

# To What Extent Does Man Have Free Will?

It has been an age old problem. Where is the balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility? In the realm of conversion we can be sure that regeneration precedes repentance and faith since the Bible declares that faith is a gift of God (Eph 2:8) and that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him (Jn 6:44). Unless God does something inside a man's heart, there can be no conversion. The effectual call of the Holy Spirit must precede any action of man in deciding for Jesus. The responsibility of man is, therefore, to repent and believe as a result of being enabled by God. Naturally we have no will to surrender to God, being lost in our sins and depravity. Paul makes this clear in Romans; quoting Psalms he declares that no one seeks for God (Rm 3:10). Despite the testimony of God being plainly seen in creation men do not honour God, rather they suppress the truth and have become futile in their thinking (Rm 18 ff). God must supply the will to repent. He radically changes our disposition to turn us from our sins.

In the case of the elect then, free will is not really an issue. Man has a responsibility to repent but does so as a result of God's action in his heart. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are combined, but the source of the initial action is God. Salvation is of the Lord. But what about ordinary men? To what degree is man's will free generally? If he didn't have free will then he would be a zombie. We know that this is not the case. God created man to make choices. But man cannot choose to be saved, as we have seen. His free will cannot be a will to choose life, or salvation would cease to be of the Lord and would be of man. This is the case in Arminianism and Pelagianism. In evangelical Arminianism, salvation is a vague entity that has been procured by Jesus awaiting the decision of men to accept him -anyone can do it at any time. The scriptures already quoted show that this cannot be true (and there are a great many more). As regards salvation, man's will cannot be free. Man is not capable of self determination to good because he is depraved. Man has been given up by God to a base mind, improper conduct, filled with all manner of wickedness, deserving to die, (Rm 1:28-32).

So, man's will is free and yet bound. How do we explain this?

## Responsibility

Firstly, we must establish that man is indeed responsible for his sin and his need to turn to God:

- God commands all men to repent - Acts 17:30
- Man is lost in sin - Rm 1-3
- Man is responsible for his own sin, he is guilty - Rm 3:19,20,23, 5:18; Jm 2:10; Jude 15; Jn 3:18-20,36.

## Inability

Secondly, the Bible shows clearly that natural man is unable to respond, unable to repent, unable to believe because he is so lost in sin. In addition to the texts already quoted we

add:

- No one can come to Jesus unless the Father grants it - Jn 6:65
- Repentance is a gift of God - Acts 5:31, 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25.
- Man is dead towards God with no spiritual ability - Eph 2:1
- Man must be raised to new life - Eph 2:5a; Jn 3:3,6
- Salvation is by God's grace alone - Eph 2:5b,8.

### **First Conclusion**

*Sin has so totally corrupted man that he is completely unable to even respond to the Gospel by nature. Without God's assistance all men would be hopelessly lost and doomed to perdition. The demand to obey is still in force, however, and all men are under condemnation. Free will cannot include the ability to believe in God without the prior work of the Holy Spirit.*

## **Why is man unable ?**

What has made man dead towards God? The answer is the Fall.

God warned Adam, man's representative head, that the day he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would die (Gen 2:16-17). Now Adam did not physically die that day; unless you take it that from that point he was made mortal. What is more likely is that on that day Adam's spirit became dead towards God. As a result, he no longer enjoyed fellowship with God and, in fact, feared him (Gen 3:8-10).

All of mankind was tested in Adam, he represented the entire race. As a result, all men fell with him (Rm 5:12).

### **Fallen man is totally depraved**

The condition of the state of man after the fall is clearly spelled out in Genesis 6:5

**The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**

Jeremiah goes further:

**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? I the Lord search the mind and try the heart, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.** (Jer 17:9-10)

There is no propensity to good in these statements: no ability to find peace with God; no self determination to good. Every part of man's nature is radically corrupt. Any seeming goodness is, at best, superficial and only seems 'good' in comparison to other depraved people, not God. In traumatic circumstances, like war or tragedy, the veneer is often peeled away and 'good' men change. Man's own actions and statements will be enough to judge him (Rm 2). Even without a moral code he judges the actions of others while doing the same things. This testimony from his own mouth is enough to damn him.

### **Second conclusion**

*The reason for man's inability is due to the Fall of mankind, represented by Adam in the garden of Eden. As a result all men are totally depraved, that is:*

- every aspect of man's nature is affected, the extent is total.
- It does not mean that every man is as evil as he can possibly be, but that all his

*faculties are affected by the Fall.*

- *This has led to the death of man's spirit towards God.*
- *Man has no propensity to good in terms of God's standards of righteousness.*
- *Man is responsible for his actions, which are evil even by his own judgment, and will suffer the wrath and condemnation of God as a result.*

### **Spiritual effects of the fall**

Man's spiritual condition is often pictured in terms of physical sickness or inability. For instance Isaiah 53:4-6 tells us that Jesus has carried our sicknesses and pains, that he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities and we, as a result are made whole and healed. 1 Pt 2:24 uses similar language to describe our forgiveness in the cross. (It is also applied to Jesus' healing ministry in Mt 8:17.)

- Man is blind - Eph 4:18; Acts 26:18
- Man is deaf - Jn 8:43, 8:47
- Man is sick - Rm 7:5; Gal 6:7; typified by leprosy Lev 13
- Man is dead - Eph 2:1;
- Man is racially unfit i.e. belongs to a race that can't be saved as it stands - 1 Cor 15:50

Man is also said to be:

- Alienated from God - Eph 4:18
- An enemy of God - Rm 5:10
- Unable to discern truth - 1 Cor 2:14
- A slave - Rm 6:20; Jn 8:34-36
- Deceived to depend upon his own strength - Hos 10:13

### **Third conclusion**

*Man is in a very serious state indeed. There is no hope for him left to his own strength and will. His condition is terminal. He is lost. His will can have no power for salvation, either to choose it or to gain it.*

## **What is the nature of man's salvation?**

- It gives life - Jn 1:4; Eph 2:1
- It is a sonship - Jn 1:12
- It is an adoption - Rm 8:15
- It is a creation - 2 Cor 5:17
- It is a conception (birth) - Jn 3:3
- It is becoming a part of a new race - 1 Cor 15:20-23,42-50
- It requires a choosing (election) - Eph 1:4-5
- It requires a gift of grace - Eph 2:8
- It requires a gift of faith - Eph 2:8-9
- It requires a gift of repentance - Acts 5:31
- It requires a gift of justification - Rm 4:1-5, 5:1
- It requires an effectual calling - Rm 8:30

### **Fourth conclusion**

*The act of salvation is a huge affair involving many acts of God. It is totally dependent*

*upon God, not only as the first cause, but to see the work through (sanctification, perseverance, glorification). The very best of men have no hope of attaining this. A dead man cannot bring himself to life, he requires a resurrection.*

## The will is not a constituent of the initiation of salvation.

We can argue about the place of the will in conversion. It is obviously involved in the act of repentance and faith, but we have seen that this is not the initial act in salvation. It is not Biblical doctrine to say that the first act in the salvation of a sinner is his decision, his choice for Jesus. Prior to any action of man there is (at the very least): the elective choosing of God, the decree of predestination, the decision to atone, the sending of the Holy Spirit to call, the drawing of the Father and the gifts of regeneration, faith and repentance.

Since this is true, is there any place for the will in the initial stages of salvation? No!

**So it depends not upon man's exertion (will), but upon God's mercy. (Rm 9:15)**

**So then he (God) has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills. (Rm 9:18)**

**God made us alive ... by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not because of works (e.g. the will of man), lest any man should boast. (Eph 2:5-9)**

It is wrong to suggest that anyone can believe in Jesus. The will cannot choose faith, faith must be given. Not everyone has faith (2 Thess 3:2) because not everyone is given it, only the elect. In salvation, man can only receive (1 Cor 4:7). Thus all the glory goes to God. It is not shared.

Salvation must be understood in terms of election. The apostle Paul makes this the first cause and continually refers to it in opposition to any suggestion that man determines his own salvation (eg Rm 8:9; Eph 1). He even uses a dramatic image to drive the point home, that of a potter who chooses to make a vessel of honour with one piece of clay and destroy another from the same lump.

### **Fifth conclusion**

*The will of man is not the prime mover in salvation. The Bible specifically states that it is not dependent upon the will of man. Only God can supply the power to draw a man to himself.*

## To what degree is man's will free?

Man has the power of choice within his natural remit. He is a free agent among other men in the world. He can wake up and choose whether to wear a suit or jeans. He can paint his house whatever colour he likes. Jonathan Edwards described the will as: *'that by which the mind chooses anything'*. What we choose is determined by the mind. Man has volitional power at a soulish (Greek: *psuche*, 'psyche') level, i.e. a psychological level. The mind's choice is determined by motives, i.e. what it thinks is best. Only an insane person would do what he didn't choose for his best, what is against his inclination. [Some make the case that the will isn't free at all being under the direction of the intent or disposition of the mind. A rational human being can't have freedom to deny intelligent considerations. However this is splitting hairs, whether it is the mind or the will, - the soul (the psyche) chooses at a

basic sub spiritual level.]

Man has no power to will at a spiritual (*pneuma*) level. Man can only will to comparative evil (i.e. compared to the righteousness of God not man, man is capable of philanthropic works). The heart is corrupt, and everything springs from the heart (Prov 4:23). Good fruit cannot arise from a bad tree (Matt 12:33-35).

Being saved means coming to God. This is what the human will cannot and will not do. Being sinful, it is not motivated to do it. Coming to God means acknowledging his sovereignty, man does not accept this, he feels that he is in control. Coming to God means approaching someone who is holy, man does not want to come and confess his sin and lack of holiness. The will of man is morally unable. It can only will within the realm of sin.

If man's will was free, salvation would be of man, not of the Lord (Jonah 2:9). Man would be controlling grace not grace controlling him. Man would be able to thwart God.

### **Sixth conclusion**

*Man can exercise free will in terms of soulish or psychological choice. There is a natural ability to choose in everyday things. As far as moral good (Godly righteousness) is concerned, man's will is bound and unable. He cannot choose faith or life.*

## **But what about 'Whosoever will may come'?**

This oft quoted sentence is actually from a hymn and a chorus. The sentiments are, however, Biblical. The nearest approximation to this in the Bible is Rev 22:17b

**And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (AV)**

Similar ideas are found in Matt 7:7-8, 11:28; Jn 3:16,7:37.

Now we have seen that the Biblical teaching is that man cannot come of his own free will but must be drawn by God. This is the clear statement of truth. The rules of interpretation insist that Rev 22:17 is interpreted in the light of the clear teaching and not made to mean something else.

No man will ever stand at the day of judgment and declare that he longed to come to Christ but was refused. The will to come in a man is the expression of the inward working of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. The Spirit works upon the will to change a man's inclinations to respond to the gospel. The offer of the Gospel is to all without discrimination. We are to go into all the world to preach it. However, only those called and predestined will respond to that offer (Rm 8:29-30).

### **Seventh conclusion**

*It is true that whosoever will may come to Jesus but those are the ones that God has drawn, elected from eternity. It is God's power that draws, not man's will. Gospel presentations which emphasise that people must decide to be saved or that they can be saved at any time or that it lies within man's power must be avoided as false. Enquirers should be shown God's demands in the law, their state in sin, the provision of a saviour in Christ and advised to seek God for mercy. If it is judged that the person is under conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit, then they should be directed to repent and believe in Jesus as saviour and Lord.*

## Other views

### **Pelagianism**

Stated that the will is neutral. If man is responsible, he must be able. It is free to choose good and do it. Sin is only when we deliberately choose to do evil. There is no total depravity. Adam's sin affected no one else. Men are born in innocence. Man can live free of sin even without knowing Christ. The law and Christ's example are given to encourage man to choose good. A limited gracious influence is given to those who deserve it by the faithful use of their own powers, but it can be resisted.

Augustine countered this by saying that this destroyed the Biblical doctrine of sin and the grace of God. There is an inherited depravity and, therefore, a man cannot stop sinning. A person is not able to choose God; in the fall he lost himself and his will. The will is enslaved so that it has no power for righteousness. Grace is essential; not just for conversion but for continuance in the Christian life. The church accepted Augustine's view but gradually drifted into Pelagianism over the following centuries.

### **Erasmus**

During the Reformation, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam entered into controversy with Martin Luther over this issue. He declared that the will must be free, for similar reasons to Pelagius. Luther accepted the psychological fact that people make choices, but in the area of choosing God Luther denied free will, denied self determination vigorously. His reply, *'The Bondage of the Will'* is still a classic. We are wholly given over to sin, must acknowledge it and cry to God for mercy; and even that requires God's grace to convict us of our sin.

### **Council of Trent**

All the Reformers took essentially the same position of Luther (i.e. Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer etc.). In retaliation, the Roman Catholic church set up the council of Trent to respond to the Reformation and try to regain ground. They took a semi-Pelagian position, ie that man can co-operate with God. A blend of human will and divine assistance.

### **Arminianism**

In Holland Jacob Arminius and his more radical Remonstrant followers (a party formed by his disciples a year after his death) revived versions of Pelagianism. In this system, which is essentially semi-Pelagianism, election becomes conditional; i.e. God chooses to save those whom he foreknows will have faith. Man is able to use his free will to latch on to grace provided by Jesus whose death does not actually save a specific number of elect but only provides a potential salvation for those who decide to accept him as saviour. Salvation, therefore, becomes a joint effort between God and man. Man is not dead but able to choose and repent without grace to do so. As a result of this man centred gospel, the Christian life also becomes a journey of effort. There is no guarantee of salvation and it therefore becomes possible to fall away from grace. The synod of Dort (in Holland) was convened (in 1618) to repudiate this heresy and formulated the five points of Calvinism (known by the mnemonic TULIP). The five points are not the whole of Calvinistic doctrine but simply key points in response to Arminius' theories. Much of the modern church is Pelagian or Arminian (although only the Methodists formally state this in their creed). The failure of both is not that they ignore grace but that they elevate the will to an unbiblical position and make it the first cause of salvation.

## This Biblical view is historically attested.

The exposition given here is not novel but is the same as all the historical Reformed standards of faith (e.g. the *Synod of Dort*, the *Belgic confession*). It also appears in the 39 articles of the Church of England (Article 10), and the answer to question 25 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* and section 10:1 of the *Westminster Confession*.

### Conclusion

The case is made. Surely no more proof is needed.

Man can exercise a certain amount of free will in choosing according to his desires and inclinations. The will is conditioned by the mind (and to some degree by the emotions) to decide for what is best for the person. This is the level of the soul (volition, emotions, mind), the psychological level.

Since the fall, man's will has been bound in sin. His being is completely corrupted, totally depraved, and man cannot choose spiritual good. It cannot rise above sin.

Man cannot choose faith or repentance. He cannot decide for Christ on his own. A person can only come to Christ when he is drawn by the Father. Those who are drawn are those who are elect from eternity.

Of the theological schools, the Biblical doctrine is taught by Augustinianism, Calvinism and the Reformed faith. Protestant churches that adhere to Reformed standards also believe this (e.g. the original Anglican and Lutheran churches). In these days many Evangelicals fail to hold this truth, having succumbed to Arminianism.

### Sources

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