

MYTH
OF
FREE WILL

WALTER J. CHANTRY

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by Walter J. Chantry

Most people say that they believe in free will. Do you have any idea what that means? I believe that you will find a great deal of superstition on this subject. The will is saluted as the grand power of the human soul which is completely free to direct our lives. But from what is it free? And what is its power?

I. THE MYTH OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL FREEDOM

No one denies that man has a will — that is, a faculty of choosing what he wishes to say, do, and think. But have you ever reflected on the pitiful weakness of your will? Though you have the ability to make a decision, you do not have the power to carry out your purpose. Will may devise a course of action, but will has no power to execute its intention.

Joseph's brothers hated him. They sold him to be a slave. But God used their actions to make him a ruler over themselves. They chose their course of action to harm Joseph. But God in his power directed events for Joseph's good. Joseph said, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20)

And how many of your decisions are miserably thwarted? You may choose to be a millionaire, but God's providence is likely to prevent it. You may decide to be a scholar, but bad health, an unstable home, or lack of finances may frustrate your will. You choose to go on a vacation, but an automobile accident may send you to the hospital instead.

By saying that your will is free, we certainly do not mean that it determines the course of your life. You did not choose the sickness, sorrow, war, and poverty that have spoiled your

happiness. You did not choose to have enemies. If man's will is so potent, why not choose to live on and on? But you must die. The major factors which shape your life cannot thank your will. You did not select your social status, color, intelligence, etc

Any sober reflection on your experience will produce the conclusion, "A man's mind **plans** his way, but the Lord **directs** his steps." (Proverbs 16:9) Rather than extolling the human will, we ought humbly to praise the Lord whose purposes shape our lives. As Jeremiah confessed, "I know, o Lord, that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man to direct his steps." (Jeremiah 10:23).

Yes, you may choose what you want, and you may plan what you will do. But your will is not free to accomplish anything contrary to the purposes of God. Neither have you any power to reach your goals but that which God allows you. The next time you are so enamored with your own will, remember Jesus parable about the rich man. The wealthy man said, "I **will** do this; I **will** pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I **will** store all my grain and my goods. . . But God said to him, Fool! This night your soul is required of you." (Luke 12:18-21) He was free to plan but not free to accomplish; so it is with you.

II. THE MYTH OF ETHICAL FREEDOM

But freedom of the will is cited as an important factor in making **moral** decisions. Man's will is said to be free to choose between good and evil. But again we must ask, from what is it free? And what is man's will free to choose?

The will of man is his power to choose between alternatives. Your will does decide your actions from a number of options. You have the faculty to direct your own thoughts, words, and deeds. Your decisions are not formed by an outside force but from within yourself. No man is compelled to act contrary to his will, nor forced to say what he does not wish. Your will guides your actions.

Yet this does not mean that the power to decide is free from all influence. You make choices based on your understanding, your feelings, your likes and dislikes, and your appetites. In other words, your will is not free from yourself! Your choices are determined by your own basic character. The will is not independent of your nature but the slave of it. Your choices do not shape your character, but your character guides your choices. The will is quite partial to what you know, feel, love, and desire. You always choose on the basis of your disposition, according to the condition of your heart.

It is just for this reason that your will is **not** free to do good. Your will is the servant of your heart, and your heart is evil. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that **every** imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5) “No one does good, not even one.” (Romans. 3:12) No power forces man to sin contrary to his will, but the descendants of Adam are so evil that they always choose the evil.

Your decisions are molded by your understanding, and the Bible says of all men, “Their senseless minds were darkened.” (Romans 1:21) Man can only be righteous when he desires to have fellowship with God. But, “No one seeks for God.” (Romans 3:11) Your appetites crave sin, and thus you cannot choose God. To choose good is contrary to human nature. If you chose to obey God, it would be the result of external compulsion. But you are free to choose, and hence your choice is enslaved to your own evil nature.

If fresh meat and tossed salad were placed before a hungry lion, he would choose the flesh. This is because his nature dictates the selection. It is just so with man. The will of man is free from outside force but not from the bias of human nature. That bias is against God. Man’s powers of decision are free to choose whatever the human heart dictates; therefore there is no possibility of a man choosing to please God without a prior work of divine grace.

What most people mean by free will is the idea that man is by nature neutral and therefore able to choose either good or evil. This simply is not true. The human will and the whole of human nature is bent to **only evil continually.** Jeremiah asked, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.” (Jeremiah 13:23) It is impossible. It is contrary to nature. Thus do men desperately need the supernatural transformation of their natures, else their wills are enslaved to choosing evil.

In spite of the great praise that is given to “free will,” we have seen that man’s will is not free to choose a course contrary to God’s purposes nor free to act contrary to his own moral nature. Your will does not determine the events of your life nor the circumstances of it. Ethical choices are not formed by a neutral mind but always dictated by your personality make-up.

III. THE MYTH OF SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

Nevertheless many assert that the human will makes the ultimate choice of spiritual life or spiritual death. Here the will is altogether free to choose eternal life offered in Jesus Christ or to reject it. It is said that God will give a new heart to all who choose by the power of their own free will to receive Jesus Christ.

There can be no question that receiving Jesus Christ is an act of the human will. It is often called “faith.” But how do men come to receive the Lord willingly? It is usually answered, “Out of the power of their own free will.” But how can that be? Jesus is a prophet. To receive him means to believe all that he says. In John 8:41-45 Jesus made it clear that you were born of Satan. This evil father hates the truth and imparted the same bias into your heart by nature. Hence said Jesus, “Because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me.” How does the human will jump out of man to choose to believe what the human mind hates and denies?

To receive Jesus further means to embrace him as a priest — that is, to employ and depend on him to sue out peace with God by sacrifice and intercession. Paul tells us that the mind with which we were born is hostile to God. (Romans 8:7) How can the will escape the influence of human nature which was born with a violently enmity to God? It would be insane for the will to choose peace when every bone and drop of blood cries out for rebellion.

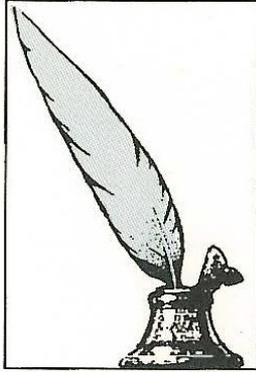
Then too, receiving Jesus means to welcome him as a king. It means choosing to obey his every command, to confess his right of rule, and to worship before his throne. But the human mind, emotions, and desires all cry out, “We will not have this man to reign over us.” (Luke 19:14) If my whole being hates his truth, hates his rule, and hates peace with God, how can my will be responsible for receiving Jesus? How can such a sinner have faith?

It is not man’s will but God’s grace that must be thanked for giving a sinner a new heart. Unless God changes the heart, creates a new spirit of peace, truthfulness, and submission, man will not choose to receive Jesus Christ and eternal life in Him. A new heart must be given before a man can believe, or else the human will is hopelessly enslaved to evil human nature — even in the matter of conversion. Jesus said, “Marvel not that I said to you, you **must** be born again.” (John 3:7) Unless you are, you will never see his kingdom.

Read John 1:12 & 13. It says that those who believe on Jesus have “been born, not of the will of man, but of God.” As your will is not responsible for your coming into this world, it is not responsible for the new birth. It is Your Creator who must be thanked for your life, and if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17) Who ever chose to be created? When Lazarus rose from the dead, he chose to answer the call of Christ, but he did not choose to come to life. So Paul said in Ephesians 2:4 & 5, “When we were dead in sins God has quickened us with Christ (by grace you are saved).” Faith is the first act of a will made new by the Holy Spirit. Receiving Christ is an act of man just as breathing is, but God must first give life.

No wonder Martin Luther (the Protestant Reformer) wrote a book entitled *The Bondage Of The Will*, which he considered one of his most important treatises. The will is in the chains of an evil human nature. You who extol the free will as a great force are clinging to a root of pride. Man, as fallen in sin, is utterly helpless choosing the forbidden fruit that brought us into misery. The powerful grace of God alone offers deliverance. Cast yourself upon God's mercy for salvation. Ask for the Spirit of Grace that he may create a new spirit within you.

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approved unto God”
2 Timothy 2:15*

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