

The Bondage of the Human Will

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What was the central issue of the Reformation? What lay at the heart of the break with Rome? Was it the idolatrous practices of the Papal system? Was it the Mass? Or the Reformers' insistence on justification by *faith alone*?

To Martin Luther the answer was clear. He wrote to Erasmus, in response to that man's treatise on free-will, these telling words:

"You have not worried me with extraneous issues about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like - trifles, rather than issues.... You, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and have aimed at the vital spot."

That hinge, that "vital spot", was free-will. Free-will was the central issue of the Reformation. The question was, Does man have it? While Erasmus and Rome believed that man does have a free will, Luther's answer, in his famous reply to Erasmus, "*The Bondage of the Will*", was an emphatic NO.

Luther was right.

Of course, to deny free-will is not to deny that man is able to make decisions. We are rational creatures, created capable of making choices. We make such choices every day. Many may seem to us rather trivial, such as what we shall wear today, while others are momentous, changing the very course of our life, such as our choice of marriage partner.

But in these matters too there is a sense in which our will is not free.

The will of God

Only God's will is absolutely free and independent. Our will, the will of every man, is subject to and subservient to God's sovereign will. All the choices made and decisions taken on earth, whether by believers or unbelievers, whether those choices are the 'insignificant' or the earth shattering, all are within the eternal counsel of almighty God.

Whether or not we realize it, we are all bound to that eternal decree. The Word of God puts it like this, "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand" (Prov. 19:21). In other words, whatever plans, desires or intentions a person may have, he can do nothing that is outside of or opposed to God's counsel because the will is under God's direction.

This is true of believers. Paul wrote, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will

and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The good works that a believer does find their source and power in God. He it is that enables the believer to do His good pleasure. This does not mean that God compels the believer to act against his own will but that God works *within* the believer's will, directing and controlling it so that he wills His own eternal good pleasure. When a believer does good works he does them willingly because he has been made willing in the day of God's power (Ps. 110:3).

It is true also of unbelievers that God works in their heart to will His purpose. Concerning the Egyptians we are told, "He [God] turned their heart to hate his people, to deal subtilly with his servants" (Ps. 105:25). And of course this is especially clear in the case of Pharaoh, "And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but *I will harden his heart*, that he shall not let the people go" (Ex. 4:21).

But as true as all this is, it is not our primary subject for these articles. The bondage referred to in the title of this editorial and in the title of Luther's famous book is not subservience to the sovereign will of God, but bondage to *sin*. That is a very different matter.

Slavery to sin

The Bible speaks in several passages of man's relation to sin as that of a servant or a slave in bondage to his master. In John 8:34 Jesus tells the Jews, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin".

Simon the sorcerer was perceived by Peter to be "in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23).

In Romans 6:16 the apostle writes, "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness". Then later in the same chapter Paul refers to his readers in their unconverted days as having been "servants of sin" (v. 20).

Peter too, in his second letter, writes of those who are "the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (II Pet. 2:19).

In II Timothy 2:26 Paul says that unbelievers are in the service of Satan himself, they are held in "the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will".

This bondage is a spiritual bondage. It is a bondage in which the will of man is so ensnared that he can do no other than to sin. Ethically and morally he is under the hard and deadly yoke of sin. He is the slave of sin, not free to do good. "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

We shall have more to say about this a little later. For now we must look back to another time when man did not know this bondage, when he was spiritually free, free from all sin. This of course was his original condition in which God created him. He was created in God's image, bearing the Divine stamp upon his nature.

Adam and the image of God

Precisely what is meant by the image of God is explained by the apostle Paul in two passages from his letters. In Ephesians 4:24 he writes, "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness". In this verse we see two components of that image: righteousness and holiness.

A third component is found in Colossians 3:10, "And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him".

The image of God, then, consists of righteousness, holiness and knowledge of God. This Adam possessed. His will, as did his whole being, bore this image. Adam's will was wholly inclined toward those things that were righteous, holy and good, having no sinful inclinations whatsoever. That is spiritual freedom.

Spiritual freedom is often mistakenly thought of as being the ability to choose freely between good and evil, to sin or not to sin, to choose Christ or not to choose Christ, as though the will is in some kind of moral neutral. A more Biblical definition of spiritual freedom is the freedom to choose good. "Being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6:17-18). It is the freedom not to choose sin. Such freedom of will Adam possessed in his original state.

But Adam lost his freedom. For although he was created with the ability not to sin, he was also able to sin and thus lose his spiritual freedom. "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen.2:17). Adam's will, along with the rest of his being, lost that image of God which it had borne from its creation, when he sinned.

Having once chosen to sin, Adam was then condemned to a lifetime of slavery to sin and its guilt. And neither was he alone. For not just Adam but the whole human race was taken into bondage with him, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (see Rom. 5:12, 18-19).

Because of the special legal relationship which the human race have to Adam, all by nature stand guilty and condemned with him, and all are held in the vice-like bondage of sin into which he fell. Consequently, unless their guilt is forgiven, they must suffer the payment of sin's terrible wages, which is death (Rom. 6:23).

Another aspect of that relationship which we all have to Adam is that we are born into the world with the same corrupt nature that he had. Like David, we can all say, "Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5).

The consequences of the fall are far-reaching and have affected every aspect of our being. Our understanding has been darkened, our affections have been corrupted, and our will has been so transformed that without the grace of God we can desire no good thing. Man is *totally* depraved. "The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). By nature we are "dead in trespasses and sins", given over entirely to "fulfilling the desires (or wills) of the flesh and of the mind" (Eph 2:1-3). "Whosoever committeth sin", says the Lord, "is the servant of sin" (Jn. 8:34).

The loss of God's image

The will cannot be separated from the other human faculties, however much many have attempted to do just that. Adam enjoyed a free will for as long as he lived a righteous, holy life, filled with the knowledge of God and walking with Him in intimate fellowship. But when he lost the image of God, he lost his free will, along with his enlightened mind and pure affections. No longer was his will inclined to righteousness and holiness and the knowledge of God, but toward sin. And what was true of Adam is true of every one of his posterity.

Man became the servant of sin so that no longer was he able to choose to do good, but only evil continually (cf. Gen. 6:5). "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

To use Paul's expression in Romans in 6:20, man became "free from righteousness". To be free from righteousness, however, is to be held in the snare and captivity of the devil (2 Tim. 2:26). The "liberty of the flesh", as Calvin calls it, "frees us from obedience to God, only to put us in bondage to the devil. It is, therefore, a despicable and accursed liberty, which triumphs in our destruction with unrestrained, or rather frenzied, violence".

It must be emphasized that man is in his spiritual slavery *willingly*. To him it is liberty while righteousness is bondage. This explains why his ethics, his morals and standards are reversed so that he calls good evil and evil good. He does not, he cannot, will that which is good, but neither does he want to. "Ye are of your father the devil", says the Lord, "and the lusts of your father ye *will to do*" (John 8:44; literal translation).

Man is born the devil's willing servant, which is why, when the things of God are presented to him in the gospel, apart from the regenerating grace of God, he *always* chooses to reject them. His will is not free. It is always opposed to God, not for Him.

Man is therefore unable to save himself and is totally dependent upon the grace of God for his salvation. As it was true of the Jews to whom Jesus spoke in John 5:40, so it is true of all men, "ye will not come to me, that ye might have life". He says in John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him". In another place He says, "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

If the natural man can do nothing without Christ, he most certainly cannot 'choose Jesus' by an act of his own will. Contrary to Erasmus, Rome and much of modern Protestantism, salvation is "*not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy*" (Rom. 9:16).

2

We began our study with the possibly startling assertion that man does not have free-will. This denial of free-will holds good for two reasons. In the first place freedom of will, when understood biblically, is the freedom to choose only good. This becomes obvious when we consider whether *God* has free will? Of course He has, but He can never choose to sin.

In fact, as Martin Luther tells us in his famous book *The Bondage of the Will*, "Free-will is plainly a divine term, and can be applicable to none but the divine Majesty only: for He alone 'doth, [as the Psalmist sings] what He will in Heaven and earth.'" So to ascribe free-will to man is to ascribe to him something that belongs to God alone and is therefore, as Luther says, "the greatest of all sacrilege".

According to this Biblical definition even Adam's will was not free because although he was able to choose good, Adam was also able to sin. And he did sin, at which point he and all mankind with him lost even the ability which they had to do good. We saw last time that

the metaphors of slavery and bondage are ones often used in the Bible to illustrate the relationship which man has to sin. We noted that this describes the *whole* man, including his will and that it is not possible to separate the will from the mind and the heart.

Having lost their freedom, Adam and his posterity died.

This connection with death is a real and important one. A fish enjoys freedom swimming in the water. It is restricted to the water certainly, but for as long as it remains in the water it enjoys liberty and life. However, if that fish decided it wanted to escape the limits imposed on it, to leave the water and live on the land, that would not be its freedom but its death. That is something like what happened when Adam chose to escape the limitations of God's law. He lost his freedom and died.

It is important that we understand this because it has a direct bearing on the gospel and the way in which the gospel is presented. As "the servant of sin" man is "*dead* in trespasses and sins", and there is nothing he can do to change his condition.

Not by the will of man

The Scriptures teach us that unregenerate man is morally dead. This means, among other things, that his will is dead and cannot choose to do good. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil?" (Job 14:4).

Martin Luther wrote in *The Bondage of The Will*, "...if it be proved that our salvation is apart from our own strength and counsel, and depends on the working of God alone...[which Luther does go on to prove - RJH], does it not evidently follow that when God is not present with us to work in us, every thing that we do is evil, and that we of necessity do those things which are of no avail unto salvation? For if it is not we ourselves, but God only, that works salvation in us, it must follow... that we do nothing unto salvation *before* the working of God in us".

Or put another way, before God begins to work in us nothing that we are able to do can contribute anything to our salvation.

Luther says that this is "of *necessity*". What he means is that someone who is unsaved does not sin unwillingly as though they are forced into it kicking and screaming, but they sin with a "desirous willingness". It is spontaneous. It is natural. It is in the very nature of our being to sin. When God is not in our hearts we act simply according to the natural bent of our will, which is toward sin.

What is more, as Luther observes, this willingness and desire to sin, the man who is void of the Spirit "cannot, by his own power, leave off, restrain, or change; but it still goes on desiring and craving". Even if the unregenerate sinner is compelled by restraints and pressures, e.g., the law of the land, to do something which is outwardly good, the disposition of the will within him remains the same and, in Luther's words, it "rises in indignation... the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent".

All this being true, how implausible it is to suggest that man by an action of his will can "decide for Christ". His will is programmed *against* Christ, if we may put it in that way, and only sends the sinner off in the opposite direction from Christ. To tell him that he has "free-will" which he must exercise in order to be saved, "letting Jesus into his heart", "accepting Jesus as his Saviour", "letting God save him", is a most cruel and devilish deceit. It

completely reverses the Biblical teaching that salvation is of the Lord and instead makes salvation to depend ultimately upon the impossible, the will of man choosing the highest good. It is a gospel of despair because it requires of the sinner conditions that being dead he cannot ever fulfil. Could Lazarus as a dead man have come from his tomb to Jesus? Then neither can a sinner come to Christ by his "free-will".

Worst of all, the "gospel" of "free-will" robs the glory of salvation which rightly belongs to God and gives it to another, even sinful man himself.

The determining factor in salvation is not man's will and choice, but God's (Rom. 9:16). "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44).

The sweet breathings of the Spirit

The will has to be changed. If the sinner is to come to Christ then a mighty transformation has to be brought about within him so that he becomes willing. This change is so radical that he is no more able bring it about himself than a leopard is able to change its spots. It is a change that only God can accomplish by His own almighty power so that in the day of that power His people, the people of His choice, are released from their bondage and made willing.

Listen to Luther again as in words noteworthy for their sheer poetic beauty he describes this miraculous change:

"But again, on the other hand, when God works in us, the will, being changed and sweetly breathed on by the Spirit of God, desires and acts, not from compulsion, but responsively, from pure willingness, inclination and accord; so that it cannot be turned another way by anything contrary, nor be compelled or overcome even by the gates of hell; but it still goes on to desire, crave after, and love that which is good; even as before, it desired, craved after, and loved that which was evil."

The sinner who is thus changed now acts with a "desirous willingness" not toward sin, but toward Christ and godliness. The will has been given a new bent.

So radical is this necessary change that Scripture likens it to birth and creation, describing it as a new birth, a new creation, or a resurrection, a passing from death to life.

The sinner must be "quickened", he must be drawn by the Father. He must *be* saved for he is unwilling and unable to save himself. It takes the power of God's grace to save and when that power sets to work it raises from the dead and makes a new creation: "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins... For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph 2:1-10).

We must never belittle the magnitude of the power which is necessary for the saving of our souls, yet that is what we do when we reduce salvation to a "decision" of "free-will".

In the spiritual realm as well as in the physical there must be life before there can be a response. As with Lazarus, there must be a regeneration before there can be a coming.

The "quickening" of Ephesians 2:1 is quite literally a giving of life. Previously there was death, the sinner was dead but now he is alive. This is what the Bible elsewhere calls the new

birth, and it makes clear that this birth takes place by a power and will outside of the sinner. What baby ever chose to be born by a decision of its own will? The same is true of spiritual birth: "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, *nor of the will of man*, but of God" (John 1:13).

Here again we see that the determining factor in salvation is God's will, not man's. Christ said, "the Son quickeneth *whom he will*" (John 5:21). God determines who shall be born again, as James wrote in his epistle, "Of *his own will* begat he us with the word of truth..."(James 1:18).

This directs us to God's eternal decree of predestination in which, by the operation of His own free and sovereign will, He has chosen some to salvation, "having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of *his will*" (Eph. 1:5), while others He has rejected. God has mercy "on *whom he will* have mercy" (Rom. 9:18).

Only thus having been born of God, quickened, regenerated, is the sinner willing and able to receive Christ. The new birth thus marks the beginning of God's work of grace in our lives, the beginning of a new life in which He works in us "both to *will* and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

The root and the fruit

Clearly there is an order in salvation and it is important that we understand that order correctly and not put the cart before the proverbial horse. That is what we do if we say that a sinner must first decide for Christ, repent and believe on Him before he can be born again. Or to use a more appropriate metaphor, we must know which is the root and which is the fruit.

In that great Bible passage on regeneration and faith, John 3, the relationship is clear. The first eleven verses of that chapter deal entirely with regeneration, God's initial work of grace in the elect sinner, while there is not so much as a mention of faith and believing. The sinner is completely passive in those verses while God is active. It is only when we come to the second part of the chapter, verses 12-36, that we see faith active in the regenerated sinner believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. The root implanted by God, regeneration, produces the fruit of faith.

This order is evident also in John 1:12-13, verses which are often misconstrued: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even 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." Taking the order of events in this passage we note that that which is written last actually comes first in time: it is the being "born of God" which occurs first and then those who are so born receive Christ and believe on His name, as the root brings forth its fruit.

A similar passage is found in John 5 which records the healing of the paralytic man at the pool of Bethesda. In verse 21 Christ says to the Jews, "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom he will". But how are we to know whether someone has been quickened? How will we know that they have "passed from death unto life"? The Lord goes on, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation;

but is passed from death unto life" (vs. 24).

We know that the quickening has taken place, that the sinner has passed from death unto life, when the sinner has 'the hearing ear' to hear the words of the Saviour and believes on His name. "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (vs. 25).

Thinking in terms of a root and its fruit, the new birth is the root and faith is the fruit. That is the Biblical order of salvation.

That is the Biblical order of salvation because the Biblical doctrine of the bondage of the will demands it. If man's so-called "free" will is put first then salvation is all of man and God is his impotent servant. That is a terrible error that denies God His sovereignty. Let us have nothing to do with it.

But where does all this leave human responsibility? That will occupy us for another article.

3

Having shown from the Scriptures that by nature man's will is in bondage, making him unwilling and unable to free himself from sin, and that he is totally dependent upon God for his salvation, we now come to the question with which we ended last time: Where does this leave man's responsibility? If all that has been said in the previous articles is true, how can God hold man responsible for not doing what He requires?

The Scriptures are full of Gospel exhortations, but if God calls on sinners to repent and believe the gospel while all the time knowing that they are unable to do so, surely He cannot blame them when they do not obey.

The fault with this line of reasoning lies in the assumption that responsibility is based on an ability to obey, when in fact this is not the case. Our responsibility stems rather from our obligation to God as creatures to our Creator. The fact that we are not able to fulfil our obligation and obey Him is not God's fault but ours, and for this reason God holds us accountable for our disobedience.

Let us take a closer look.

Human responsibility

That man is responsible must not be denied, indeed it cannot be denied without falling into the serious error of hyper-Calvinism, which we will look at presently. God created us as responsible beings. Go back to the Garden of Eden, to Adam in whom we all stand represented, and there we find human responsibility writ large over the whole scene.

Sinless Adam, and by extension every member of the human race, was responsible for each action that he took. His obligation to the Lord his God was to love Him with all his heart, and with all his mind, and with all his soul, and with all his strength, and that he did perfectly with a willing and able heart. That was his place as one created solely for God and for God's pleasure (Rev. 4:11). He was to honour and worship God, and being blessed with

the true knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness he was able to do all that God required.

In the midst of the garden there was just one tree the fruit of which he was forbidden to eat. Given the abundance of provision in that beautiful Paradise, to refrain from one tree does not seem too much to ask, but at the instigation of the devil he ate of that forbidden fruit. By this one act of wilful disobedience Adam and the entire human race were plunged into spiritual death. Hence the knowledge of God which man once had is now darkness and falsehood; the righteousness which once governed and beautified his every thought and deed is perverseness; the holiness that once adorned his character is now corruption, and sin pollutes his every desire and affection.

No longer is man able to perform what God calls him to do. No longer is he able to keep God's holy law. No longer is he able to love God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. But whose fault is it?

And when God comes in the preaching and calls upon sinful man to repent and believe the gospel; to look to Christ Jesus, the only Saviour; to flee from the wrath to come, and man does not repent, believe and look because he is not able, whose fault is it? Do we blame God? Do we say it is not fair of God to require of man something which he cannot do?

God forbid. "Lo, this only have I found, that God hath *made man upright*; but they have sought out many inventions." (Eccl. 7:29).

Man has only himself to blame. God created him good and with all that was necessary to obey His holy commands, but he squandered those divine gifts, choosing to believe the lie of the Devil in preference to the truth of God's word.

And let it be understood that when we say 'man' we include ourselves. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon *all men*, for that *all* have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). No one is excused. We are all reckoned in Adam and are all therefore responsible for squandering our ability to love and obey the Lord God. We have no one else to blame but ourselves.

And that is why God can still require of us that which He knows we cannot do, and blame us when we do not do it. That is why we cannot accuse God of being unfair. It is we who have changed, not God. His law and standards remain ever the same.

Accountability

Human responsibility also means that God holds us *accountable*.

In the first place we are accountable for what we have done with God's holy law. No man will go unjudged, "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Matt. 16:27). The sins that we have committed are *our* sins and if they are not covered with the blood and righteousness of Christ, we will answer for them.

It is not fashionable today to lay blame for the lawlessness in society on those who commit it. We are told that they are not to blame. A school headmaster was heard to say recently that while youngsters "*do* bad things, *they* are not bad things". They suffer from 'low self-esteem', or are in some way disadvantaged and underprivileged, but they are not responsible, so they go unpunished.

But God is not mocked. He holds every one of us responsible and accountable for our sin.

In the second place, human responsibility means that men are accountable for what they have done with the gospel. Maybe they have heard it many times in the home and in the church, yet they have stubbornly refused to heed its message. Again and again they have heard the promise of God that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13), but they have resolutely refused to call. They are like the servant who knew his lord's will, but "prepared not himself, neither did according to his will" and accordingly was beaten with "*many stripes...* for unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12:47,48).

God is perfectly righteous in all of His demands and in judgment, so no one will be able to defend himself on that dread day by saying that God required the impossible. As we have said, loss of ability does not absolve us of responsibility. God created us able to do all that He wanted of us, most certainly then, and with perfect justice, will He lay at our door all the blame for our disobedience. His wrath will be just.

But finally a word about hyper-Calvinism.

Hyper-Calvinism

What is hyper-Calvinism? In these days when the label "hyper-Calvinist" seems to be tagged on to anyone who faithfully declares the sovereignty of God, it is important that we understand properly what the term means.

I do not believe it is possible to stress too much the doctrine of Divine sovereignty. It is not possible to over-emphasize the sovereignty of God's free and saving grace. Preachers cannot declare too explicitly or too frequently from their pulpits that salvation from beginning to end is a matter of sovereign grace alone. That is not hyper-Calvinism, that is Calvinism, that is the Gospel.

Hyper-Calvinism is the denial of human responsibility. It is the teaching that men in general are under no obligation to repent of their sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the teaching that only the *elect* sinner who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit is required to believe.

As a consequence of this the hyper-Calvinist denies that the preacher is to *call* upon all men to repent and believe on the Lord in true saving faith. He believes the gospel call is to be directed somehow only to the elect.

This has the effect of killing true gospel preaching. The clear word of Scripture is, "God... now commandeth *all men every where* to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man which he hath ordained" (Acts 17:30,31).

Notice that all are *commanded* to repent. It is their duty. Notice too it is *God*, no less, who commands them in the preaching. It is *God* calling, proclaiming to all that Jesus is the only Saviour from sin, sending forth His promise that whosoever believes on His Son shall not perish but have everlasting life. And the preacher proclaims this gospel to all in the sure and certain knowledge that the elect will believe, for his preaching is God's ordained means of saving them (Rom. 10:13,14).