

## The Freedom of Will

### I. Introduction

The question of free will became an urgent question for the Christian church early in the 5th Century and has continued to be very important right up until the present. Around the year 400 A.D. a British monk called Pelagius went to Rome and was very upset by the immorality of the Christians there. He began to preach about the need for Christians to try harder to reach the Christian standards of morality and to practice more self-discipline. He felt there was no excuse for the Christians being so lax in the way they lived. If they made up their minds to do better they could do better. God had showed them what was right and they could do it if they wanted to.

About the same time, St. Augustine was converted and wrote his great book called The Confessions. In this book Augustine told about the grace of God which had changed his life. He had lived a very sinful life before he was converted, and was convinced that it was the power and grace of God alone that had been able to change him and save him from his own moral weakness. Many times in his book he prayed to God: "I have no hope at all except in your great mercy." At one point he went on to say: "O, God, you command us to be continent; therefore give us whatever you command, and command whatever you like."

Pelagius read this prayer of Augustine's and felt that it was dangerously mistaken. He felt it was putting the responsibility on God for whatever we do. "Give whatever you command and command whatever you will." Pelagius reasoned that since God has given the commandments it is now up to man to keep them. He believed that man has been created with the power to follow God's will and can even reach perfection if he tries hard enough. It is no good asking God to make people keep his commands. He has given people free will which is the power to decide whether or not they will follow God's laws. Pelagius felt that when Augustine asked God to "give what He commands" he was simply giving people an excuse for not keeping God's commands. If they followed Augustine's thinking people could always say it was up to God to make them be good. If they were bad it was not really their fault. It was Adam's fault, and now God alone could save them. Pelagius held that this kind of thinking was responsible for the low state of Christian morals. Besides, he argued, this kind of thinking was not true. Man really has free will and has the ability to decide whether or not to obey God's laws. In addition to believing the gospel, keeping the law is another way into God's kingdom. Man's free will gives him the possibility of choosing not to sin. Adam's sin did not cause the whole human race necessarily to sin. Adam's sin injured himself alone. It did not destroy free will in all men forever and ever, as Augustine believed. Free will, said Pelagius, has survived the fall of man. "Not so", replied Augustine. Man does not have the power to decide by himself whether or not he will be saved.

The argument about free will and original sin went on in the Church for nearly 150 years before it was decided that Pelagius was mainly wrong and Augustine mainly right. But there have always been people in the Church who have thought and acted more like Pelagius than like Augustine. The Catholic Church in 529 A.D. condemned most of Pelagius' ideas but before long the way of salvation taught in the Church depended on man's ability to do what was right and to follow the laws of the Church. The salvation preached by the Church gradually depended less and less on God's grace and more and more on man's works. By the time of the Reformation it was even possible for a person to buy salvation by a donation of money to the Church. In other words, a person could freely choose whether or not to be saved and could practically earn his own salvation by doing whatever the Church leaders said was necessary. For example, many people went on the Crusades because of the promise of the Pope that they would be guaranteed salvation if they went.

To be fair to the Catholic Church, it held that salvation was always due to the merit of Christ's blood shed at Calvary. But they believed that the Church had the power to dispense this merit and that people could earn this merit of Christ's sacrifice from the Church either by good deeds or by payment of money. It was assumed that people had enough free will to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to share in Christ's merit. Pelagius was being followed in practice if not in theory.

Martin Luther was the one who next challenged the idea that man has free will. He insisted that salvation was solely by God's grace in Jesus Christ and that people do not have the choice of buying Christ's merit or earning it in any other way. Salvation is the gift of God through faith. Luther claimed that the whole idea of salvation in the Catholic Church was wrong because it depended on man's free will and not solely on God's grace through faith. He wrote a famous book called The Bondage of the Will in which he maintained that man does not have any free will at all so far as serving God is concerned. John Calvin took the same position. In his famous doctrine of "double predestination" he held that God alone decides who will be saved and who will be damned and man's free will has nothing to do with it. Man does not have the power to decide for or against God. God decides for or against each man.

The Reformation was part of the period of the Renaissance. This was a time when many men were breaking away from the authority of religion and trying to think for themselves. Many people did not agree with Luther and Calvin that man's free will was very limited or even non-existent. Many people thought that man's free will was one of the most important aspects of being a human being. Free will, they believed, enabled man to follow reason. It was free will that gave man his dignity, making him responsible and creative. They felt that without free will man would be like a machine or a puppet who could do anything only when God pulled the strings. So, the idea of free will continued to be very controversial both inside and outside of the Church.

The development of science next challenged the idea of free will. Science believes that everything that happens has a cause that explains why it happened. If everything a person does has a cause that explains why he did it, then it is difficult to claim that man has a free will. A person may think he has a free will but in fact if all the causes for his actions were known then it would be seen that his will is not free at all. Everything he does has a cause. Free will is just an illusion. People are not really free at all. They are determined by various causes in everything they do.

In the face of these ideas of early modern science Christians began to defend the idea of free will again. They did not like the idea that man was completely determined by various causes in everything that he did because this implied that it was not God who controlled men's lives. If man was completely determined then there seemed to be nothing left for God to do. So Christians attacked the idea of determinism and defended the idea of free will. Man has a free will, they claimed, so that God can influence him by his Holy Spirit to do good things.

At present, science does not stress determinism as it did at first. Science does not claim to be able to discover all the causes that make people do the things they do. The argument about free will has died down. Now modern man again assumes that he has a free will and believes that he can decide how to solve his problems and improve his life on earth. In fact, the spirit of modern man is the spirit of self-sufficiency. Man's attitude now is that there is practically nothing that he cannot do if he decides to do it and tries hard enough. This attitude is the essence of the modern secular outlook which people of all races and cultures are adopting. This secular outlook is regarded by many Christians as a threat to Christianity because it leaves God out of the picture. If men can do almost anything by their own power and skill then God is no longer needed. By his own free will and natural ability man can look after himself. This is the common secular outlook in the present world.

Therefore, some Christians are again attacking the idea of man's free will and stressing the need for man to be dependent on God. They say that man's free will alone without God's help is not able to solve human problems and create a better world. Man's free will by itself cannot avoid the weaknesses of sin. Free will alone only causes human problems rather than solving them.

In this very brief history of the Christian belief about free will we have seen that Christians have changed positions several times from one extreme to the other. Sometimes the Church has defended free will and sometimes it has attacked it, depending on the emphasis that was needed at the time. This makes it difficult for us to see what our own belief about free will should be.

The history of the Church does not give a clear answer to the problem of free will. How then can we decide what we should think about the matter? The answer is that we must look at the Biblical records to see if there is a clear cut position on man's free will, and we must look at free will as a theological idea to see how it relates to other important theological beliefs. By combining the Biblical witness and systematic theological thinking we may be able to see the position that we should take on this question.

The great Christian leaders of the past like Luther or Augustine or Erasmus also searched the Scriptures diligently to find the truth about free will. We can easily look at the evidence which they found. When we do this, however, we discover that the evidence of the Bible itself neither clearly proves nor disproves the fact of man's free will. There seems to be evidence in the Bible to support both Pelagius and Augustine, both Luther and Erasmus, both the modern secular man and the Christian who disagrees with him. The Bible witness seems to be that there is truth on both sides. If this is so, it is the responsibility of Christians to see how the two aspects of truth are related to each other. It is in our theological understanding that we can find a way to think about free will that will be most faithful to the whole of the Biblical witness. Let us look at the theological and Biblical support for the fact of free will first. Then we will look at the evidence for the limitations of free will.

## II. Free Will Defended

Those who believe in free will argue that if there is no free will then there cannot be any real decision, or repentance, or sin, or responsibility, or merit, or reward because all these depend on the fact of free will. There are, of course, many Biblical passages which refer to all these things and it is indeed difficult to understand them unless one believes in free will. For example, Joshua challenged the Israelites to make a decision about which God they would serve. He said: "If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served ... or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15) Many more examples could be found which speak of decision which requires free will.

Repentance is a kind of decision that also requires free will. If a person did not repent freely but because of some force or necessity then his repentance would not be true repentance. The Chinese term "Rice Christian" is a good description of a person who has not truly repented. The ideas of repentance and of sin depend on the idea that man is responsible for his own actions. But one must have some degree of free will if he is to be held responsible for what he does. If all of our actions are determined by various causes or controlled completely by God then we are very much like a machine or a puppet, and we not responsible for what we do. But the Bible many times states that each person is responsible for his actions and even his thoughts. In Ezekiel 18:20-1 we read: "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall

be upon himself. But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins ... and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live." In Genesis 4:7 God says to Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Again, in Jesus' parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25 the King says: "Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." The Bible again and again witnesses to man's responsibility to do what is right. It is always implied that man has a choice whether or not to do good or evil. Jesus said to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:17 "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." His words certainly seem to imply that man has freedom to choose whether or not to keep the commandments. It seems clear that Pelagius was at least partly right when he insisted that Christians should exercise self-control in keeping the commandments. In I Corinthians 9:25 St. Paul speaks in the same vein, saying "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

Perseverance, as well as repentance, requires free will. Pelagius claimed that a person could even reach perfection by perseverance. He said he was following Jesus advice to the rich young ruler when he said (Matthew 19:21) "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The fact that the rich young ruler did not take Jesus' advice seems to give further proof of man's freedom of choice.

Finally, it is argued that God cannot justly recognize anyone's merit, or reward anyone unless the person was responsible for what he did; and in order to be responsible one must have free will. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) the rewards and punishment given to the various servants depended on what they had done. The Master said: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." It would seem to be very unfair for the worthless servant to be cast into outer darkness if he were not responsible for his failure. Even St. Paul who preached justification by faith and not works, said in Romans 2:6-8 "For he (God) will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury."

We have not covered all the arguments supporting man's free will but perhaps we have looked at enough evidence to show that there is a substantial witness in the Bible to the fact of our freedom of choice in matters of goodness and evil.

### III. The Attack on Free Will

Now we need to look at the arguments of those who believe that free will is not important for man's salvation. These people include some of the greatest leaders in the history of the Church: Luther, Calvin, and Augustine, and many others. These men were influenced very much by St. Paul and especially by the Epistle to the Romans. They were convinced that salvation is received as a gift through faith. Salvation is not the result of a person's works, and this includes keeping the commandments of the law. The gospel is radically different from the law. The gospel is the news of God's free gift of saving grace. People are saved by accepting through faith the promised grace of God in Jesus Christ. Salvation is not a reward for keeping the law. God takes the initiative in saving man. It does not start with man's free will.

Up to this point in the argument I think that Augustine and Luther were absolutely right. Paul puts the matter very clearly in Ephesians 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not because of works, lest any man should boast." Grace is the centre of the gospel and far more important than man's free will in keeping the law. In Romans Paul explains that the law does not lead to salvation but to temptation and frustration. Grace

is responsible for the "righteousness and peace and joy" of the Kingdom of God (Romans 14:17). Free will by itself can never achieve the salvation which is the result of grace. John puts the emphasis in the right place when he says in John 1:12-13 "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

Augustine and Luther were great figures in the Church precisely because they put first things first, that is, they insisted that God's grace is the heart and centre of the gospel. They knew where salvation begins, namely with God's gift of forgiveness, and they understood the limitations of man's ability to save himself by his own free will.

Both Luther and Augustine, however, went on to claim that man has no free will at all. They both argued that man's free will was totally destroyed by the fall. They believed that man was completely a slave of his weakness until he was saved by the power of God. Then he became a slave of God's redeeming Spirit. For Augustine, being a slave of God is what true human freedom means. For Luther, salvation produced a new kind of freedom which was the chief mark of the Christian life. But Luther's book "On Christian Liberty" did not contradict his other book on "The Bondage of the Will". Luther still believed that man has no free will.

Luther and Augustine and Calvin got into difficulty when they had to explain why some people are saved and others not. If salvation is God's gift, then he must choose those to whom he gives the gift. Furthermore, he must also choose not to give the gift to the people who do not receive it. Thus, these men all held a doctrine of double predestination. God saves some and damns others. They argued that this must be true if God is all-powerful. They believed that God's grace is not only prevenient but also irresistible. Man does not have enough free will even to resist or reject God's gift of grace. They quoted such Biblical passages as Romans 8:29-30 where Paul speaks of predestination. They referred to the passages in the Bible which speak of the fact that all men are sinners. For example, Romans 3:10-12 "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." They quoted Romans 8:18 which says: "So then he (God) has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills." Man's free will, according to this passage, has nothing to do with salvation or damnation. In fact, you might conclude, as Luther and Augustine did, that man really has no free will at all. God's power does everything.

#### IV. Defending Both Free Will and Grace

The solution to the question of free will depends partly on a person's doctrine of God and partly on the doctrine of man. If God's omnipotence is understood to mean that He does absolutely everything, then, of course, there is no room left for man's free will. Or if man is conceived to be totally depraved then his free will can do no good whatsoever. Luther and Augustine were both convinced by their own sinfulness before conversion that man is totally depraved and that God finally determines who is saved and who is damned.

It is not necessary, however, to adopt such an extreme position on these two questions. God's omnipotence and divine freedom do not have to mean that He is responsible for everything that man does. Original sin does not have to mean that man's free will was totally destroyed, leaving man totally depraved.

It is certainly true that God's gift of grace is the cause of salvation. But God's grace is not irresistible. Man has at least enough free will to reject God's offer of forgiveness. In Matthew 23:37 Jesus said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" God's grace is powerful but it does not force man to do His will. Paul in Romans 2:4 gives a clue how God's grace works. He says: "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance." God's grace "leads" but

does not force us. God in his wisdom has given man the freedom to choose whether or not to accept his grace. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus shows the nature of God's offer of grace when he said: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." God's grace is gentle, inviting, encouraging and powerful, but not irresistible. Man can resist God's grace because God made him to be a person, not a puppet. Man's free will may choose to do evil. God does not cause people to do evil. Double predestination has rightly been rejected by most Christians in the modern world. Ezekiel gave a true picture of God in Chapter 18:23, 32 "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live." For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord God; so turn, and live."

God's power condemns no one. If men are condemned they condemn themselves. God's grace is offered to all. Thus it is true to say that, whenever a person is saved, his free will is always assisted by God's grace. Man's free will alone cannot achieve salvation. But with the assistance of grace man can decide to repent and to believe: he can persevere and improve his self-discipline. He may not attain perfection as Pelagius claimed, but he, like Paul, can "press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

Canons on Justification (and free will)

The Council of Trent 1547

All the following statements were declared to be in error.

- (1) That man can be justified before God by his own works, which are done either in the strength of human nature or through the teaching of the law, apart from the divine grace through Jesus Christ.
- (2) That this grace is given through Jesus Christ solely to the end that a man may be able more easily to live justly and to earn eternal life, as if he could, though with great difficulty, do both these through his free will, without grace.
- (3) That without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his aid a man can believe, hope and love, or can repent, as he should, so that on him the grace of justification may be conferred.
- \* (4) That the free will of man, moved and aroused by God, does not co-operate at all by responding to the awakening call of God, so as to dispose and prepare itself for the acquisition of the grace of justification, nor can it refuse that grace, if it so will, but it does nothing at all, like some inanimate thing, and is completely passive.
- \* (5) That man's free will has been wholly lost and destroyed after Adam's sin.
- \* (6) That it is not in the power of man to make his ways evil, but that evil works as well as good are wrought by God, not just by way of permission but even by his own personal activity; so that the betrayal of Judas is no less his work than the calling of Paul.
- \* (7) That all works before justification, for whatever reason they were done, are in truth sins and deserve the hatred of God, or that the more strongly a man strives to dispose himself to receive Grace, the more grievously he sins.
- (9) That the impious is justified by faith alone - if this means that nothing else is required by way of co-operation in the acquisition of the grace of justification, and that it is in no way necessary for a man to be prepared and disposed by the motion of his own will.
- (15) That a man reborn and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate.
- (23) That a man once justified can no more sin, nor can he lose the grace, and so he that falls into sin was never truly justified; or that it is possible altogether to avoid all sins, even venial sins ...
- \* (24) That justification once received is not preserved and even increased in the sight of God through good works; but that these same works are only fruits and signs of justification, not causes of its increase.