

PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL

by

James Montgomery Boice

An article from *Tenth*, An Evangelical Quarterly, July, 1983
(Official papers of the 1983 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology)

I am not a philosopher, but I have read that the problem of the will is the most discussed issue in philosophy. It is also a major subject in religious discussion. Martin Luther believed that it is the essential issue in Christianity, because it relates (as is perfectly plain and, I trust, will become even plainer as we deal with it in this hour) to the doctrines of sin and how serious sin is, grace and how necessary grace is, and how grace must function in us if we are to be saved.

At the end of his monumental defense of the will's bondage, after he had demolished the arguments of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose work he was answering, Luther turned to the Dutch humanist and complimented him on at least focusing on the central matter. He wrote, "I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account--that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue."

Free will relates to the Fall. And when we talk about the Fall, we want to ask, How far did man fall when he fell? I tell a story about a mountain climber making his way up a steep ascent of rock who slips and is about to go over the edge of a cliff to his death. He throws out his hand and catches himself on a branch. There are some people who think the Fall is like that. It is a serious slip and is certainly leading in the direction of our destruction, but there is that branch. We catch it and, having not fallen completely, there is always the possibility of getting ourselves back up onto the level ground and on with the climb again.

So how far *did* man fall when he sinned? Did he stumble merely? Did he fall part way, but nevertheless not so far as to render himself hopeless? Or did he fall totally, so far that he cannot even will to seek God or obey him? What does the Bible mean when it says that man is "dead in trespasses and sins"? Does this mean that he really is dead so far as any ability to respond to God or choose God is concerned? Or does he still have the ability at least to respond to God when the offer of salvation is made to him? If man can respond, what does Paul mean when he says that "no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11), or what does Jesus mean when he says that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him" (John 6:44)? On the other hand, if he cannot respond, what is the meaning of those many passages in which the gospel is offered to fallen men and women? Again, how is a person to be held responsible for failing to believe on Jesus if he or she is unable to do it because of the will's bondage?

These questions suggest the importance of the subject. And they indicate how the doctrines of sin and depravity, election, grace and human responsibility flow from it.

I want to say one other thing by way of introduction, namely, that this is an encouraging subject because it shows that progress can be made in theology. In early periods of church history there were men who had proper biblical perspectives on this subject but did not really understand what the will is and how it functions. Later, people did come to understand it. We come up against theological matters that we do not understand. They are an utter mystery to us. But because they are a mystery now does not mean they will always be a mystery. There may be things we are talking about in this conference that nobody today can understand. Yet there may be somebody sitting here who will begin to deal with them and eventually explain them for the benefit of the church, and theology will go forward.

I would like to look at three periods in which the will was discussed, periods which I believe were the key ones. Because of the advance in understanding I have mentioned, this will enable us also to progress from a right but primitive understanding of the issue to what I believe to be a more advanced one.

Augustine and Pelagius

The first period concerns the way the matter was discussed by Augustine in his controversies with Pelagius in the early fifth century. It was not the intention of Pelagius to deny the universality of sin, at least at the beginning. In this he wished to remain orthodox. But he was unable to see how responsibility could reside in man without free will. Ability must be present if there is to be obligation, he argued. If I ought to do something, I can. In working this out Pelagius argued that the will, rather than being bound over to sin, was actually neutral so that at any given moment or in any situation it is free to choose the good and do it. In this approach sin became only those deliberate and unrelated acts in which the will chooses to do evil, and any necessary connection between sins or any hereditary principle of sin within the race was forgotten. Pelagius further stated that:

- 1. The sin of Adam affected no one but himself.*
- 2. Those who have been born since Adam have been born into the condition Adam possessed before his fall, that is, into a position of neutrality so far as sin is concerned.*
- 3. Men are able to live free from sin if they desire to do so, and this they can do even without an awareness of the work of Christ and the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit.*

It is easy to see how Pelagius' position greatly limited the true scope of sin and inevitably

led to a denial of the absolute need of the unmerited grace of God in salvation. Moreover, even in a case where the gospel of grace is freely preached to the sinner, what ultimately determines whether he or she will be saved or not is, not the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit within, but rather the will which either receives or else rejects the Savior.

Early in his life Augustine had thought much as Pelagius. But he had come to see that the view did not do justice either to the biblical doctrine of sin, which is always portrayed as far more than mere individual and isolated acts, or to the grace of God, which is ultimately the only fully determining element in salvation. So far as sin goes, Augustine argued that there is an inherited depravity as the result of which it is simply not possible for the individual to stop sinning. His key phrase was *non possi non peccare* (that is, "not able not to sin"). It means that a person is not able to choose God. Augustine says that man, having used his free will badly in the Fall, lost both himself and his will. He says that the will has been so enslaved that it can have no power for righteousness. He says ironically that the will is indeed free of righteousness, but enslaved to sin. He says that it is free to turn *from* God, but not to turn *to* him.

In the matter of grace Augustine was concerned to stress that grace is a necessity, apart from which no one can be saved. Moreover, it is a matter of grace from beginning to end, not just of prevenient grace or partial grace to which the sinner adds by his own efforts. Otherwise, salvation would not be of God entirely, his honor would be diminished, and man for his part would have room for boasting in heaven.

Sometimes in my discussion with someone who thinks like Pelagius I will say, "If you believe that in the final analysis salvation depends on your free choice, you are going to claim some of the glory for yourself."

"Oh, no," he or she says, "I don't want to do that. Salvation is all of God."

But I reply, "What happens then when you get to heaven and somebody else is there and you are talking to him or her and the question comes up about those who are missing. Why are you there and they are not? Was the grace of God not offered to them?"

"Yes, it was."

"Was the death of the Lord Jesus Christ not sufficient for them?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, then, why are you here and they are not here?"

The answer has to be, "Well, I hate to say this especially standing in heaven as I am and having laid upon me the duty to glorify God; but I have to be honest and admit that in the final analysis I am here because I believed and they are not here because they did not. So I suppose that some of the glory--not much though! just a tiny bit--does go to me." This is what Augustine saw to be utterly unbiblical. He saw that the Bible does not give ninety-

nine and forty-four one-hundredths percent of the glory to God, but one hundred percent of the glory to God. It is for us to profess that from first to last we are sinners *saved by grace*, and not grace plus anything of ourselves.

Luther's "Bondage of the Will"

The second period is that of the Reformation, when the same battle erupted again on several fronts. One very direct confrontation was the exchange between Erasmus and Luther referred to earlier. Erasmus had been sympathetic to the Reformation in its early stages, for he, like all clear thinkers of the day, readily saw the corruptions of the medieval church and longed for their correction. But Erasmus did not have Luther's deep spiritual undergirdings and thus was eventually prevailed upon to challenge Luther, which he did in the matter of the will. He said that the will must be free, for reasons much like those given by Pelagius. But this was not a subject for which Erasmus had great interest; hence, while he opposed Luther, he nevertheless counseled moderation.

It was no small matter to Luther. Consequently, he plunged into his subject zealously, viewing it as that upon which the very truth of God depended. Erasmus' treatise had been titled "*The Freedom of the Will*." Luther's work, written against Erasmus, was *The Bondage of the Will*. In it he stated the same type of argument that Augustine had earlier.

In *The Bondage of the Will* Luther was not unwilling to admit that people do make choices. This is so self-evident as almost not to require a statement. You and I make choices every day of our lives. When we go to bed at night, we decide at what hour we are going to get up in the morning. We set the alarm clock accordingly. And when the alarm rings we make another choice--either to get up or not. It is that way all through the day. Luther was not concerned with that. What Luther wanted to say was that in all the important things, above all in spiritual matters, men and women are unable to make those choices which pertain to salvation.

A person obviously has free will in what may be regarded as many non-essential things. He can decide what profession he is going to enter. He can decide what school to attend in order to prepare for it. He can decide to live on campus or off. He can choose his clothes, the make of his car, the kind of food he will eat, and so on. But these are not the most important areas of life. In the most important areas we do not have free will, Luther argued.

To begin with, we do not have free will in the intellectual realm. On the basis of the intelligence we have, we can make choices. But we cannot choose to have an intelligence quotient of 160 if our intelligence quotient is only 100. Moreover, even if we have high intelligence in one area, it does not mean that we will necessarily have an equal aptitude in other areas. We may excel in quantum mechanics, for example; but we cannot necessarily excel in literary fields, just because we will it. Similarly, an individual does not have an unlimited will in many physical areas. He has the free will to go out for the

track team; but he does not have the free will to make it if he lacks the necessary speed and co-ordination. He does not have free will to run the hundred-yard dash in seven seconds, however much he would like to. He cannot run the mile in three minutes. Or again, he cannot look like Robert Redford. Or, if a girl, she cannot look like Bo Derek just by wishing it. In other words, while there are areas in which men and women do make choices, these are not unlimited, nor are they even the most significant areas.

Now, just as we do not have free will in many intellectual and physical areas, so we do not have free will spiritually. And it is this that is at the heart of the free will versus the bondage of the will debate, as Luther saw it. Adam did have free will, but he lost it. Since then all men and women have been born as he was consequent to the Fall.

We may illustrate what happened by imagining that God created Adam on the edge of a steep pit. He told Adam, "Do not jump into that pit; because if you do jump into the pit, you will not be able to get back out again." As long as Adam stayed on the edge of the pit he had free will so far as the matter of his jumping or not was concerned. But once he decided to jump in, free will was lost in that area. He still had free will to walk around on the bottom of the pit or sit down. He had the choice of being complacent about his condition or else complaining about it. He could cry for help or be silent. He could blame himself or try to shift the blame to another. He had free will in each of those areas. But in the crucial area, the area of his being able to get out of the pit, he was impotent.

Thus did Adam fall away from God. He did not need to, but, once he did, the possibility of his returning to God was gone from him. Moreover, all who have followed him have been born into his condition. Some are complacent; some are angry. Some are resigned; some are anxious. Most are hardly aware of what has been lost. But regardless of their state of mind, all are in the same condition so far as God is concerned. They cannot choose him. And none do choose him until by grace God reaches down into the mud pit of human misery and sin, picks the sinner up, places him upon the edge of the pit once more and says, "Now, this is the way; walk in it."

Luther was impressed with texts such as these. First, Jesus spoke to the religious leaders of his day, asking rhetorically, "Why is my language not clear to you?" He then answered, "Because you are *unable* to hear what I say" (John 8:43). His point was not that they were physically deaf, but that they were spiritually deaf. They could hear, but not with understanding.

Second, Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit, saying to his disciples, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever--the Spirit of truth. The world *cannot* accept him" (John 14:16, 17). This means that no one receives the Holy Spirit as an act of the will. He must be given.

Third, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, *nor can it* do so" (Rom. 8:7, 8). In these words Paul teaches that the natural man, that is, a man or woman unaided by God's Spirit, cannot by his or her own will submit to God's law.

Fourth, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

If we put these together, they are a statement of a doctrine of total or radical depravity so strong that it embraces the human will, as also every other part of man's spiritual and psychological make-up. They tell us that unaided by the Spirit of God the sinner is unable to hear God's word, receive the Holy Spirit, submit to God's law, understand biblical teaching, or cease from sin. Even if every generation of the race had a John the Baptist to go through every city and town on this earth and point to Jesus saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"--apart from the supernatural work of the Spirit of God within the individual to recreate his will and turn him from sin to the Savior, no one would turn to Jesus. Nor would it be different if God should send angels to rearrange the stars of heaven to say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." None would believe. If any do believe--as many have through the preaching of the gospel in this as in every other age--it is only because God has first sent his Holy Spirit to quicken their wills, open their eyes to his truth, and draw them to Jesus. It is only after he does this that any are able to choose the path he then sets before them.

Edwards' "Freedom of the Will"

The third historical period is that of Jonathan Edwards, who also wrote a treatise on the will. But it is an interesting feature of this treatise that it does not have the title of Martin Luther's great study: *The Bondage of the Will*. Surprisingly, though Jonathan Edwards in the final analysis says much the same thing as Luther so far as the issues Luther had raised are concerned, his emphasis is not on the "bondage of the will" but on the "freedom of the will," which was the title of Erasmus.

This requires a bit of explaining. But before I do this, let me acknowledge that Edwards' treatise is a difficult thing to understand. Most of what Edwards said was somewhat difficult, but this is particularly difficult. I want to read just one sentence from it to show how dense it really is. You may ask, "Did you go through it to pick the most difficult sentence you could find?" No, I did not. I did not even pick the longest sentence I could find. I picked this one because it comes at the end of the treatise in a section in which Edwards is answering the objection that because his particular views are so hard to understand they must be wrong. He answers, not by saying that a statement is not necessarily wrong just because it is difficult--though he certainly could have done that--but by saying that what he said is not difficult. That is the sentence I want to read. One sentence, which lists the things Edwards taught in the treatise that are "easy" to understand!

There is no high degree of refinement and abstruse speculation, in determining, that a thing is not before it is, and so cannot be the cause of itself; or that the first act of free choice, has not another act of free choice going before that, to excite or direct it; or in determining, that no choice is made while the mind remains in a state of

absolute indifference; that preference and equilibrium never coexist; and that therefore no choice is made in a state of liberty, consisting in indifference; and that so far as the Will is determined by motives, exhibiting and operating previous to the act of the Will, so far it is not determined by the Will itself; that nothing can begin to be, which before was not, without a cause, or some antecedent ground or reason why it then begins to be; that effects depend on their causes, and are connected with them; that virtue is not the worse, nor sin the better, for the strength of inclination with which it is practised, and the difficulty which thence arises of doing otherwise; that when it is already infallibly known that the thing will be, it is not contingent whether it will ever be or no; or that it can be truly said, notwithstanding, that it is not necessary it should be, but it either may be, or may not be.

Then he has a very short sentence: "And the like might be observed of many other things which belong to the foregoing reasoning."

Notwithstanding the difficulty of Edwards' treatise, what he says is a magnificent contribution to the subject. The first significant thing Edwards did was to define the will. It is interesting that nobody had done that previously. Everybody had operated on the assumption that we all know what the will is. We call the will that thing in us that makes choices. Edwards defined the will as "that by which *the mind* chooses any thing." In other words, what we choose is determined (according to Edwards) not by the will itself but by the mind. Our choices are determined by what we think is the most desirable course of action.

Edwards' second contribution concerned "motives." He asked, Why is it that the mind chooses any one thing and not another? He answered that "the mind chooses as it does because of motives." That is, the mind chooses what it thinks is best. Edwards makes this point over many pages, and it is hard to condense his arguments. But let me make his point by quoting from a small primer on free will by John Gerstner. Gerstner addresses the reader:

Your choices, as a rational person, are always based on various considerations or motives that are before you at the time. Those motives have a certain weight with you, and the motives for and against reading a book [for example] are weighed in the balance of your mind; the motives which outweigh all others are what you, indeed, choose to follow. You, being a rational person, will always choose what seems to you to be the right thing, the wise thing, the advisable thing to do. If you choose not to do the right thing, the advisable thing, the thing that you are inclined to do, you would, of course be insane. You would be choosing something which you didn't choose. You would find something preferable which you didn't prefer. But you, being a rational and sane person, choose something because it seems to you the right, proper, good, advantageous thing to do.

I can put the matter negatively. Suppose that when you are confronted by a certain choice no motive whatever enters into the choice. It would then follow, would it not, that the choice would be impossible for you and a decision would not be made? Suppose there is a

donkey standing in the middle of the room. To the right of the donkey is a bunch of carrots precisely matched (in the mind of the donkey) with a bunch of carrots placed on the left. How can the donkey choose between those bunches? If one bunch of carrots is exactly the same as the other and no motives whatever for choosing one rather than the other enter into the picture, what is going to happen to the donkey? The donkey is going to starve standing between the two bunches of carrots! There is nothing to incline it one way or the other. So if he does go one way or the other, it is because for some reason (unknown to us but certainly clear in the mind of the donkey) one choice or the other is preferable. When you and I make a choice it is on that same basis. For whatever reason one thing seems good to us, and because it seems good it is the thing we choose.

The third thing Edwards dealt with was the matter of responsibility, the issue that had troubled Pelagius so profoundly. What Edwards did here, and did very wisely, was to distinguish between what he called "natural" and what he called "moral" inability. Let me give three illustrations of this distinction; first, my own; second, one from the writings of Arthur W. Pink; and third, one from Edwards himself.

In the animal world there are animals which eat nothing but meat: carnivores. There are other animals which eat nothing but grass or plants: herbivores. Imagine then that we have a lion, who is a carnivore, and place a beautiful bundle of hay or a trough of oats before him. He will not eat the hay or the oats. Why not? Is it because he is physically unable? No. Physically, he could easily begin to munch on this food and swallow it. Then why does he not eat it? The answer is that it is not in his nature to do so. Moreover, if it were possible to ask the lion why he will not eat the herbivore's meal and if he could answer, he would say, "I can't eat this food; I hate it; I will eat nothing but meat." We are speaking in a similar way when we say that the natural man cannot respond to or choose God in salvation. Physically he is able, but spiritually he is not. He cannot come because he will not come. He will not because he really hates God.

Arthur W. Pink turns to Scripture to illustrate the distinction. In 1 Kings 14:4 ("Now Ahijah could not see; his sight was gone because of his age") and Jonah 1:13 ("The men did their best to row back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew ever wilder than before") it is natural inability that is in view. No guilt is attached to it. On the other hand, in Genesis 37:4 we read, "When his brothers saw that their father loved him [Joseph] more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." This is a spiritual or moral inability. For this they were guilty, which the passage indicates by explaining their inability to speak kindly to Joseph by their hatred of him.

Now I come to Edwards' illustration. He is talking about Arminians who claim that the Calvinistic position is unreasonable. No, he says, they are the unreasonable ones.

Let common sense determine whether there be not a great difference between these two cases: the one, that of a man who has offended his prince, and is cast into prison; and after he has lain there a while, the king comes to him, calls him to come forth; and tells him, that if he will do so, and will fall down before him and humbly beg his pardon, he shall be forgiven, and set at liberty, and also be greatly enriched,

and advanced to honour: the prisoner heartily repents of the folly and wickedness of his offence against his prince, is thoroughly disposed to abase himself, and accept of the king's offer; but is confined by strong walls, with gates of brass, and bars of iron. The other case is, that of a man who is of a very unreasonable spirit, of a haughty, ungrateful, willful disposition; and moreover, has been brought up in traitorous principles; and has his heart possessed with an extreme and inveterate enmity to his lawful sovereign; and for his rebellion is cast into prison, and lies long there, loaded with heavy chains, and in miserable circumstances. At length the compassionate prince comes to the prison, orders his chains to be knocked off, and his prison doors to be set wide open; calls to him and tells him, if he will come forth to him, and fall down before him, acknowledge that he has treated him unworthily, and ask his forgiveness; he shall be forgiven, set at liberty, and set in a place of great dignity and profit in his court. But he is so stout, and full of haughty malignity, that he cannot be willing to accept the offer; his rooted strong pride and malice have perfect power over him, and as it were bind him, by binding his heart: the opposition of his heart has the mastery over him, having an influence on his mind far superior to the king's grace and condescension, and to all his kind offers and promises. Now, is it agreeable to common sense, to assert and stand to it, that there is no difference between these two cases, as to any worthiness of blame in the prisoners?

When we hear an illustration like that, our first instinct is to claim that while the doctrine of depravity may be true in that particular example, it is not true of us because, so we say, we are not that haughty or prideful or set against the majesty of God. But, of course that is precisely what the Bible tells us we are like. We are so set against God that when the offer of the gospel is presented to us, we do not receive it--not because in a natural sense we cannot receive it--but because the motives that operate in us are hostile to God.

As we judge the matter, coming to a God like the one presented in the Bible is the very thing we do not want to do. That God is a sovereign God; if we come to him, we must acknowledge his sovereignty over our lives. We do not want to do that. Coming to a God like the one presented in the Bible means coming to one who is holy; if we come to a holy God, we must acknowledge his holiness and confess our sin. We do not want to do that either. Again, if we come to God, we must admit his omniscience, and we do not want to do that. If we would come to God, we must acknowledge his immutability, because any God worthy of the name does not change in any other attributes. God is sovereign, and he will always be sovereign. God is holy, and he will always be holy. God is omniscient, and he will always be omniscient. That is the very God we do not want. So we will not come. Indeed, we cannot come until God by grace does what can only properly be described as a miracle in our sinful lives.

Someone who does not hold to reformed doctrine might say, "But surely the Bible teaches that anyone who will come to Christ may come to him? Jesus himself said that if we come he will not cast us out." The answer is that, of course, this is true. But it is not the point. Certainly, anyone who wills may come. It is this that makes our refusal to come so unreasonable and increases our guilt. But who wills to come? The answer is, no one,

except those in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed the entirely irresistible work of the new birth so that, as the result of this miracle, the spiritually blind eyes of the natural man are opened to see God's truth and the totally depraved mind of the sinner is renewed to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior.

No New Doctrine

Is this new teaching? Not at all. It is merely the purest and most basic form of that doctrine of man embraced by most Protestants and even (privately) by some Catholics. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England say, "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith, and calling upon God; Wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us [that is, being with us beforehand to motivate us], that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that will" (Article 10).

George Whitefield, the great Calvinistic evangelist, spoke on one occasion on Christ's raising of Lazarus, and he compared it to our experience.

Come, ye dead, Christless, unconverted sinners, come and see the place where they laid the body of the deceased Lazarus; behold him laid out, bound hand and foot with grave-cloths, locked up and stinking in a dark cave, with a great stone placed on the top of it. View him again and again; go nearer to him; be not afraid; smell him. Ah! how he stinketh. Stop there now, pause a while; and whilst thou art gazing upon the corpse of Lazarus, give me leave to tell thee with great plainness, but greater love, that this dead, bound, entombed, stinking carcass, is but a faint representation of thy poor soul in its natural state: for, whether thou believest or not, thy spirit which thou bearest about with thee, sepulchred in flesh and blood, is as literally dead to God, and as truly dead in trespasses and sins, as the body of Lazarus was in the cave. Was he bound hand and foot with grave-cloths? So art thou bound hand and foot with thy corruptions: and as a stone was laid on the sepulchre, so is there a stone of unbelief upon thy stupid heart. Perhaps thou hast lain in this state, not only four days, but many years, stinking in God's nostrils. And, what is still more effecting, thou art as unable to raise thyself out of this loathsome, dead state, to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave in which he lay so long. Thou mayest try the power of thy own boasted free-will, and the force and energy of moral persuasion and rational arguments (which, without all doubt, have their proper place in religion); but all thy efforts, exerted with never so much vigor, will prove fruitless and abortive, till that same Jesus, who said, "Take away the stone," and cried, "Lazarus, come forth," also quicken you.

It is only a gospel like this that does justice to the depravity of man and properly honors the sovereign grace of our God in salvation.