

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY
AND THE
HUMAN WILL

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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND THE HUMAN WILL

“It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

CONCERNING the nature and the power of fallen man's will, the greatest confusion prevails today, and the most erroneous views are held, even by many of God's children. The popular idea now prevailing, and which is taught from the great majority of pulpits, is that man has a “free will”, and that salvation comes to the sinner through his *will* co-operating with the Holy Spirit. To deny the “free will” of man, i.e. His power to choose that which is good, his native ability to accept Christ, is to bring one into disfavor at once, even before most of those who profess to be orthodox.

And yet Scripture emphatically says,

“It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy” (Romans 9:16).

Which shall we believe: God, or the preachers?

But some one may reply, Did not Joshua say to Israel, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve”? Yes, he did; but why not complete his sentence?—

“whether the gods that your fathers served which were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell!” (Joshua 24:15)

But why attempt to pit scripture *against* scripture? The Word of God never contradicts itself, and the Word expressly declares, “There is *none that seeketh* after God” (Romans 3:11). Did not Christ say to the men of His day, “Ye *will not* come to Me, that ye might have life” (John 5:40)? Yes, but some *did* “come” to Him, some *did* receive Him. True and who were they? John 1:12, 13 tells us;

“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God!”

But does not Scripture say, “Whosoever will may come”? It does, but does

this signify that everybody has the will *to* come? What of those who *won't* come? “Whosoever will may come” no more implies that fallen man has the power (in himself) *to* come, than “Stretch forth thine hand” implied that the man with the withered arm had ability (in himself) to comply. In and of himself the natural man has power to reject Christ; but in and of himself he has not the power to receive Christ. And why? Because he has a mind that is “enmity against” Him (Romans 8:7); because he has a heart that hates Him (John 15:18). Man chooses that which is according to his nature, and therefore before he will ever choose or prefer that which is divine and spiritual, a new nature must be imparted to him; in other words, he *must* be born again.

Should it be asked, But does not the Holy Spirit *overcome* a man’s enmity and hatred when He convicts the sinner of his sins and his need of Christ; and does not the Spirit of God produce such conviction in many that perish? Such language betrays confusion of thought: were such a man’s enmity *really* “overcome”, then he *would* readily turn to Christ; that he does not come to the Savior, demonstrates that his enmity is not overcome. But that many are, through the preaching of the Word, convicted by the Holy Spirit, who nevertheless die in unbelief, is solemnly true. Yet, it is a fact which must not be lost sight of that, the Holy Spirit does *something more* in each of God’s elect than He does in the non elect: He works in them “both to will and to do of God’s good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

In reply to what we have said above, Arminians would answer, No; the Spirit’s work of conviction is the same both in the converted and in the unconverted, that which distinguishes the one class from the other is that the former *yielded* to His strivings, whereas the latter *resist* them. But if this *were* the case, then the Christian would *make himself* to “differ”, whereas the Scripture attributes the “differing” to God’s discriminating grace (1 Corinthians 4:7). Again; if such *were* the case, then the Christian would have ground for boasting and self-glorying over *his* cooperation with the Spirit; but this would flatly contradict Ephesians 2:8,

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that *not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.*”

Let us appeal to the actual experience of the Christian reader. Was there not a time (may the remembrance of it bow each of us into the dust) when you

were unwilling to come to Christ? There was. Since then you *have* come to Him. Are you now prepared to give Him *all* the glory for that (Psalm 115:1)? Do you not acknowledge you came to Christ because the Holy Spirit brought you from unwillingness to willingness? You do. Then is it not also a patent fact that the Holy Spirit has not done in many others what He *has* in you! Granting that many others have heard the Gospel, been shown their need of Christ, yet, they are still unwilling to come to Him. Thus He *has* wrought more in you, than in them. Do you answer, Yet I remember well the time when the Great Issue was presented to me, and my consciousness testifies that my will acted and that I yielded to the claims of Christ upon me. Quite true. But *before* you “yielded”, the Holy Spirit overcame the native enmity of your mind against God, and this “enmity” He does not overcome in all. Should it be said, That is because they are unwilling for their enmity to be overcome. Ah, none are thus “willing” till He has put forth His *all mighty* power and wrought a miracle of grace in the heart.

But let us now inquire, *What is* the human Will? Is it a self-determining agent, or is it, in turn, determined by something else? Is it sovereign or servant? Is the will superior to every other faculty of our being so that it governs them, or is it moved by their impulses and subject to their pleasure? Does the will rule the mind, or does the mind control the will? Is the will free to do as it pleases, or is it under the necessity of rendering obedience to something outside of itself?

“Does the will stand apart from the other great faculties or powers of the soul, a *man within a man*, who can reverse the man and fly against the man and split him into segments, as a glass snake breaks in pieces? Or, is the will connected with the other faculties, as the tail of the serpent is with his body, and that again with his head, so that where the head goes, the whole creature goes, and, as a man *thinketh* in his *heart*, so is he? First thought, then heart (desire or aversion), and then act. Is it this way, the dog wags the tail? Or, is it the will, the tail, wags the dog? Is the will the first and chief thing in the man, or is it the last thing — to be kept subordinate, and in its place beneath the other faculties? And, is the true philosophy of moral action and its process that of Genesis 3:6: ‘And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food’ (sense-perception, intelligence), ‘and a tree to be desired’ (affections), ‘she took and ate thereof’ (the will).” (G. S. Bishop).

These are questions of more than academical interest. They are of practical importance. We believe that we do not go too far when we affirm that the answer returned to these questions is a fundamental test of doctrinal soundness.[1]

1. THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN WILL.

What is the Will? We answer, the will is the faculty of choice, the immediate cause of all action. Choice necessarily implies the refusal of one thing and the acceptance of another. The positive and the negative must both be present to the mind before there can be any choice. In every act of the will there is a preference — the desiring of one thing rather than another. Where there is no preference, but complete indifference, there is no volition. To will is to choose, and to choose is to decide between two or more alternatives. But there is something which *influences* the choice; something which *determines* the decision. Hence the will cannot be sovereign because it is the servant of that something. The will cannot be both sovereign and servant. It cannot be both cause and effect. The will *is not causative*, because, as we have said, something causes it *to choose*, therefore that something must be the causative agent. Choice itself is affected by certain considerations, is determined by various influences brought to bear *upon the individual himself*, hence, volition is the effect of these considerations and influences, and if the effect, it must be their *servant*; and if the will is their servant then it is not sovereign, and if the will is *not* sovereign, we certainly cannot predicate absolute “freedom” of it. Acts of the will cannot come to pass of themselves—to say they can, is to postulate an *uncaused* effect. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* nothing cannot produce something.

In all ages, however, there have been those who contended for the absolute freedom or sovereignty of the human will. Men will argue that the will possesses a *self-determining* power. They say, for example, I can turn my eyes up or down, the mind is quite indifferent which I do, the will must decide. But this is a contradiction in terms. This case supposes that I choose one thing in preference to another, while I am in a state of complete indifference. Manifestly, both cannot be true. But it may be replied, the mind was quite indifferent until it came to have a preference. Exactly; and at that time the will was quiescent, too! But the moment indifference vanished, choice was made, and the fact that indifference gave place to preference,

overthrows the argument that the will is capable of choosing between two equal things. As we have said, choice implies the acceptance of one alternative and the rejection of the other or others.

That which determines the will is that which causes it to choose. If the will is determined, then there must be a determiner. *What is it* that determines the will? We reply, The strongest motive power which is brought to bear upon it.

What this motive power is, varies in different cases. With one it may be the logic of reason, with another the voice of conscience, with another the impulse of the emotions, with another the whisper of the Tempter, with another the power of the Holy Spirit; whichever of these presents the *strongest* motive power and exerts the *greatest* influence *upon the individual himself*, is that which impels the will to act. In other words, the action of the will is determined by that condition of mind (which in turn is influenced by the world, the flesh, and the Devil, as well as by God), which has the greatest degree of tendency to excite volition. To illustrate what we have just said let us analyze a simple example — On a certain Lord's day afternoon a friend of ours was suffering from a severe headache. He was anxious to visit the sick, but feared that if he did so his own condition would grow worse, and as the consequence, be unable to attend the preaching of the Gospel that evening. Two alternatives confronted him: to visit the sick that afternoon and risk being sick himself, or, to take a rest that afternoon (and visit the sick the next day), and probably arise refreshed and fit for the evening service. Now what was it that decided our friend in choosing between these two alternatives? The *will*? Not at all. True, that in the end, the will made a choice, but the will itself was *moved* to make the choice. In the above case certain considerations presented strong motives for selecting either alternative; these motives were balanced the one against the other *by the individual himself*, i.e., his heart and mind, and the one alternative being supported by stronger motives than the other, decision was formed accordingly, *and then* the will acted. On the one side, our friend felt impelled by a sense of duty to visit the sick; he was moved with compassion to do so, and thus a strong motive was presented to his mind. On the other hand, his judgment reminded him that he was feeling far from well himself, that he badly needed a rest, that if he visited the sick his own condition would probably be made worse, and in such case he would be prevented from attending the preaching of the Gospel that night; furthermore, he knew that on the morrow, the Lord willing, he could visit the

sick, and this being so, he concluded he ought to rest that afternoon. Here then were two sets of alternatives presented to our Christian brother: on the one side was a sense of duty plus his own sympathy, on the other side was a sense of his own need plus a real concern for God's glory, for he felt that he *ought* to attend the preaching of the Gospel that night. The latter prevailed. Spiritual considerations outweighed his sense of duty. Having formed his decision the will acted accordingly, and he retired to rest. An analysis of the above case shows that the mind or reasoning faculty was directed by spiritual considerations, and the mind regulated and controlled the will. Hence we say that, if the will is *controlled*, it is neither sovereign nor free, but is the servant of the mind.

It is only as we see the real nature of freedom and mark that the will is subject to the motives brought to bear upon it, that we are able to discern there is no conflict between two statements of Holy Writ which concern our blessed Lord. In Matthew 4:1 we read,

“Then was Jesus *led up* of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil;”

but in Mark 1:12, 13 we are told,

“And immediately the Spirit *driveth* Him into the wilderness. And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan”

It is utterly impossible to harmonize these two statements by the Arminian conception of the will. But really there is no difficulty. That Christ was “driven”, implies it was by a forcible motive or powerful impulse, such as was not to be resisted or refused; that He was “led” denotes His freedom in going. Putting the two together we learn, that He was *driven, with a voluntary condescension thereto*. So, there is the liberty of man's will and the victorious efficacy of God's grace united together: a sinner may be “drawn” and yet “come” to Christ — the “drawing” presenting to him the irresistible motive, the “coming” signifying the response of his will — as Christ was “driven” and “led” by the Spirit into the wilderness.

Human philosophy insists that it is the will which governs the man, but the Word of God teaches that it is the *heart* which is the dominating center of our being. Many scriptures might be quoted in substantiation of this.

“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for *out of it* are the issues of life”

(Proverbs 4:23).

“For from within, *out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,*” etc. (Mark 7:21).

Here our Lord traces these sinful acts back to their source, and declares that their fountain is the “heart,” and not the will! Again;

“This people draweth nigh unto Me with their lips, but *their heart is far from Me*” (Matthew 15:8).

If further proof were required we might call attention to the fact that the word “heart” is found in the Bible more than three times oftener than is the word “will,” even though nearly half of the references to the latter refer to *God’s* will!

When we affirm that it is the *heart* and not the will which governs the man, we are not merely striving about words, but insisting on a distinction that is of vital importance. Here is an individual before whom two alternatives are placed; which will he choose? We answer, the one which is most agreeable to himself, i.e., his “heart” — the innermost core of his being. Before the sinner is set a life of virtue and piety, and a life of sinful indulgence; which will he follow? The latter. Why? Because this is his choice. But does that prove the will is sovereign? Not at all. Go back from effect to cause. *Why* does the sinner choose a life of sinful indulgence? Because he *prefers* it — and he *does* prefer it, all arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, though of course he does not enjoy the *effects* of such a course. And why does he prefer it? Because his *heart* is sinful. The same alternatives, in like manner, confront the Christian, and he chooses and strives after a life of piety and virtue. Why? Because God has given him a *new heart* or nature. Hence we say it is not *the will* which makes the sinner impervious to all appeals to “forsake his way,” but his corrupt and evil *heart*. He will not come to Christ, *because* he does not want to, and he does not want to because his *heart* hates Him and loves sin: see Jeremiah 17:9!

In defining the will we have said above, that “the will is the faculty of choice, the immediate cause of all action.” We say the *immediate* cause, for the will is not the primary cause of any action, any more than the hand is. Just as the hand is controlled by the muscles and nerves of the arm, and the arm by the brain; so the will is the servant of the mind, and the mind, in turn, is affected

by various influences and motives which are brought to bear upon it. But, it may be asked, Does not Scripture make its appeal to man's *will*? Is it not written, "And whosoever *will*, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17)? And did not our Lord say, "ye *will not* come to Me that ye might have life" (John 5:40)? We answer; the appeal of Scripture is not always made to man's "will"; other of his faculties are also addressed. For example: "He that hath *ears* to hear, let him hear." "*Hear* and your soul shall live." "*Look* unto Me and be ye saved." "*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." "Come now and let us *reason* together," "with *the heart* man believeth unto righteousness," etc., etc.

2. THE BONDAGE OF THE HUMAN WILL.

In any treatise that proposes to deal with the human will, its nature and functions, respect should be had to the will in three different men, namely, unfallen Adam, the sinner, and the Lord Jesus Christ. In unfallen Adam the will was *free*, free in *both* directions, free toward good and free toward evil. Adam was created in a state of *Innocency*, but not in a state of holiness, as is so often assumed and asserted. Adam's will was therefore in a condition of moral equipoise: that is to say, in Adam there was no constraining *bias* in him toward either good or evil, and as such, Adam differed radically from all his descendants, as well as from "the Man Christ Jesus." But with the sinner it is far otherwise. The sinner is born with a will that is *not* in a condition of moral equipoise, because in him there is a heart that is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," and this gives him *a bias toward evil*. So, too, with the Lord Jesus it was far otherwise: He also differed radically from unfallen Adam. The Lord Jesus Christ *could not sin* because He was "the Holy One of God." Before He was born into this world it was said to Mary,

"The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also *that Holy Thing* which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Speaking reverently then, we say, that the will of the Son of Man was *not* in a condition of moral equipoise, that is, capable of turning toward either good or evil. The will of the Lord Jesus was *biased toward that which is good* because, side by side with His sinless, holy, perfect humanity, was His eternal Deity. Now in contradistinction from the will of the Lord Jesus which was biased toward good, and Adam's will which, before his fall, was in a

condition of moral equipoise — capable of turning toward either good or evil — the *sinner's* will is *biased toward evil*, and therefore is free in one direction only, namely, in the direction of evil. The sinner's will is *enslaved* because it is in bondage to and is the servant of a depraved heart.

In what does the sinner's freedom consist? This question is naturally suggested by what we have just said above. The sinner is 'free' in the sense of being unforced *from without*. God never *forces* the sinner to sin. But the sinner is not free to do *either* good or evil, because an evil heart within is ever inclining him toward sin. Let us illustrate what we have in mind. I hold in my hand a book. I release it; what happens? It falls. In which direction? Downwards; always downwards. Why? Because, answering the law of gravity, its own weight sinks it. Suppose I desire that book to occupy a position three feet higher; then what? I must lift it; a power outside of that book must raise it. Such is the relationship which fallen man sustains toward God. Whilst Divine power upholds him, he is preserved from plunging still deeper into sin; let that power be withdrawn, and he falls— his own weight (of sin) drags him down. God does not push him down, anymore than I did that book. Let all Divine restraint be removed, and every man is capable of becoming, would become, a Cain, a Pharaoh, a Judas. How then is the sinner to move heavenwards? By an act of his own will? Not so. A power outside of himself must grasp hold of him and lift him every inch of the way. The sinner *is* free, but free in one direction only free to fall, free to sin. As the Word expresses it:

“For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were *free from righteousness*”
(Romans 6:20).

The sinner is free to do as he pleases, always as he pleases (except as he is restrained by God), but his pleasure is to sin.

In the opening paragraph of this chapter we insisted that a proper conception of the nature and function of the will is of practical importance, nay, that it constitutes a fundamental test of theological orthodoxy or doctrinal soundness. We wish to amplify this statement and attempt to demonstrate its accuracy. The freedom or bondage of the will was the dividing line between Augustinianism and Pelagianism, and in more recent times between Calvinism and Arminianism. Reduced to simple terms, this means, that the difference involved was the affirmation or denial of the total depravity of

man. In taking the affirmative we shall now consider,

3. THE IMPOTENCY OF THE HUMAN WILL.

Does it lie within the province of man's will to accept or reject the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior? Granted that the Gospel is preached to the sinner, that the Holy Spirit convicts him of his lost condition, does it, in the final analysis, lie within the power of his own will to resist or to yield himself up to God? The answer to this question defines our conception of human depravity. That man is a fallen creature all professing Christians will allow, but what many of them mean by "fallen" is often difficult to determine. The general impression seems to be that man is now mortal, that he is no longer in the condition in which he left the hands of his Creator, that he is liable to disease, that he inherits evil tendencies; but, that if he employs his powers to the best of his ability, somehow he will be happy at last. O, how far short of the sad truth! Infirmities, sickness, even corporeal death, are but trifles in comparison with the moral and spiritual effects of the Fall! It is only by consulting the Holy Scriptures that we are able to obtain some conception of the extent of that terrible calamity.

When we say that man is totally depraved, we mean that the entrance of sin into the human constitution has affected every part and faculty of man's being. Total depravity means that man is, in spirit and soul and body, the slave of sin and the captive of the Devil — walking

“according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

This statement ought not to need arguing: it is a common fact of human experience. Man is *unable* to realize his own aspirations and materialize his own ideals. He *cannot* do the things that he would. There is a moral inability which paralyzes him. This is proof positive that he is no free man, but instead, the slave of sin and Satan.

“Ye are of your father the Devil, and the lusts (desires) of your father ye will do” (John 8:44).

Sin is more than an act or a series of acts; it is a state or condition: it is that which lies behind and produces the acts. Sin has penetrated and permeated the whole of man's make-up. It has blinded the understanding, corrupted the heart, and alienated the mind from God. *And the will has not escaped.* The

will is under the dominion of sin and Satan. Therefore, the will is not free. In short, the affections love as they do and the will chooses as it does because of the state of *the heart*, and because the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked “There is *none* that *seeketh* after God” (Romans 3:11).

We repeat our question; Does it lie within the power of the sinner’s will to yield himself up to God? Let us attempt an answer by asking several others: Can water (of itself) rise above its own level? Can a clean thing come out of an unclean? Can the will reverse the whole tendency and strain of human nature? Can that which is under the dominion of sin originate that which is pure and holy? Manifestly not. If ever the will of a fallen and depraved creature is to move God-wards, a Divine power must be brought to bear upon it which will overcome the influences of sin that pull in a counter direction. This is only another way of saying,

“No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me, *draw him*” (John 6:44).

In other words, God’s people must be *made willing* in the day of His power (Psalm 110:3).

As said Mr. Darby,

“If Christ came to save that which is *lost*, free will has no place. Not that God prevents men from receiving Christ — far from it. But even when God uses all possible inducements, all that is capable of exerting influence in the heart of man, it only serves to show that man will have none of it, that so corrupt is his heart, and so decided his will not to submit to God (however much it may be the devil who encourages him to sin) that nothing can induce him to receive the Lord, and to give up sin. If by the words, ‘freedom of man,’ they mean that no one forces him to reject the Lord, this liberty fully exists. But if it is said that, on account of the dominion of sin, of which he is the slave, and that voluntarily, he cannot escape from his condition, and make choice of the good — even while acknowledging it to be good, and approving of it — then *he has no liberty whatever* (italics ours). He is not subject to the law, neither indeed can be; hence, they that are in the flesh cannot please God.”

The will is not sovereign; it is a servant, because influenced and controlled by

the other faculties of man's being. The sinner is not a free agent because he is a slave of sin — this was clearly implied in our Lord's words,

“If the Son shall therefore *make you free*, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Man is a rational being and as such responsible and accountable to God, but to affirm that he is a *free* moral agent *is to deny that he is totally depraved* — *i.e.*, depraved in will as in everything else. Because man's will is governed by his mind and heart, and because these have been vitiated and corrupted by sin, then it follows that if ever man is to turn or move in a Godward direction, God Himself must work in him “both *to will and to do* of His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Man's boasted freedom is in truth “the bondage of corruption”; he “*serves divers lusts and pleasures.*”

Said a deeply taught servant of God,

“Man is impotent as to his will. He has no will favorable to God. I believe in free will; but then it is *a will only free to act according to nature* (italics ours). A dove has no will to eat carrion; a raven no will to eat the clean food of the dove. Put the nature of the dove into the raven and it will eat the food of the dove. Satan could have no will for holiness. We speak it with reverence, God could have no will for evil. The sinner in his sinful nature could never have a will according to God. For this he must be born again” (J. Denham Smith).

This is just what we have contended for throughout this chapter — *the will is regulated by the nature.*

Among the “decrees” of the Council of Trent (1563), which is the avowed standard of Popery, we find the following: —

“If any one shall affirm, that man's free-will, moved and excited by God, does not, by consenting, co operate with God, the mover and exciter, so as to *prepare* and *dispose* itself for the *attainment* of justification; if moreover, anyone shall say, that the human will cannot refuse complying, if *it pleases*, but that it is inactive, and merely passive; let such an one *be accursed!*”

“If anyone shall affirm, that since the fall of Adam, man's free-will is *lost* and extinguished; or, that it is a thing titular, yea a name, without a thing, and a fiction introduced by Satan into the Church; let such an one

be accursed!”

Thus, those who today insist on the free-will of the natural man believe precisely what Rome teaches on the subject! That Roman Catholics and Arminians walk hand in hand may be seen from others of the decrees issued by the Council of Trent: —

“If any one shall affirm that a regenerate and justified man is bound to believe that he is certainly in the number of the elect (which, 1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5 plainly teaches. A.W.P.) let such an one be accursed!”

“If any one shall affirm with positive and absolute certainty, that he shall surely have the gift of perseverance to the end (which John 10:28-30 assuredly guarantees, A.W.P.); let him be accursed!”

In order for any sinner to be saved three things were indispensable: God the Father had to *purpose* his salvation, God the Son had to *purchase* it, God the Spirit has to *apply* it. God does more than “propose” to us: were He *only* to “invite”, every last one of us would be lost. This is strikingly illustrated in the Old Testament. In Ezra 1:1-3 we read,

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel.”

Here was an “*offer*” made, made to a people in captivity, affording them opportunity to leave and return to Jerusalem — God’s dwelling-place. Did *all* Israel eagerly respond to this offer? No indeed. The vast majority were content to remain in the enemy’s land. Only an insignificant “remnant” availed themselves of this overture of mercy! And *why* did *they*? Hear the answer of Scripture:

“Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all whose spirit *God had stirred up*, to go

up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem!” (Ezra 1:5)

In like manner, *God* “stirs up” the spirits of His elect when the effectual call comes to them, and not till then do they have any *willingness to* respond to the Divine proclamation.

The superficial work of many of the professional evangelists of the last fifty years is largely responsible for the erroneous views now current upon the *bondage* of the natural man, encouraged by the laziness of those in the pew in their failure to “*prove* all things” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The average evangelical pulpit conveys the impression that it lies wholly in the power of the sinner whether or not he shall be saved. It is said that “God has done His part, now man must do his.” Alas, what *can* a lifeless man do, and man by nature is “*dead* in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)! If this were really believed, there would be more dependence upon the Holy Spirit to come in with His miracle-working power, and less confidence in *our* attempts to “win men for Christ.”

When addressing the unsaved, preachers often draw an analogy between God’s sending of the Gospel to the sinner, and a sick man in bed, with some healing medicine on a table by his side: all he needs to do is reach forth his hand and take it. But in order for this illustration to be in any wise true to the picture which Scripture gives us of the fallen and depraved sinner, the sick man in bed must be described as one who is blind (Ephesians 4:18) so that he cannot see the medicine, his hand paralyzed (Romans 5:6) so that he is unable to reach forth for it, and his heart not only devoid of all confidence in the medicine but filled with hatred against the physician himself (John 15:18). O what superficial views of man’s desperate plight are now entertained! Christ came here not to help those who were willing to help themselves, but to do for His people what they were incapable of doing for themselves:

“To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house” (Isaiah 42:7).

Now in conclusion let us anticipate and dispose of the usual and inevitable objection — Why *preach the Gospel if man is powerless to respond*? Why bid the sinner come to Christ if sin has so enslaved him that he has no power in himself *to* come? Reply: — We do not preach the Gospel *because we* believe that men are free moral agents, and therefore capable of receiving

Christ, but we preach it *because we are commanded to do so* (Mark 16:15); and though to them that perish it is *foolishness*, yet, “unto us which are saved it is *the power of God*” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

“The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

The sinner is dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), and a dead man is utterly incapable of willing anything, hence it is that “they that are in the flesh (the unregenerate) cannot please God” (Romans 8:8).

To fleshly wisdom it appears the height of folly to preach the Gospel to those that are *dead*, and therefore *beyond* the reach of doing anything themselves. Yes, but God’s ways are different from ours.

It pleases God:

“by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Man may deem it folly to prophesy to “*dead bones*” and to say unto them,

“O, ye dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:4).

Ah! but then it is the Word of the Lord, and the words He speaks “they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). Wise men standing by the grave of Lazarus might pronounce it an evidence of insanity when the Lord addressed a *dead* man with the words, “Lazarus, Come forth.” Ah! But He who thus spake was and is Himself the Resurrection and the Life, and at *His* word even the dead live! We go forth to preach the Gospel, then, not because we believe that sinners have within themselves the power to receive the Savior it proclaims, but because the Gospel itself *is the power of God unto* salvation to everyone that believeth, and because we know that “as many as were ordained to eternal life” (Acts 13:48), *shall* believe (John 6:37; 10:16 — note the “shall’s”!) in God’s appointed time, for it is written,

“Thy people *shall* be willing in the day of Thy power” (Psalm 110:3)!

What we have set forth in this chapter is not a product of “modern thought”; no indeed, it is at direct variance with it. It is those of the past few generations who have *departed* so far from the teachings of their scripturally instructed fathers. In the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England we read,

“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 (being before-hand with us), that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will” (Article 10).

In the Westminster Catechism of Faith (adopted by the Presbyterians) we read,

“The sinfulness of that state whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is *utterly indisposed*, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and *wholly* inclined to all evil, and that continually” (Answer to question 25). So in the Baptists’ Philadelphian Confession of Faith, 1742, we read, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost *all ability of will* to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (Chapter 9).

FOOTNOTE:

[1] Since writing the above we have read an article by the late J. N. Darby entitled, “*Man’s so-called freewill*,” that opens with these words:

“This re-appearance of the doctrine of freewill serves to support that of the pretension of the natural man to be not irremediably fallen, for this is what such doctrine tends to. All who have never been deeply convicted of sin, all persons in whom this conviction is based on gross external sins, believe more or less in freewill.”