

## **CHAPTER NINE: FREE WILL**

### **The Nature of Free Will**

1. *In the natural order God has endued man's will with liberty and the power to act upon choice, so that it is neither forced from without, nor by any necessity arising from within itself, compelled to do good or evil.*

The Biblical teaching about the will of man is central to the teaching about salvation. If we go wrong here we will go wrong everywhere. During the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther wrote a book called 'The Bondage of the Will', which he considered to be his most important writing next to his translation of the Bible into German. The Confession defines freedom (liberty) of the will to consist in "the power to act upon choice". What we choose to do we have the power to do. This is the experience of every man – we freely choose what we want to choose – and this is the basis of our responsibility. God always addresses us in His Word as those who are responsible for what they do. We are not forced to do what we do not want to do by external factors. For example, a thief may demand that you hand over your money or be killed. If you decide to hand it over rather than face death, it was your free choice. Many other have refused and have been killed.

### **The Will Before the Fall**

2. *In his state of innocency man had freedom and power to will and to do what was good and acceptable to God. Yet, being unstable, it was possible for him to fall from his uprightness.*

Adam and Eve were created upright (Genesis 1:31, Ecclesiastes 7:29). There was nothing evil, nothing lacking in their nature that would make them choose evil. Yet, although we cannot explain it, it was possible for them to choose evil. We know this because that is what they did! This is why the tree was called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17). They were unstable creatures, under a test, not confirmed in their uprightness, liable to fall before external temptation.

### **The Will After the Fall**

3. *As the consequence of his fall into a state of sin, man has lost all ability to will the performance of any of those works, spiritually good, that accompany salvation. As a natural (unspiritual) man he is dead in sin and altogether opposed to that which is good. Hence he is not able, by any strength of his own, to turn himself to God, or even to prepare himself to turn to God.*

The Fall so changed the nature of man that sinful man is totally unable to will anything "spiritually good". The Confession describes such things as those that "accompany salvation". Whatever is required for salvation, such as faith and repentance, is impossible for man in sin. This because man's nature is totally depraved = every faculty has become corrupted by sin (see chapter 6, sections 4 & 5). How can a person whose heart is deceitful, who is blind to the truth, and who loves his sin, ever have the will to turn to God? Therefore, no man can do anything to save himself, nor can he do anything even to prepare himself for that salvation. Man is helpless and thus without hope in himself. This **total inability** with regards to salvation is proved by the following arguments:

1. The Bible describes man as “dead” in sin (Ephesians 2:1,5), a “slave” to sin (Romans 6:17-20) and “blind” to the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). No dead man can raise himself; no slave can free himself; no blind man can open his own eyes. So the Bible uses three words to describe what happens when a person becomes a Christian, words that imply that only God can make a person a Christian: birth (John 3:3,5), resurrection (Ephesians 2:1,5,6), and creation (Ephesians 2:10).
2. The Bible clearly says that no man has any ability to please God (Romans 8:8), or to do His will (Jeremiah 13:23, Matthew 12:33-37), or to come to Christ in faith (John 6:44,65), or to enter the kingdom (John 3:3,5), or to understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).
3. The Bible does not attribute salvation to the will of man, but rather to the will of God (John 1:12-13, Romans 9:16-18), James 1:18).

To this doctrine of total depravity there have been **objections**. Some say that man can only be responsible for what he is able to do. So, they argue, if God commands faith, men must be able to believe. But the same Bible that commands faith (Acts 16:31) also teaches that men cannot believe by their own power (John 6:44, see Acts 13:48). The inability is not physical but spiritual. And the inability arises from men’s sinful nature for which men, not God, are responsible. A drunken driver is not excused for bad driving by pleading he was unable to drive properly because he was drunk! Some object that total inability produces helplessness and despair. This is exactly what needs to be produced in the sinner so that he no longer looks to himself, but to God with whom his only hope lies. This doctrine is a great preparation for the gospel.

### **The Will After Conversion**

4. *When God converts a sinner, and brings him out of sin into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage to sin and, by His grace alone, He enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good. Nevertheless certain corruptions remain in the sinner, so that his will is never completely and perfectly held in captivity to that which is good, but it also entertains evil.*

When a person becomes a Christian he receives a new heart so that he is no longer in “his natural bondage to sin”. As opposed to the non-Christian he is able “to that which is spiritually good” (Philippians 2:13). This is as Adam was before the Fall. God’s purpose in conversion is to enable the sinner to do His will and so to be holy (see Romans 8:4). We must live as those who are able to do what God says in the Scriptures and not make any excuses. However, because “certain corruptions remain in the sinner” it is impossible to live a perfect life. There is always a struggle between the new man and the flesh (see Galatians 5:16-17). This is different from Adam before the Fall, as he was able not to sin.

### **The Will in Glory**

5. *It is not until man enters the state of glory that he is made perfectly and immutably free to will that which is good, and that alone.*

This is the final goal of creation, and of salvation. In glory the Christian will receive that perfection Adam would have received if he had passed the test in the garden. Then, it will not be possible for the Christian to sin, because he will have a new body like Christ’s glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21). Then the will of the Christian will be as free as God’s is free, free to do good and to never sin. True freedom does necessarily consist in the ability to do evil as well as good, otherwise God and the angels would not be truly free. Thank God for that hope we have in glory.