing that which is acceptable to God, and the use of this power, so that it commences to obey God according to these declarations of his word: “The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart.” “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.” “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.” (Deut. 30:6, Exod. 36:26, 2 Cor. 3:17, 1 John 3:9) The reasons, on account of which the will in this third degree chooses and does in part both the good and the evil, are the following: 1. Because the mind and will of those who are regenerated, are not fully perfectly renewed in this life. There are many remains of depravity which cleave to the best of men, as long as they continue in the flesh, so that the works which they perform are imperfect, and defiled with sin. “I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing.” (Rom. 7:18) 2. Because those who are regenerated are not always governed by the Holy Spirit; but are some- times forsaken of God for a season, that he may thus either try, or humble them. Yet, although they are thus left to themselves for a time, they do not finally perish, for God, in his own time and way, calls them to repentance. “Take not thy Holy Spirit from me.” “O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear. Return, for thy servant’s sake.” (Ps. 51:13, Isa. 63:17) In short, after regeneration, there is a proneness to choose partly the good, and partly the evil. There is a proneness *to the good*, because the mind and will being illuminated and changed, begin, in some measure, to be turned to the good, and to commence new obedience. There is a proneness *to the evil*, because the saints are only imperfectly renewed in this life—retain many infirmities and evil desires, on account of original sin, which still cleaves to them. Hence the good works which they perform are not perfectly good.³

Therefore, in this state of grace, the regenerated believer freely chooses good, yet that good is mixed with evil because of his remaining sin. Using his freedom to perfectly choose good will only come under the fourth state.

The State of Glorification or The State of Perfect Regeneration

In this state of perfect and glorious liberty, the will of man will be perfectly restored and perfectly regenerated. Another quote from Ursinus will be helpful.

In this state, the will of man will be free to choose only the good, and not the evil. This will be the highest degree, or the perfect liberty of the human will, when we shall obey God fully and forever. In this state we shall not only not sin, but we will abhor it above every thing else; yea, we shall then no longer be able to sin. In proof of this we may adduce the following reasons: First, the perfect knowledge of God will then shine in the mind, while there will be the strongest and most ardent desire of the will and heart to obey God; so that there will be no room left for ignorance or doubt, or the least contempt of God.

Secondly, in the life to come, the saints will never be forsaken, but will be constantly and forever ruled by the Holy Spirit, so that it will not be possible for them to deviate in the smallest respect from that which is right. Hence it is said: “They are as the angels of God in heaven.” “We shall be like him.” (Matt. 22:30, 1 John 3:3) The good angels are inclined only to that which is good, because they are good; just as the bad angels, on the other hand, are inclined to that which is evil, because they are evil. But we shall be like the good angels. Our condition will, therefore, be one of far greater excellence than that of Adam before the fall. Adam was, indeed, perfectly conformed to God; but he had the power to will both the good and the evil; and therefore, with all his gifts, he had a certain infirmity, viz: the possibility to fall from God, and to lose his gifts. He was changeably good. But we shall not be able to will any thing but the good. Just as the wicked are inclined and led to do evil

only, because they are wicked; so we shall be inclined to that which is good, and love and choose it alone, because we shall be unchangeably good. We shall then be so fully established in righteousness and conformity to God, that it will not be possible for us to fall from him; yes, it will then be impossible for us to will any thing that is evil, because we shall be preserved by divine grace in that state of perfect liberty in which the will will choose the good only.

From these things which we have now said in relation to human freedom, it is manifestly a foul slander to say that we take away the liberty of the will. And although those who are renewed and glorified will not be able to will any thing but the good, after their glorification; yet their power of choice will then be free to a much greater extent than it now is; for God, also, cannot will any thing but the good, and yet he possesses perfect freedom of will. So on the other hand, we do not take away the power of choice from the ungodly, or such as are unregenerated, when we affirm that they are not able to will any thing but that which is evil; for they will and choose the evil freely—yea, most freely. Their will is inclined and carried with the greatest impetuosity, to evil only; because they continually retain in their hearts, hatred to God. Hence, all the works which they perform of an external moral character, are evil in the sight of God, as we have already shown in our remarks upon the doctrine of sin.⁴

There are six things related to this Eternal State:

1. *Death*: “For I know that You will bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living” (Job 30:23).
2. *The Difference between the righteous and the wicked in their death*: “The wicked is banished in his wickedness, but the righteous has a refuge in his death” (Prov. 14:32).
3. *The resurrection*: “Do not marvel at this: for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28–29).
4. *The general judgment*: “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed...’ [but] to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed...’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:31–34, 41, 46).
5. *The kingdom of heaven*: “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:34).
6. *Hell*: “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:41).

It can be seen that the Bible teaches that man has no ability to save himself, and indeed, has lost the power that Adam had to choose to do good. He is perfectly free to choose and act in accordance with his own nature, just as the glorified man will freely choose to please God in all things. For now men have no power to please God without having his nature radically changed by the Holy Spirit. Our methods and message of evangelism should be greatly impacted by this fact. It is all so vitally important to the Christian faith.

3. Free Will and Free Agency

In the last two chapters we have considered free will and man’s four-fold state. A brief summary will be helpful as we continue:

1. Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and well pleasing to God; but that state was mutable, or changeable, so that he was able to fall from it.

2. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has entirely lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; therefore, as a natural man, being altogether averse to that good, and dead in sin, he is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself or to prepare himself for salvation.

3. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He frees 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, by reason of his remaining corruption, he also wills that which is evil.

4. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only. Any study of the will of man is incomplete without some explanation of the difference between free will and free agency. I am using *free* as meaning “independent, sovereign, autonomous,” that is, “not subject to the rule or control of another.”

An *agent* is “one who acts, performs an act, or has power to act—a moving force.”

Man is a free moral agent, but he does not have a free will. Man is only free to act according to his nature, and he was born with a sinful nature (see Ps. 51:5).

One does not pursue the study of free will and free agency very far until he comes head on with an apparent contradiction (note well, I said “apparent”). We must, in all candor, acknowledge these apparent contradictions. They deserve some serious, thoughtful consideration. For example, we must address God’s commands and man’s inability—God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility.

God’s Commands and Man’s Inability

The gospel command—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”—is addressed by divine authority to every creature, and therefore it is the duty of every man to obey it. There are some who deny this upon the grounds that man does not have the spiritual ability to believe in Jesus. However, it is altogether an error to imagine that the measure of the sinner’s moral ability is the measure of his duty.

There are many things which men ought to do which they have now lost the moral and spiritual (though not the physical) power to do. A man ought to be chaste; but if he has been so long immoral that he cannot restrain his passions, he is not therefore free from the obligation. It is the duty of a debtor to pay his debts; but if he has been such a spendthrift that he has brought himself into hopeless poverty, he is not exonerated from his debts on account of his inability to pay.

Every man ought to believe that which is true, but if his mind has become so depraved that he loves a lie and will not receive the truth, is he therefore excused?

If the law of God is to be lowered according to the moral condition of sinners, we would have a law graduated upon a sliding scale to suit the degrees of human sinfulness. In fact, the worst man would then be under the least law and become consequently the least guilty. God’s requirements would be of a variable quantity, and, in truth, we would be under no rule at all.

The command of Christ stands good, however bad men may be; and when He commands all men everywhere to repent, they are required to repent, whether their sinfulness renders it impossible for them to be willing to do so or not. In every case, it is man’s duty to do what God bids him.

But, one may ask, how can a person be a free and responsible agent if his actions have been foreordained from eternity? Again, a free and responsible agent means an intelligent person who acts with rational self-determination. Foreordination means that from eternity past God has made certain the actual course of events which take place in the life of every person and in the realm of nature.

It is important to note at the outset that the true solution of this difficult question respecting the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man is not to be found in denying the sovereignty of God; neither is it found in denying the responsibility of man. The same God who has ordained the events has ordained human liberty and human responsibility in the midst of these events. The Bible teaches that it is just as important to assert the true validity of the secondary agent (man) as it is to assert the ultimate validity of the final cause (God).

One can readily see that we have as our solution either fatalism on the one hand, or the intelligent plan and purpose of an almighty, personal God on the other. The Bible clearly teaches that God has a plan and that He has the wisdom and power to execute that plan.

Pelagianism denies human depravity, the necessity of efficacious grace, and exalts the human will above the divine will. Pelagians do not believe in the imputation of Adam's sin. By denying man's sinfulness, Pelagianism lifts up man's will and opens the door for the Arminian belief that man freely, on his own, chooses God. Therefore, Pelagianism is the mother of Arminianism; in fact, "Arminianism" can be traced back to a time twelve hundred years before Arminius was born.

A quote from Robert Shaw's *Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* will put the Arminian and the Calvinistic views of free will in perspective:

The decision of most of the points in controversy between Calvinists and Arminians, as President Edwards has observed, depends on the determination of the question—*Wherein consists that freedom of will which is requisite to moral agency?* According to Arminians three things belong to the freedom of the will:—1. That the will has a *self-determining power*, or a certain sovereignty over itself, and its own acts, whereby it determines its own volitions. 2. A state of *indifference*, or that *equilibrium*, whereby the will is without all antecedent bias, and left entirely free from any prepossessing inclination to one side or the other. 3. That the volitions, or acts of the will, are *contingent*, not only as opposed to all constraint, but to all *necessity*, or any fixed and certain connection with some previous ground or reason of their existence. Calvinists, on the other hand, contend that a power in the will to determine its own determinations, is either unmeaning, or supposes, contrary to the first principles of philosophy, something to arise without a cause; that the idea of the soul exerting an act of choice of preference, while, at the same time, the will is in a perfect equilibrium, or state of indifference, is full of absurdity and self-contradiction; and that, as nothing can ever come to pass without a cause, the acts of the will are never contingent, or without necessity—understanding by *necessity*, a *necessity of consequence*, or an infallible connection with something foregoing. According to Calvinists, the liberty of a moral agent consists in the power of acting according to his choice; and those actions are free which are performed without any external compulsion or restraint, in consequence of the determination of his own mind. "The necessity of man's willing and acting in conformity to his apprehensions and disposition, is, in their opinion, fully consistent with all the liberty which can belong to a rational nature. The infinite Being necessarily wills and acts according to the absolute perfection of his nature, yet with the highest liberty. Angels necessarily will and act according to the perfection of their natures, yet with full liberty; for this sort of necessity is so far from interfering with liberty of will, that the perfection of the will's liberty lies in such a necessity. The very essence of its liberty lies in acting consciously, choosing or refusing without any external compulsion or constraint, but according to inward principles of rational apprehension and natural disposition."5

Thus the Arminian and the Calvinist differ on their qualifying conditions of what makes up a free will. The Calvinist believes the man is free to choose and act in accordance with his nature. The Arminian, with his Pelagian roots denying moral depravity, believes that the will can make choices which are completely untainted by his nature and thus has a "free will." In contrast, the Calvinist believes man is a free agent—free to act according to his own nature.

Free agency is not to be confused with "free will." Because of the fall, men have lost their ability—the will—to obey God, but they are just as responsible to God to obey perfectly His commands. Thus Spurgeon could say, "I dread more than anything your being left to your own free will." Arminianism, alongside hyper-Calvinism, argues that sinners cannot be required to do what they are not able to do, namely, to believe in Christ for salvation, since the ability to believe belongs only to the elect and is only given at a time determined by the Spirit of God. They say, "For a preacher to call all his hearers to immediate repentance and faith is to deny both human depravity and sovereign grace." So they say.

Spurgeon says this on the implications of free will:

According to the free will scheme, the Lord intends good, but he must wait like a lackey on his own creature to know what his intention is; God willeth good and would do it but he cannot because he has an unwilling man who will not have God's good thing carried into effect. What do ye, sirs, but drag the Eternal from his throne and lift up into it that fallen creature, man; for man, according to that theory, nods and his nod is destiny. You must have a destiny somewhere; it must either be as God wills or as man wills. If it be as God wills, then Jehovah sits as sovereign upon his throne of glory, and all hosts obey him, and the world is safe; if not God, then you put man there to say, "I will," or "I will not; if I will it, I will enter heaven; if I will it, I will despise the grace of God; if I will it, I will conquer the Holy Spirit, for I am stronger than God and stronger than omnipotence; if I will it, I will make the blood of Christ of no effect, for I am mightier than the blood, mightier than the blood of the Son of God himself; though God make his purpose, yet will I laugh at his purpose; it shall be my purpose that shall make his purpose stand or fall." Why, sirs, if this be not atheism, it is idolatry; it is putting man where God should be; and I shrink with solemn awe and horror from that doctrine which makes the grandest of God's works—the salvation

of man—to be dependent upon the will of his creature whether it shall be accomplished or not. Glory I can and must in my text in its fullest sense. “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Romans 9:16).⁶

Our Lord’s mission was not to save all whom He addressed; it was to save out of them as many as His Father gave Him: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” (John 6:37).

O unconverted man, your will is no place on which to fix your hope—the will cannot set itself free. *Only God can set the prisoner free.*

4. Free Will and the Antinomy

In the last chapter we considered free will and free agency. It is important not to confuse the two. Free will and free agency are not the same thing. Man is a free, moral agent, but he does not have a free will; his will is limited by his nature.

In this chapter I wish to address a question that is logically raised when serious thought is given to our subject. The question comes in different forms, but at the bottom are God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility.

In the study of man’s will, the question is usually asked like this: How can a person be a free and responsible agent if his actions have been foreordained from all eternity? This is a logical question indeed.

To put the question another way, How can an action be known to God before it takes place and yet be freely performed by a free, moral agent?

The 121 Westminster divines were aware of this question and they addressed it with candor when they drafted their Confession. They said, “God has freely and unchangeably ordained *whatsoever* comes to pass.” That is divine sovereignty. They immediately added, “Yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offended to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of the second cause taken away, but rather, established.”

Sometimes the question comes in this form: Is not God unjust to require what men do not have the ability to perform? I answer:

- *Yes, God is unjust, unless He first gave the ability to perform what He requires.*
- *Yes, God is unjust, unless man, by his own will, brought this inability upon himself.*
- *Yes, God is unjust in requiring that which man cannot perform, unless such a requirement which is impossible to meet is designed to lead him to acknowledge and deplore his inability.*

This is the real problem with the multitude of efforts by those who come running on the scene of human turmoil with this sentimental pity for man in his present condition. They immediately begin to charge God with being unjust.

When we see sickness, death, war, pain, murder, rape, robbery, and lawlessness we ask, “How did this come about?” The answer is: Sin! Sin! Sin! Man’s sin! How did the prodigal son come to feeding pigs? By living in sin!

If I believed that God made man *like he is*, and then condemned him for what he is, I would curse God and die—such a God would be a monster. But instead, “Truly, this only I have found: that God *made man upright*, but they have sought out many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29; emphasis mine).

Who but God can fully comprehend how an action that was known of God before it was done can be freely performed by man? However, our inability to understand *how* something should actually come to be is not sufficient ground for affirming that it cannot be.

It should not surprise us or discourage us that there is divine foreknowledge of all human actions on the one hand and free agency on the other hand.

We have a similar problem with God’s commanding men to do what they do not have the will or ability to do since they must act in accordance with their nature. For example, when God commanded Lazarus to “come forth from the

grave,” he was dead and did not have the ability to obey or respond to our Lord’s command—unless God did something for him.

Another example is the poor man in the gospels who had been powerless for thirty-eight years and had no native ability to obey our Lord’s command to “take up your bed and walk.” The power came from the one who gave the command.

We are considering in this chapter these two truths: (1) Man is a free agent and is responsible for his actions; (2) Man’s actions are foreknown by an omniscient God. Both of these truths are clearly set out in the Holy Scripture—many times in the same verse. For example, in Acts 2:23 we read, “Him [Christ], being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, *you have taken* by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death” (emphasis mine).

This verse clearly teaches that the crucifixion of our Lord was planned, predicted, and determined before it happened and all the devils in hell or men on earth could not keep Jesus from the cross—it was determined by a sovereign God. Yet at the same time, wicked men—acting freely—were charged with this wicked act.

In Acts 4:24–30, God puts these two truths side by side without apology or explanation. Here this apparent contradiction and seeming conflict is expressed in a prayer.

“So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: “Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.” For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

Peter and John were in prison when they prayed this prayer. Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were said to be carrying out what God had purposed and determined was to be done before it was actually done.

In the first truth we see that God is one hundred percent sovereign in planning and determining. At the same time the verse teaches that wicked men are one hundred percent responsible for their wicked deeds.

If we examine these two truths separately, we will conclude that from Genesis to Revelation the Bible teaches that the God of the Bible is one hundred percent sovereign—sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption, and sovereign in providence—and that from Genesis to Revelation the Bible teaches that man is one hundred percent responsible for his sin. Therefore, we have no alternative but to believe both are true, even though with our finite minds we cannot reconcile them or harmonize them.

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon was asked to reconcile these truths—God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility—he said, “I never try to reconcile friends—they are both in the Bible.”

Antinomy

There is one word that gives us the biblical picture of these two truths—*antinomy*. J.I. Packer taught me the meaning of that word in his wonderful, helpful book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. More than any other, this book has helped me get a biblical view of evangelism. Let Dr. Packer define antinomy:

All theological topics contain pitfalls for the unwary, for God’s truth is never quite what man would have expected; and our present subject is more treacherous than most. This is because in thinking it through we have to deal with an *antinomy* in the biblical revelation, and in such circumstances our finite, fallen minds are more than ordinarily apt to go astray.

What is an antinomy? *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable or necessary.” For our purposes, however, this definition is not quite accurate; the opening words should read “an *appearance* of contradiction.” For the whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. Let me give an example. Modern physics faces

an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles, but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other; the two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts.

It appears, therefore, that an antinomy is not the same thing as a paradox. A paradox is a figure of speech, a play on words. It is a form of statement that seems to unite two opposite ideas, or to deny something by the very terms in which it is asserted. Many truths about the Christian life can be expressed as paradoxes. A Prayer Book collect, for instance, declares that God's "service is perfect freedom": man goes free through becoming a slave. Paul states various paradoxes of his own Christian experience: "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...having nothing, and yet possessing all things"; "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 6:10, 12:10). The point of a paradox, however, is that what creates the appearance of contradiction is not the facts, but the words. The contradiction is verbal, but not real, and a little thought shows how it can be eliminated and the same idea expressed in non-paradoxical form. In other words a paradox is always *dispensable*. Look at the examples quoted. The Prayer Book might have said that those who serve God are free from sin's dominion. In 2 Cor. 6:10, 12:10 Paul might have said that sorrow at circumstances, and joy in God, are constantly combined in his experience, and that, though he owns no property, has no bank balance, there is a sense in which everything belongs to him, because he is Christ's, and Christ is Lord of all. Again, in 2 Cor. 12:10, he might have said that the Lord strengthens him most when he is most conscious of his natural infirmity. Such non-paradoxical forms of speech are clumsy and dull beside the paradoxes which they would replace, but they express precisely the same meaning. For a paradox is merely a matter of how you use words; the employment of paradox is an arresting trick of speech, but it does not imply even an appearance of contradiction in the facts that you are describing.

Also it should be noted that a paradox is always *comprehensible*. A speaker or writer casts his ideas into paradoxes in order to make them memorable and provoke thought about them. But the person at the receiving end must be able, on reflection, to see how to unravel the paradox, otherwise it will seem to him to be really self-contradictory, and therefore really meaningless. An incomprehensible paradox could not be distinguished from a mere contradiction in terms. Sheer paradox would thus have to be written off as sheer nonsense.

By contrast, however, an antinomy is neither dispensable nor comprehensible. It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves. It is unavoidable, and it is insoluble. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other. Be careful, therefore, not to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other (such deductions would, for that very reason, be certainly unsound). Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference (*i.e.*, the area delimited by the evidence from which the principle has been drawn). Note what connections exist between the two truths and their two frames of reference, and teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both. This is how antinomies must be handled, whether in nature or in Scripture. This, as I understand it, is how modern physics deals with the problem of light, and this is how Christians have to deal with the antinomies of biblical teaching.

The particular antinomy which concerns us here is the apparent opposition between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, or (putting it more biblically) between what God does as King and what He does as Judge. Scripture teaches that, as King, He orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with His own eternal purpose. Scripture also teaches that, as Judge, He holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues. Thus hearers of the gospel are responsible for their reaction; if they reject the good news, they are guilty of unbelief. "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed." Again, Paul, entrusted with the gospel, is responsible for preaching it; if he neglects his commission, he is penalized for unfaithfulness. "Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught us side by side in the same Bible; sometimes, indeed, in the same text. Both are thus guaranteed to us by the same divine authority; both, therefore, are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other. Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is *also* divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is *also* a responsible moral agent.

God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antinomy in terms of which we have to do our thinking about divine command and free-will.

To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable. It sounds like a contradiction, and our first reaction is to complain that it is absurd. Paul notices this complaint in Romans 9: "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why does he [God] yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (Rom. 9:19). If, as our Lord, God orders all our actions, how can it be reasonable or right for Him to act also as our Judge, and condemn our shortcomings? Observe how Paul replies. He does not attempt to demonstrate the propriety of God's action; instead, he rebukes the spirit of the question. "Nay but, O man, who are thou that repliest against God?" What the objector has to learn is that he, a creature and a sinner, has not right whatsoever to find fault with the revealed ways of God. Creatures are not entitled to register complaints about their Creator.⁷

This incomprehensible antinomy—God's will, man's will, and free will—occupies a large part of God's truth. Does this subject have a message for ministers and Christians in this day of doctrinal indifference and ignorance? It most certainly does.

Many evangelicals today have a lot of semi-Pelagianism in their blood. They believe man really isn't all that bad. Certainly he isn't totally *depraved*—he can choose to do good because his nature is good.

An understanding of the bondage of the will would produce some radical changes in the common approach to preaching in general and to evangelistic preaching in particular. As has been shown previously, man's will is a slave to his nature. He cannot decide something or choose to do something that is alien to his nature. This concept would have a profound effect on many departments of theology as well as pastoral work. It is good for us to remember that the bondage of the will was a central theme at the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and thus at the center of all that occurred then in evangelism, preaching, holy living, and organizational restructuring.

Do we not stand in urgent need of teaching that humbles man, strengthens faith, and glorifies God?

5. Related Doctrines

The doctrine we have considered in the preceding chapters is vitally related to other key doctrines of the Bible, such as total depravity, election, and effectual calling. This was vividly brought home to me in the early 1980s when I was distributing Dr. James P. Boyce's *Abstract of Systematic Theology* to graduates of our Southern Baptist seminaries. With each book I enclosed a little survey sheet consisting of four questions:

1. Do you believe that Dr. Boyce is biblically correct in his chapter on Effectual Calling?
2. Do you think his view of the Doctrine of Election is the biblical teaching?
3. In Chapter 28, Dr. Boyce sets forth several views of the Atonement. Which view do you believe to be the biblical view?
4. Please comment on Chapter 12: "The Will of God."

One of the survey responses will illustrate my point that the doctrine of free will is vitally related to other biblical doctrines. This prudent young seminarian did not realize how profound his answers were. He said, "No, Dr. Boyce was not biblically correct on his views of election because if Boyce was correct on his view of election, man would not have a free will." He was one hundred percent correct. If man had a free will, Boyce was wrong on his view of election. The young seminarian may have been wrong about Boyce, but he was right in his conclusion.

Three years later I received a letter from this fine young man informing me that, after much study (particularly of the first chapter of Ephesians), he had changed his view: Boyce was biblically correct on the doctrine of election and effectual calling. He now had a correct, biblical view of man's will. (This young man is now teaching at Midwestern Baptist Seminary.) Our view of free will has a profound effect on other major doctrines of the Christian faith.

Now I wish to consider the biblical doctrine of election as it relates to free will. The Bible nowhere uses the expression "free will," but it has a lot to say about the will. For instance, John 5:40, "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." In this little verse our Lord is telling us four fundamental and necessary things:

1. Every man is spiritually dead and dead men need life (“come to Me that you may have life”).
2. This life is found only in Christ (“come to Me”).
3. There is life in Jesus Christ only for those who come for it (one must “come”).
4. No one by nature ever will come (“you are not willing to come”).

This verse lays the groundwork for the blessed doctrine of unconditional election. It expresses the biblical view of the will: “You are not willing to come to Me.” Left to himself no one will come to Christ. This is the biblical teaching on free will. “You are not willing.” B.B. Warfield used to say, “What is the use of arguing about whosoever will when we live in a world of whosoever will nots.” This universal condition of “will nots” makes the doctrine of unconditional election necessary if any one is to be saved.

The preacher might borrow the eloquence of Demosthenes, he may beg you on his knees with heartfelt tears in his eyes, he might show you the horrors of hell and the joys of heaven, the sufficiency of Christ, and your own lost condition, but still none will come unless the blessed Spirit that rested on Christ should draw you. That is the practical outworkings of the bondage of the will.

“You mean that I can’t come to Christ if I will?” No, I do not mean that at all; in fact, it is as simple as this: if you will, you are welcome; but without that effectual call, who will? Did you ever meet a Christian who said, “I came to Christ without the power of the Spirit?” Let me assure you that if anyone ever *came* without the power of the Spirit, you may be very sure he *went away* again without the power of the Spirit. No, every Christian must put his hands to his heart and say:

*Grace taught my soul to pray,
And made my eyes o’er flow;
'Twas grace that kept me to this day,
And will not let me go.*

No Christian will say, “I sought God before he sought me.” Even the Arminian will sing, “O yes! I do love Jesus because he first loved me” (1 John 4:19). The Arminian view of election is that it is conditioned upon man’s will, and he does not believe that will is limited by man’s nature.

I would like to present a clear definition of the doctrine of unconditional election as stated by J.P. Boyce, founder and first president of Southern Seminary in Louisville, and president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1872–1879, 1888). His definition of unconditional election is found in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology* and is taken from his sermon by that title.

The theory... of [Calvinists as to election] is that God (who and not man is the one who chooses or elects) of his own purpose (in accordance with his will, and not from any obligation to man, nor because of any will of man), has from Eternity (the period of God’s action, not in time in which man acts), determined to save (not has actually saved, but simply determined so to do), [and to save, (not [merely] to confer gospel or church privileges upon)] a definite number of mankind (not the whole race, nor indefinitely merely some of them, nor indefinitely a certain proportionate part, but a definite number), as individuals (not the whole or a part of the race, nor of a nation, nor of a church, nor of a class, as of believers or the pious; but individuals) not for or because of any merit or work of theirs, nor of any value to him of them (not for their good works, nor for their holiness nor excellence, nor their faith, nor their spiritual sanctification, although the choice is to a salvation attained through faith and sanctification; nor [for] their value to him, though their salvation tends greatly to the manifested glory of his grace): but of his own good pleasure (simply because he was pleased so to choose).⁸

(Boyce used the following Scripture verses in support of his position: Ephesians 1:4–6, 11; Matthew 11:25–26; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Corinthians 1:26–30; Acts 13:48; 1 Timothy 1:9; Romans 8:28–30; 9:11–24 33; Revelation 13:8; 17:8; Ephesians 2:1–3; John 1:13, 3:3–8; 5:21; 6:37–65; 15:16; 17:2; James 1:18.)

This definition is clear. Dr. Boyce believed and taught unconditional election. For him this election to salvation was not based upon God’s looking into the future, seeing which men would choose Him, and then electing those men to salvation. Rather, our Baptist fathers preached the God of absolute and indisputable sovereignty, who chose His elect with nothing moving Him with respect to whom He chose except His own good pleasure and distinguishing mercy.

The doctrine of election holds a very prominent place in the Scriptures. It meets us everywhere—in both the Old and New Testaments. Everyone who believes the Bible must believe something about election. He may not have the correct

meaning, but he must believe something about it. The Arminian believes something about election, though he doesn't believe the biblical teaching on the subject. Election, however, has one meaning.

Election does not destroy the will. Obviously, the sinner must have a will in the matter. It is absurdity to say the sinner loves, believes, etc., against his will or by compulsion. The sinner must will: he must will to take the broad way, or he must will to take the narrow way. His will is essential to all these movements of his soul. But in what state do we find his will? We find it is wholly set against the truth. Every will since the fall is entirely opposed to God and His Word. Man needs no foreign influence, no external power, to make him reject the truth; that he does by nature. He hates it with his whole heart. When a sinner then comes to receive the truth, how is this accomplished? Does he renew himself? Does he change the enmity of his will by the unaided act of his will? Does he of himself bend back his own will into the opposite direction? Does he, by a word of his own power, cause the current that had been flowing downhill to change its course and power, causing it to flow upward? Does his own will originate the change in itself and carry the change into effect? Impossible! The current would have flowed forever downward had it not been arrested in its course by something stronger than itself. The sinner's will would have remained forever in depravity and bondage, had it not another Will, far mightier than itself, coming into contact with it, and altering both its nature and course, working in the sinner "*both to will and to do.*" Was the sinner willing before this other Will met his? No! Was he willing after? Yes! Then it is plain that it was God's will, meeting and changing the sinner's will, that made the difference. God's will was first.

It was God's will that began the work and made the sinner willing. He never would have willed had not God made him willing. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power." It is the power of Jehovah applied to us that makes us willing. Until that power is applied, we are unwilling. It is His hand, operating directly upon the soul, that changes its nature and its bent. Were it not for that, our unwillingness would never be removed. No outward means, no motives, would be sufficient to effect the change; for all these means and motives are rejected by the sinner. Nor does he become willing even to allow the approach or application of these means or motives until God makes him willing. To speak of his being changed by that which he rejects is as absurd as to speak of a man's being healed by a medicine which he persists in refusing. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (Jer. 13:23).

Does God then hinder sinners from believing and willing? By no means. He hinders none. They are their own hindrance. "You are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." Not one soul would be saved if left to his own will. But in His infinite mercy, God does not leave them to their own wills. He puts forth His mighty power on some to make them willing. Were it not for this, all would be lost, for all would reject the Savior.

But some profane objector says, "Does God make men to be damned?" Let me in a few words answer the miserable atheism of such an objection. This is precisely the argument of the Socinians, Universalists, and Deists against the existence of such a place as hell. If you speak of hell or everlasting fire to such, their answer is, "Did God make men to damn them?" And however abominable and unscriptural their notion is, it is at least consistent with their own theory. Making God to be all love and nothing else, they think it inconsistent with His love that He should allow such a place as hell in the universe. They do not believe in hell, and so they must ask such a question.

God did not make men in order to damn them. He did not make the angels "who kept not their first estate," in order to damn them. He did not make Lucifer for the purpose of casting him out of Paradise. He did not make Judas for the purpose of sending him to his own place. God made man—every man and every thing—to glorify Himself. Every creature, man, and angel must do this, either actively or passively, either willingly or unwillingly: actively and willingly in Heaven, or passively and unwillingly in hell. This is God's purpose and it shall stand. God may have many other ends in creation, but this is the chief one, the ultimate one—the one which is above all the others and to which all the rest are subordinate.

In this sense, then, plainly, God did not make men either to destroy them or to save them. He made them for His own glory. If the question is asked, Did God make the devil and his angels only to damn them?, I answer, He made them for His own glory. They are lost forever, but does that prove that He made them to destroy them? He kept their companions from falling (and so they are called the "elect angels,") while He did not keep them. But does this prove that he made them to destroy them? They fell, and in a moment they were consigned to everlasting chains. He made no effort to save them; He sent no redemption to them. But does that prove that he made them only to destroy them? If ever such an accusation could be preferred against God, it must be in the case of the angels, to whom no salvation was sent. It cannot be said of man, to whom salvation has come.

Whatever is right for God to do, it is right for Him to decree. If God's casting sinners into hell is not wrong or unjust, then His purposing to do so from all eternity cannot be wrong or unjust. So you must either deny that there is a hell or admit God's right to leave sinners to themselves to go to their own place to dwell there forever. There is no middle way between Calvinism and Universalism.

Let me merely call your attention to two passages of Scripture which would be good for those to ponder who ask such a question:

The Lord has made all things for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Prov. 16:4).

The Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth...What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?” (Rom. 9:17, 22).

Texts like these are not to be explained away or overlooked. They are part of God’s holy Word—just as much as “God is love.” And if one class of texts is to be twisted or turned away from, why not another? Let us look both in the face, and let us believe them both, whatever difficulty we may find in reconciling them. Our first duty is to believe, but there is nothing in the Bible which we need to shrink from believing. “For an empty-headed man will be wise, when a wild donkey’s colt is born a man” (Job 11:12).

Let me close this important chapter with a brief warning to those who reject and speak against the blessed doctrine of election:

1. It is not wise to make derogatory remarks about what is in the Bible, whether you understand it or not.
2. It is not wise to reject what the Bible teaches on any subject, especially if you have not studied what the Bible says about it.
3. It is not wise to make a hobby out of any one doctrine. Although this doctrine is of vital importance, it is only one doctrine and must not be separated from all Christian truth.
4. It is not wise to reject any doctrine because it has been abused and misused. All the key doctrines have been perverted.

If it were not for election, your will would take you to hell. You can only get rid of election by getting rid of the Bible. My foremost reason for believing in election is because it is clearly and plainly taught in the Bible.

What Election is Not

- *Election is not* salvation but unto salvation (2 Thess. 2:13, 14; Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:29, 30).
- *Election is not* exclusive of means (2 Thess. 2:14; Eph. 1:5, 13; 2 Tim. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:2).
- *Election is not* a respecter of persons (Rom. 9:18–24). Fame, wealth, wisdom, position, etc., did not cause God to have respect for some and thus elect them (Job 34:19). All being ungodly, none could have been saved had he not shown grace to some.
- *Election is not* “salvation regardless,” but unto salvation through the redemption of Christ, applied by the Spirit through the gospel (John 6:37; Rom. 10:17; 1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14; Acts 13:48).
- *Election is not* opposed to the gospel, but the gospel is a means in accomplishing election’s purpose (see Scriptures already cited).
- *Election is not* an enemy of righteousness, but through its appointed means it causes those once ungodly to live godly (Eph. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:4–10).
- *Election is not* based on unforeseen faith or works, but it produces faith and works. (Rom. 9:11–16; 11:5, 6; Phil. 1:6; 1 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 2:8–10; Acts 13:48; 1 Cor. 3:5; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 4:7; Acts 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25).
- *Election does not* shut the door of salvation but opens that door for all those who come to Christ (John 6:37, 44, 63; 10:9; 14:6).
- *Election is not* a hindrance to gospel preaching, but it assures the gospel of success (Isa. 55:11; John 10:27; 6:37, 45; 17:20, 21; Acts 15:14; 16:14; 18:27; 2 Tim. 2:9, 10).
- *Election is not* of the Jews only (Rom. 9:24; 11:5–8, 11, 12, 25; John 11:52).
- *Election is not* merely to service but to salvation (2 Thess. 2:13, 14; 2 Tim. 2:10).
- *Election is not* fatalism but is the work of God (1 Thess. 1:4; Rom. 8:28, 30).

- *Election does not* destroy man’s so-called “free will.” The will of man is his desire, wish or choice. His choice is sin (John 3:19, 20; 5:40; 3:11; 2:2, 3; 4:17–19; Jer. 17:9; 13:23; etc.). Man “freely” chooses sin, and by God’s grace, the elect freely choose Christ (Ps. 65:4; 110:3; John 6:44, 65; Acts 13:48). Lazarus “freely” rotted, but at the word of Christ, he “freely” came forth (John 11); and so do the elect of God.
- *Election is not* anti-missionary but gives the foundation for missions (John 6:37; 17:20, 21; 2 Tim. 2:10; Isa. 55:11; 2 Pet. 3:9, 15).
- *Election does not* destroy the responsibility of man. Men are responsible with whatever light they have, be it conscience (Rom. 2:15), nature (Rom. 1:19–20), written law (Rom. 2:17–27), or the gospel (Mark 16:15–16). Man’s inability to do righteousness no more frees him from responsibility than does Satan’s inability to do righteousness.
- *Election does not* make God unjust. His blessing of a great number of unworthy sinners with salvation is no injustice to the rest of the unworthy sinners. If a government pardons one convict, is it injustice to the rest? (1 Thess. 5:9)
- *Election does not* discourage convicted sinners but welcomes them to Christ. “Let him who thirsts come” (Rev. 22:17). The God who saves is the God who has elected men unto salvation. He is the same God who invites.
- *Election does not* discourage prayer. To the contrary, it drives us to God, for He it is who alone can save. True prayer is the Spirit’s prompting; and thus will be in harmony with God’s will (Rom. 8:28).
- *Election is not* of man. Some say, “God votes, the devil votes, and man votes.” The Bible teaches that election is not of the devil and man but “of God” (1 Thess. 1:4; John 10:16; 1 John 4:10, 19).
- *Election is not* of reason but of revelation. At first it does not appeal to man’s reason; but when man accepts God’s Word, it is seen to be the only thing that could be “reasonable” (Matt. 20:15).

Unbelievably, many people do not know that *election* is in the Bible. Worse yet, the biblical teaching on the subject has been very little discussed, taught, or preached. Someone once must have thought it important because it is in our *Baptist Faith and Message*: “Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners.”⁹

It is not only in our *Articles of Faith*, but we sing it in many of our hymns—the second stanza of “The Church’s One Foundation” begins “*Elect* from every nation...”

More importantly, it is in the Bible; and if only one point is made in this chapter, let it be that *everyone who believes the Bible must believe in election*.

6. The Human Will and Doctrinal Decline

In the last chapter we considered God’s will and man’s will as it relates to the doctrine of election. The doctrine of man’s will is also related to all the foundational doctrines of Christianity.

Doctrinal distinctiveness is often overlooked and many times actually discouraged. The following quote by one theologian will illustrate my point. B. Elmo Scoggin said, “Not only would I not vote for it, I would categorically refuse it, and I would fight it to the last drop of my blood to keep the denomination [Southern Baptist] from adopting a creed.”¹⁰

Lynn May, former executive director of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission, said, “A set of doctrinal statements to which [Baptists] must subscribe...would be totally out of keeping with the historical position of Southern Baptists.”¹¹

These statements are quite contrary to what is expressed in the “Abstract of Principles” as expressed in the “Fundamental Law of the Seminary” written into the seminary’s charter of April 30, 1858: “Every Professor of the

institution shall be a member of a regular Baptist Church; and all persons accepting Professorships in this Seminary, shall be considered by such acceptance, as engaging to teach in accordance with, and not contrary to, the Abstract of Principles hereinafter laid down.”¹²

These statements are also contrary to what the great Baptist B. H. Carroll says in his commentary on Ephesians, in which he underscores the importance of doctrine and creeds:

A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.

The modern cry: “Less creed and more liberty,” is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jelly-fish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create heresy—it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but nonetheless deadly.

Just so it is not good discipline that created backsliding and other sins of Christians. But discipline is oftentimes the only means of saving a church. To hold to discipline for immoralities and relax it on doctrine puts the cart before the horse and attempts to heal a stream while leaving the fountain impure. To Christ and the apostles, false creeds were the most deadly things, and called most for the use of the knife....

Again, I solemnly warn the reader against all who depreciate creeds, or who would reduce them to a minimum of entrance qualifications into the church.¹³

When did the great shift from our doctrinal foundation take place? Harold Bloom’s book *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* gives what I believe is the answer to that question:

Edgar Young Mullins I would nominate as the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists, but only in the belated American sense, because Mullins was not the founder of the Southern Baptists but their re-founder, the definer of their creedless faith. An endlessly subtle and original religious thinker, Mullins is the most neglected of early major American theologians. Pragmatically he is more important than Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushness, and the Nierbuhrs, because Mullins reformulated (perhaps even first formulated) the faith of a major American denomination. Leonard says of Mullins, that he personified the Great Compromise only now breaking down in the Southern Baptist Convention. As Leonard notes, Mullins was not a theological liberal, but a defender of Evangelical Baptism who nevertheless found no threat in science or philosophy to the religious. A thorough pragmatist, deeply influenced by William James, Mullins grounded his faith upon “experience” in James’s sense. A deep and powerful subjectivity was the basis of Mullins’s intellectual and spiritual strength, linked also to a profound understanding what Baptists believe depended upon a highly personal relation of each individual to God. I don’t find it accidental that Mullins had memorized much of Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” for Milton had made himself into a sect of one, and his theological position is scarcely distinguishable from that of Mullins. Milton’s devotion to the Inner Light is at the heart of Mullins’s doctrine, to which I turn now, in order to explore the enigma of just what it is that Moderate Southern Baptists believe.”¹⁴

E. Y. Mullins, the fourth president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1899–1928) and president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921–24, can rightly be called the “re-founder of the Southern Baptists.” Mullins articulated theological principles which nearly catapulted Calvinism into oblivion; and when Calvinism goes, the doctrine of man’s will goes also.

The title of his theological dissertation for his Th.D. was *A Baptist Examination of Theological Restatement*.¹⁵ Mullins was a strong advocate of “Theological Restatement.”

There is no question that Mullins’s doctrinal position put an entirely different complexion on the theological face of Southern Seminary. The move away from Calvinism caused more attention to be drawn to the old Erasmus error. The place of man’s will was at the heart of this change. An honest examination of Mullins’s theology as found in his dissertation¹⁶ will soon make it very clear that the turning point began with Mullins.

Mullins replaced the theology of James P. Boyce (as well as that of the famous first faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) with his own theology: “The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression.” It is interesting to note that Mullins never once quoted his old theology professor, James P. Boyce, and there is not one reference to Boyce’s *Abstract of Systematic Theology* in Mullins’ theology text.

Professor Borden Parker Bowne, of Boston University, and his “personalism” had a great deal of influence on Mullins. Personalism is that philosophical outlook which sees the ultimate reality as being explained only and fundamentally in terms of personality. (Mullins wrote a favorable review of Bowne’s book.) Another mentor of Mullins’s

was the philosopher William James, whose work *Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902) best expresses his philosophy. Certainly, neither Parker Bowne or William James could be classified as evangelical Christians.

In one of Mullin's theology class lectures a student recorded the following "values" of experience in theology: "What is there in religious experience that gives it this value?..."

1. It is a reaction of the whole of man's nature upon ultimate reality, and not the reaction of man's reason alone.
2. It includes the sense of dependence of pantheism without immerging [sic] the soul in the all. There must be "a Thou and an I," if there is to be worship. Pantheism cancels "the I and the Thou," and makes it all "the I."
3. It includes the emotions without canceling the will and the personality. Mysticism teaches the absorption in the internal. It cancels the will and the intellect.
4. It has the moral element of the theistic views; but add [sic] the vital religious element.
5. It is more vital and inward than merely morality because it embraces communion and fellowship with God.
6. It is more dynamic [sic] than morality because in it the human will is reinforced by the divine will.
7. It is superior [sic] to mere [sic] beliefs of all kinds because there is a reciprocal relation [between the] believer and the object of belief.
8. Religious experience completes our human reaction upon the universe by assigning to the will its part in that reaction.¹⁷

By the 1970s the residue of evangelical Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention bore minimal resemblance to that of its founding fathers. Actually, the high water mark of Calvinistic influence upon Southern Baptist Convention was reached when the first seminary was founded in 1858. The full tide of Calvinistic influence crested during the era of the famous first faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. For a quarter of a century the stalwart Calvinistic theology rang out with a clarity that the later seminaries never produced. It is safe to say that Southern Baptists were rocked in the cradle of Calvinism.

To answer the question, How did Calvinism fall by the wayside?, we must go to Mullins and his "theology of experience" expressed in his own theological work. One writer designated his work "The Theology of Christian Experience in Abstract Doctrine." The very opening chapters in Mullin's text deals with ways of regarding religious experience and the personal need for self-revelation of God. Mullins put us on the road to Erasmusism regarding free will. In *Christian Religion and Its Doctrinal Expression* he said, "God is limited by man's freedom."¹⁸ In another place he said, "Free-will eats up divine sovereignty: to ignore man's free-will is to see God arbitrary."

As educator, denominational statesman, and theologian, Edgar Young Mullins's "philosophical personalism" is what remains as perhaps the most significant attempt toward theological restatement in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention. In spite of some theological inconsistencies, his heart and soul was tied to biblical Christianity as he understood it. Obviously, he did not realize some of the conclusions his ideas inherently presupposed. He was, of course, very influential. He was a very confusing and contradictory character. One writer said, "he was both a model and a foil." He has left, in the Convention, a theological confusion that is with us today.

Doctrine

"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine...Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself, and those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:13, 16).

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:16).

These passages of Scripture bring together what should never be separated, that is, doctrine and experience, belief and practice—biblical truth clothed with genuine Christian experience. What God has joined together let no man put asunder.

Jesus Was a Doctrinal Preacher

In the first chapter of Mark we learn some important lessons from the Preacher of preachers—the wise Master Preacher Himself. First, we learn that He prayed before He preached (Mark 1:13). He was forty days and nights in the wilderness before He came to Galilee to begin His preaching ministry (v. 14). Note in Mark 1:35: “Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.” Immediately after He prayed, He said to His followers, “Let us go...that I may preach...because for this purpose I have come” (v. 38). He stated very clearly His purpose: “I have come *to preach*.”

In this passage we learn some other important lessons from the Master Preacher. In verses 22 and 27 we learn that He preached with authority; in verse 41 we learn that He preached with compassion. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that He was a doctrinal preacher: “And they were astonished at His doctrine” (v. 22); “What new doctrine is this?” (v. 27). These verses tell us plainly that Jesus was a doctrinal preacher—a teaching preacher.

Doctrine is to Christian experience what bones are to the body. A body without bones would be a lump of “glob” utterly useless. Likewise, bones without flesh are but a dead skeleton.

There are those who cry “down with doctrine” and “up experience.” Some think it quite pious to say, “Christ is our creed and the Bible is our textbook.” On the surface that sounds good. But which Christ are they talking about? There are a thousand “Christs” on the religious market. The Jehovah Witnesses have a “Christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The Mormons have a “Christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. Christian Science has a “Christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The liberals have a “Christ,” but it is not the One who came to us by a virgin’s womb, suffered vicariously on a Roman cross and rose victoriously from a borrowed grave. *There is only one biblical Christ*. The cults also say the Bible is their textbook. But someone must proclaim what this infallible Bible actually says, what it means, and how it applies to our lives and the life of the church. Now, certainly we are all against substituting a dead, doctrinal creed for a living Christ. But our creed need not be dead—just as our faith should not be dead faith (James 2:20). We do not reject true faith because there is a dead faith.

It is not enough to speak of a mystical experience with God without doctrinal knowledge. We must worship God in truth as well as spirit. Truth can be stated in real words, and when truth is stated in real words, it is doctrine—teaching. This effort to be a practicing Christian without knowing what Christianity is all about will always fail. The true Christian has a doctrinal foundation. The conflict between our Lord and the Pharisees was over the question of who He was—the doctrine of the Messiah.

To believe savingly in Christ involves believing the right things about Him: *who He was*—the virgin-born Son of God; *what He did*—suffered vicariously on the cross; *why He died on the cross*—because of a covenant with God the Father to redeem an innumerable company of sheep (His people) from every tribe, nation, and tongue. “And she shall bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

What is true religion? It is not some mystical, nebulous thing, floating around in the sky. True religion cannot be less than this: right thinking in respect to God; right feeling in respect to God; right acting in respect to God. True religion must reach the whole man. It must reach his *mind* because that is what he thinks with; it must reach his *affection* because that is what he feels with; and it must reach his *will* because that is what he decides with.

Experience and Doctrine

Christian experience is the influence of sound biblical doctrine applied to the mind, affections, and will by the Holy Spirit. Founder of twenty-five churches, J. C. Ryle said, “You can talk about Christian experience all you wish, but without doctrinal roots, it is like cut flowers stuck in the ground—it will wither and die.”

It is impossible, therefore, to overemphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the Christian life. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is imperative if we are to have right living. As men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles, so sound Christian character does not grow out of unsound doctrine. Someone may ask, “How do we test true Christian experience in the midst of so much spurious experience and religious confusion?” Let me suggest three tests:

1. Is this professed religious experience produced by the truth plainly and faithfully presented? It must be biblical truth—not only feeling and emotion or religious excitement.
2. Is this professed religious experience regulated and governed by biblical truth?
3. Do the subjects of this professed religious experience manifest a general and cordial love to biblical truth?

Biblical doctrine is more important than most church members realize. Doctrine not only expresses our experiences and beliefs; it also determines our direction. Doctrine shapes our lives and church programs. Doctrine to the Christian and the church is what the bones are to the body. It gives unity and stability.

The church that neglects to teach sound biblical doctrine weakens the church membership. It works against true unity. It invites instability in its fellowship, lessens conviction, and stalemates true progress in the church.

What Doctrines?

Perhaps few would disagree with what I have said to this point. But I do not want to speak in general, nebulous terms. Consider, for example, the word *doctrine*. The word by itself is almost meaningless. All cults have doctrine. I want to be more specific and speak of the doctrines believed and preached by our Baptist fathers—such men as James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, B. H. Carroll, John L. Dagg, Luther Rice, P. H. Mell, John Bunyan, Charles H. Spurgeon, William Carey, and Andrew Fuller. I am speaking of those doctrines expressed by the Philadelphia Association in which Southern Baptists have their roots. These doctrines were the foundation of their devotion, their worship, their witness, and all their service to Christ and His church.

Before I mention specifically some foundational doctrines I must make one simple but weighty point: If what our Baptist fathers believed and taught was true, then it is just as true and just as important today—because the Bible has not changed, truth has not changed, and God has not changed. The minds of men are like porous sieves out of which truth can leak and into which error may seep to dilute the truth. But truth does not change because God Himself does not change. Our understanding of truth may change, but truth does not change.

What specific doctrines am I talking about? Foundational doctrines, not secondary matters. I am talking about those doctrines that were set forth, defined, and defended at the Synod of Dort in 1618 and later expressed in the Westminster Confession and the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689.

I am referring to those doctrines that set forth a God who saves, not this little “God” who just helps man to save himself. I mean those doctrines that reveal the three great acts of the Trinity for the recovering of poor, helpless, lost sinners: election by the Father, redemption by the Son, and calling by the Spirit. All are directed to the same individuals and secure their salvation infallibly. Away with this wicked idea of giving each act of the Trinity a different reference, i.e., the objects of redemption as *all mankind*; the objects of calling as *those who hear the gospel*; and the objects of election as *those hearers who respond*.

Let us instead return to those doctrines which

- give *all* the glory of saving sinners to *God* and do not divide it between God and the sinner
- see the Creator as the source and the end of everything both in nature and in grace
- teach that history is nothing less than the working out of God’s preordained plan
- set forth the God who was sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption (both in planning it and perfecting it), and sovereign in providence—both historically and right now
- reveal a Redeemer who actually redeems; a God who saves by purpose and by power; the Trinity working together for the salvation of sinners (the Father plans it, the Son achieves it, and the Holy Spirit communicates and effectually applies it to God’s elect)
- proclaim a God who saves, keeps, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners—and loses none in the process

God saves sinners! We must not weaken this great truth that God saves sinners by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man. Jonah had it straight: “Salvation [past, present, and future] is of the Lord” (2:9). These doctrines trace the source of every spiritual blessing—faith included—back to that great transaction between God and His Son which was carried out on Calvary’s hill.

The Spirit’s gift is not just an *enlightening* work. It is also the *regenerating* work of God in men: taking away their hearts of stone and giving them hearts of flesh, renewing their wills, and by His almighty power, determining and causing them to come—not against their will but freely, being made willing by His grace (Ps. 110:3).

“Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts” (Ps. 65:4). It is in this sense grace proves to be *irresistible*. Why? Because grace subdues man’s power to resist.

Though this is all the sovereign work of God, let us not suppose that God's decision to save a man by a decree leaves man passive and inert. It is the opposite that takes place:

The covenant of grace does not kill man; it takes possession of a man.

- It does not regard man as a tin can, a piece of wood, or a robot; it lays hold of his whole being with all his faculties and power of soul and body, for time and eternity.
- It does not annihilate his powers but removes his powerlessness.
- It does not destroy his will but frees it from sin.
- It does not stifle or obliterate his conscience but sets it free from darkness.
- It regenerates and recreates man in his entirety; and in renewing him by grace, it causes him to love and consecrate himself to God freely.

These doctrines show the cross as revealing God's *power* to save, not His impotence. The cross was not a place to make salvation *possible* but a place to actually *secure* the salvation of sinners, fulfilling that prophecy of the great evangelical prophet Isaiah: "He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied" (53:11). God was not frustrated at the cross.

The Bible says, "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). God was the Master of Ceremonies at the cross!

William Cowper expressed it in his hymn *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*:

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more."*

These doctrines will drive us to proclaim to everyone:

1. All are sinners—not sick and need help but *dead* and need life.
2. Jesus Christ, God's Son, is the only perfect, able, and willing Savior of sinners (even the worst).
3. The Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be such sinners and put their faith in Christ as Savior shall be received into favor and none cast out.
4. God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man who hears the gospel, a serious and full casting of the soul upon Christ as the all-sufficient Savior, ready, able, and willing to save *all* that come to God by Him.

To the question: "What must I do to be saved?" we must answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). What does that mean? It means:

1. Knowing oneself to be a sinner
2. Knowing Christ to have died for sinners
3. Abandoning all self-righteousness, self-confidence, and self-effort
4. Casting yourself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace
5. Exchanging your natural enmity and rebellion against Him for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of your heart by the Holy Spirit

Erasmus had a wrong view of the human will and its relationship to other major Christian doctrines. It is still a serious error in Roman Catholic teaching. It is likewise true that this erroneous view is held by most present-day Southern Baptists—"Take heed to yourself [your experience] and to the doctrine."

John Sutcliff summed it up very well when he said: "Every increase of religious knowledge should not only make me wiser, but better; not only make my head more clear, but purify my heart, influence my affections, and regulate my life."¹⁹

Appendix: Definitions of Doctrines

By CLAUDE DUVAL COLE

“Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace: Thereby good shall come unto thee”—Job 22:21

The Will of God

IN ALL intelligent beings there is a will—men and angels and God have wills. In men the will is the faculty of the mind by which choice is made of a future action determined upon. In willing a man has the purpose of action in view. And his will is the cause of the action, else he would be a mere machine or automation. If I take a gun and shoot another man, the will worked before the hand did; the purpose was before the act. But if I am held by another man, and a gun is placed in my hand, and another hand moves my finger to pull the trigger, that is not my act because I did not will or choose to do it. In that act I was not a responsible being, but a mere machine or tool of another.

In God the will is the attribute by which He determines and executes future events. His will includes “whatsoever comes to pass,” hence everything that comes to pass is providential and not accidental so far as God is concerned. He worketh all things after the counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11). The sparrow does not fall without the will of God.

Webster defines Providence as an event divinely ordained. Now it is well known that events happen in sequence, that is, they are related in order of time and one event is the cause of another event. So it seems evident, that if some events are ordained then all events are ordained. It is usual for men to distinguish events as providential and accidental. Even Christians are prone to classify their experiences either as providential or accidental. They associate providence with good things, and accident with evil things; therefore, they speak of having an accident. The Rickenbacker party regarded their rescue at sea as providential, but the writer regards the whole of their experiences as providential. The fall of their plane into the sea was as much providential as was their rescue. We need to see God’s will in our afflictions as well as in our blessings. Job was speaking of both when he said, “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away” (Job 1:21). And when his wife pleaded with him to curse God and die, he replied, “Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). And when he had lost all earthly comforts; seeing God’s hand in it all he said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15).

The will of God includes the wicked actions of sinful men, but does not take away their blameworthiness. We may not see how this can be, but the Scriptures declare it and we should believe it. The Scriptures were not written to confirm our reasoning but rather to correct it. On the day of Pentecost Peter said, concerning Jesus, “Him being delivered by the determinate counsel (will) and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). And on a later occasion he said that Herod and Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together “For to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel (will) determined before (Gk . predestinated) to be done” (Acts 4:27, 28). we may not be able to see how God can will or determine a sin without becoming the author of sin, but the fact remains that the greatest of all sins, the slaying of the Son of God, was divinely ordained.

Distinctions in the Will of God

Theologians have made many distinctions in the will of God; some of them are false, others are vain and useless, but there is one distinction that is necessary, and which will prove helpful in rightly dividing the word of truth. This is that which distinguishes between God’s **decretive** and His **preceptive** will, or His will of **purpose** and His will of **command**. God’s will of **purpose** is always done; His will of **command** is often left undone. God’s will of purpose cannot be thwarted, for this would mean His dethronement; His will of command is often violated, for men are in rebellion against Him. If the human will is greater in power than the Divine will then, of course, this human rebellion will succeed and God will be **dethroned**. If human rebellion can overthrow the government of God, we have no supreme Being at all. To further amplify the distinction between God’s **decretive** and **preceptive** wills we will consider each separately.

God’s Will of Purpose

1. It is **eternal**. God is not forming any new purposes, for His counsels are of old (Isa. 25:1). His purpose in Christ is said to be eternal (Eph. 3:11). What is to be will be, therefore, “known unto God are all His works, from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18).

2. It is **effectual**. God's will of purpose is always accomplished. God is not man that He should engage in wishful thinking. There are no mere wishes with Him which He cannot perform. Isa. 14:24-27. For example, back in eternity God willed or determined the death of His Son, and centuries after time began we see Him controlling and directing the free actions of sinful men to bring this even to pass. Moreover, He predestinated and predicted the details—when, where, and how His Son should die. And so in the four gospels, we are told that this and that was done to Him that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

3. It is **immutable**. God never changes His will of purpose. There are only two possible reasons for anybody changing his will; it must be either because he sees that what he purposed was not wise, or that he sees it cannot be accomplished. But neither of these reasons can apply to God. He was All-wise in planning and is All-powerful in performing.

Prayer does not change God's will, but it does change things. Changes wrought by prayer are all within the circle of God's purposing will. To this end the Spirit of God makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:27). Answered prayer is made in the energy of the Holy Spirit. A man may pray without the Spirit and get what he asks for, but it would not be in answer to prayer. Two generals on opposing sides may pray for victory in the coming battle, but both could not be praying in the Holy Spirit, and it is possible that neither of them are. In all true prayer the thought is implied or expressed: Not my will but Thine be done.

*“Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
However dark it be;
O lead me by Thine own right hand,
Choose out the path for me.*

*“I dare not choose my lot;
I would not if I might;
But choose Thou for me, O my God,
So shall I walk aright.*

*“Take Thou my cup, and it
With joy or sorrow fill;
As ever best to Thee may seem,
Choose Thou my good and ill.*

*“Not mine, not mine the choice,
In things of great or small;
Be Thou my guide, my guard, my strength
My wisdom, and my all.”*

4. God's will of purpose was the **cause of our conversion**. I am a converted or saved man. I have been born again. What is the explanation of this tremendous change? Back of every performance or action there must be a will. Did I will myself into a new man? Did some other man effectually will my second birth? In John 1:12 we are told that believers are given the right to become the children of God, and the following verse explains their faith in these words: “Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Saving faith does not originate with our parents, nor with ourselves, nor with some other man; it is the gift and work of God. James 1:18 says, “Of his own will begat He us with the word of truth.”

God's Will of Command

1. God's preceptive will refers to what He has prescribed as our rule of thought and conduct. The will of God is expressed in all Divine law. In Eden it was God's will that determined what kind of law would be given to Adam and Eve. At Sinai God did not consult Moses or the children of Israel about what laws they would be under. In a democracy the people make their own laws through chosen representatives who serve in legislative halls. This gives rise to pressure groups and class legislation because men are selfish; they do not love their neighbours as themselves. But in our relation to God we are not dealing with a democracy but with a Theocracy. In God's will of command we have the sovereignty of authority; in God's will of purpose we have the sovereignty of power.

2. It is God's will of command and not His will of purpose that men are responsible to perform. It was His will of purpose that Christ should be crucified, but it was not His will of command. In putting Jesus Christ to death men were fulfilling the purpose of God, but they were not obeying any command of God. There can be no sin in doing what God has commanded. Peter tells us that they put Christ to death with wicked hands; therefore, they were not obeying a command of God. What God purposes is the determining factor; what He commands is our duty. It seems easy for men to

see this distinction in everything except religion. A man who can see only one side of the truth will say, "If it is God's will or purpose to save me, He will save me; therefore, I will sit down and do nothing about it." Now this same man would not dare reason this way about other things. Concerning this year's crop, God's will of purpose determines the harvest, but His command is to plow and plant, cultivate and reap. God's will of purpose determines whether we live or die (Jas. 4:15), but it is His will of command that we regard the laws of health. Nobody quits eating because he believes God's will of purpose determines whether he lives or dies. God's will of purpose will determine the outcome of this war, but it would be foolish to sit down and say: "If it is God's will we will win, if not we will lose; therefore, let us strike and stop mining coal and producing steel." God's will of purpose determines the result of our witnessing for Christ. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good" (Eccl. 11:6). "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower; and bread to the eater; so shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth; it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing thereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:10, 11). It is God's will of command that we sow beside all waters, to preach the Gospel to every creature, and His will of purpose will take care of the results and make it accomplish what He pleases.

It is God's will of purpose that determines whether I am saved or not, but it is folly to sit down and say that if I am one of the elect I will be saved; therefore, I need not take any interest in the matter. God's will of command is to repent and believe, and this is every man's responsibility. We are commanded to make our calling and election certain (2 Peter 1:10). We are commanded to strive to enter in at the strait gate (Luke 13:24). The man who takes no interest in his soul and has no concern for his salvation; if he persists in this attitude will surely land in the lake of fire; for he that believeth not shall be damned. Much of God's will of purpose belongs to His secret will, and Secret things belong unto God, but what He has revealed and commanded belong to us. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of the law" (Deut. 29:29).

FOOTNOTES:

1 *Baptist Hymnal*, Edited by Walter Hines Sims (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1956) 238

2 J.I. Packer and R.O. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction" to *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther, tr. by Packer and Johnston (Cambridge: Jas. Clark & Co. Ltd., 1957) 40–43

3 Zacharias Ursinas, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, [Reproduction of second American edition, Columbus, Ohio, 1852]) 65

4 Ibid.

5 Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1992) 116

6 As quoted in the *Evangelical Times*, April 1996

7 J.I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961) 18–24

8 (Den Dulk Foundation) 347–348

9 (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1963) 12

10 *SBC Today*, 1:9, 2–3

11 Ibid.

12 (Mueller, *History of Southern Seminary* (Nashville: Broadman Press) 238

13 An Interpretation of the English Bible: Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews (Nashville: Broadman, 1948) 140–141, 150

14 Simon and Schuster, 199

15 A dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963

16 266, 339, 343, 344, 348, 434–37

17 Taken from W.C. Harrell, class notes, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

18 (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1917) 348

19 Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1994) 48