

## The Bondage of the Will

An important theme in the Reformation was the bondage of the human will. One important work of Martin Luther in 1520 was *The Freedom of the Christian Man*. Its double theme was that the Christian man, under grace, is Lord of all things and subject to no one, but in love, the Christian man is the bond slave of all and subject to everyone. However, no one should suppose that Luther wanted to say that a human being is free in his relationship to God. Luther took up the issue of the human will in 1525. Near the end of his life he said he valued this work, together with the two catechisms, more highly than his other writings. It was called *On the Bondage of the Will*.

He wrote it in answer to a work by Erasmus that had attacked Luther and had asserted the freedom of the will. In the work Luther at least commended Erasmus for taking up a crucial point. Erasmus had grasped him by the throat. Others had attacked him for things that were further out from the centre of the Gospel, such as his criticisms of abuses like indulgences, monastic vows, the invocation of saints, and so on.

This subject of the alleged freedom of the human will in relation to God had been long discussed in the church. The reaction of some early Christians to Gnosticism, which was deterministic, went too far the other way. Some Gnostics had said that some human beings were spiritual, some were “of soul”, and some were “of clay.” There was no hope of salvation for the third class, but the middle class could go either way. The spiritual, they said, would without fail find their way back to the ultimate God through various lesser deities or “aeons”. Christians reacted to this by stressing not only human beings’ ability to reject God, but by saying that human beings had the natural capacity to apply themselves to God and to work with the Spirit of God in conversion. Few early Christian writers wrote about the grace of God as St Paul had done. They had little to say about God’s gracious election (or predestination). Some early Christian writers like Origen heavily stressed the freedom of the will. For many, God’s grace meant little more than “help.”

Augustine took up the twin poles of God’s grace and human nature in a series of writings against the British monk Pelagius. Some monks in particular in the early Middle Ages, like Vincent and Faustus, opposed Augustine. In spite of reasonably good statements about this, such as the one at the Second Council of Orange, AD 529, the Church of the Middle Ages came to adopt Semi-Pelagian teaching, though some writers were closer to Augustine than others. Some that were Augustinian, like Gottschalk of Orbais, were treated as heretics. However, during the Carolingian age topics like the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart were often taken up. The debate between Erasmus and Luther was in many respects covering old ground.

Briefly, Luther held, against the prevailing view in the Middle Ages, that God, not man, is the directing agent in man’s relationship to God. For Luther this was not a philosophical discussion, but it concerned man’s salvation. The scholastics of the Middle Ages had followed a Semi-Pelagian line, and attributed more than was proper to the freedom of the will. They thought that after the fall of Adam each human being’s will has the ability to apply itself to the things of God. If that were right teaching, then it would follow that human beings could simply use their own powers for salvation. Jesus Christ would have died in vain.

Certainly human beings have the freedom to do things that appear to be good in the sight of other human beings. Human beings can use their reason and have a degree of freedom in this. People can and often do live lives that look honourable and attractive. However, this should be called outward, or civil, righteousness. Unbelievers can do nothing but sin.

The Lutheran Confessions teach that in spiritual matters the unregenerate human will is God’s enemy. Without the God’s grace and the working of the Holy Spirit a human being cannot become pleasing to God, fear or believe in God with the whole heart, or expel innate evil lusts from the heart. The will of unregenerate human beings desires only what God regards as evil. Since the fall into sin, all human beings are spiritually dead, and their wills are completely corrupted. They resist the Spirit of God, cannot make God-pleasing decisions about spiritual matters, and cannot please God. People actively resist God until God’s gracious working through the Gospel converts them. Paul wrote: “An unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually” (1 Cor 2:14). He wrote, in Romans 8:7-8: “The way of thinking that belongs to the sinful nature is hostile to God. For it is not subordinate to God’s Law; for it is not even able to be. Those who are in the sinful nature cannot please God.” Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the *Small Catechism* began: “I believe that I cannot, by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

It is quite proper to speak about a Christian after conversion co-operating with the Holy Spirit to live a holy life. Because of wrong teaching by some Lutherans about conversion, The *Formula of Concord* had to take up the question: “What kind of powers do human beings have after the fall of our first parents, before rebirth, on their own, in spiritual matters? Are they able, with their own powers, before they receive new birth through God’s Spirit, to dispose themselves favourably toward God’s grace and to prepare themselves to accept the grace offered by the Holy Spirit in the Word and the holy sacraments, or not?” (*Epitome* II, 1). The *Formula of Concord* rejected the suggestion that, besides the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, there was a third factor in conversion, human co-operation.

The Lutheran Confessions insisted that they were nowhere introducing any new teaching, and this applied also to this subject. For example, they appealed favourably to a work ascribed to Augustine against Pelagius and the followers of Caelestius, “We confess that there is a free will in all human beings. For all have a natural, innate mind and reason—not that they can act in matters pertaining to God, such as loving or fearing God with their whole heart—but they do have the freedom

to choose good or evil only in the external works of this life. By 'good' I mean what can be done by nature: whether to work in the field or not, whether to eat and drink, whether to visit a friend or not, to dress or undress, to build a home, to marry, to engage in a trade, and to do whatever may be useful and good. To be sure, all of this neither exists nor endures without God, but everything is from Him and through Him. On the other hand, a human being can by personal choice do evil, such as to kneel before an idol, commit murder, and the like." (*Hypomnesticon* III, 4.5).

Many people who have the name of Christian today talk glibly about making decisions for Christ, and accepting the Gospel. Many still talk about human beings' meriting God's grace by proper attitudes before conversion. With the Lutheran Confessions, we continue to reject the teaching that people "*can keep the commandments of God without grace and the Holy Spirit. For although we are by nature able to do the external works of the commandments, yet we cannot do the supreme commandments in the heart, namely, truly to fear, love, and believe in God*" (an early variant attached to Article XVIII of the *Augsburg Confession*).

The teaching that we are saved by God's grace alone, and through faith alone, without our works, for Christ's sake gives God all the credit for the salvation of sinners. There are no grounds for boasting before God. He must receive all the glory. Jesus Christ's obedience in the place of sinners should not be discredited by human attempts to hold up their merits before God.