

EXPOSITION OF THE 1689 BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH

CHAPTER IX: OF FREE WILL

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INTRODUCTION

Pivotal in so many ways is the doctrine of the free will of man. Perhaps the most hotly contested areas of Christian doctrine, the ease with which one might pervert the biblical understanding of man's free will hinges on our ability to avoid bringing our own assumptions into the text itself. Early church theologian Origen, whose entire system of theology is conspicuously built on an improper emphasis on man's free will, gives us warning in doing the same. Frankly speaking, it has always been very difficult to state this doctrine, even for the great theologian Augustine of Hippo.¹

The Confession rightly affirms and meticulously defines the nature of free will, and yet carefully limits and qualifies its clout.² This is to say that while man does possess a natural liberty to act on choice, this does not imply utter unpredictability nor ultimate autonomy. It is always directly under the control of God's sovereign will and purpose.³ While chapter 9 addresses the nature of the will of man, it does not address man's free will in relation to God's decrees; this has been handled within chapters 3 and 5.

In the first paragraph, the Confession clearly defines the nature of free will, with the remaining four paragraphs addressing the various "states" of mankind which affects his will. First, the Confession observes man's "state of innocency" before the fall. Secondly, it will show man's "state of sin" after the fall. Thirdly, it will explain man's "state of grace" after conversion, and lastly, it will address the converted man's "state of glory."

¹ Augustine acknowledged the difficulty, stating: "when grace is defended, we are thought to destroy free-will, and when a free-will is acknowledged (though in some sense only) we are thought to deny free-grace." Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 139, quoting Anthony Burgess, *A Treatise of Original Sin* (London, 1658), 290.

² Samuel E. Waldron, *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith: A Modern Exposition* (Grand Rapids: EP Books, 2013), 172.

³ *Ibid.*, 172.

I. MAN'S NATURAL LIBERTY IN HUMAN FREEDOM (9.1)

Original Text

God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.¹

Modern Text

God has endowed human will with natural liberty and power to act on choices so that it is neither forced nor inherently bound by nature to do good or evil.

¹ Matthew 17:12; James 1:14; Deuteronomy 30:19.

The word “God” is the first word of this chapter, and for an excellent reason. It would be easy to overlook this occurrence, but with the subject matter at hand, it is glaringly powerful. Any sound doctrine must begin and end with God.

The word “endued” has been modified in the modern translation to “endowed”, which both mean “to give a quality or characteristic.” In this case, “with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice.” In his observation of nearly identical language in the Westminster Confession, Sproul states, “Here the confession speaks of natural liberty, a liberty that is part and parcel of our nature as human beings.”⁴ Man’s will is also endued with “natural...power.” This meaning that, the will of man has the natural power or ability to act upon choice; truly what it means to be a human being, separate and distinct from every other creature of God’s design. This free agency is the liberty to make choices. Contrary to what opponents of Reformed theology would attest, it does not deny or diminish this area of anthropological distinction; rather it thoroughly embraces it. The ability to make choices does not vanquish God’s sovereign decree;

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Laymans' Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith, vol. II, Salvation and the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 3.

it is in fact perfectly compatible with it. Often, it is through this liberty that God frequents to bring about his decree, yet without coercing man's will.⁵

This will, "is neither forced... to do good or evil." The scene of disobedience in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) is an example of man's initial freedom to chose to disobey God's special command, based on their own desire. There is no intimation here that their will was coerced in any way, regardless of whether the serpent's temptation may have veiled what they knew to be true. This is perhaps where the Articles of the Synod of Dort falls short in clarification by stating, "Man...by the instigation of the devil and his own free will, revolting from God..."⁶ Scripture clearly affirms that it is man who chooses good or evil according to that which he desires. "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:14). The worldly deflection is, "The devil made me do it." While we may be overcome with sinful desires, each person chooses to sin and is responsible for his choices, whether good or evil (1 Cor. 5:10).

As well, the will of man is not "by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil." Sproul continues, "Here the Confession distances itself from every form of moral determinism, which would subject human choices to fixed, mechanical, or physical forces, or even to arbitrary influences of fate. In a word, Reformed theology categorically rejects fatalism and any determinism based upon the forces of nature. We are not coerced or forced by natural causes, or by his environment, either to do good or to do evil."⁷ Likewise, A.A. Hodge writes, "A man freely chooses what he wants to choose. He would not choose freely if he chose in any other

⁵ Jesus said as much about those who persecuted John the Baptist, saying they did to him "whatever they wished" and would do likewise to Himself when it was time for the Son of Man to "suffer at their hands" (Matt. 17:12).

⁶ Thomas Scott, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort* (1856; reprinted, Miami: HardPress Publishing, 2012), 205, quoting the Articles of the Synod of Dort, Chapters III & IV.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

way...Christ taught...that human action is determined by the character of the agent as certainly as the nature of the fruit is determined by the nature of the tree from which it springs; and that the only way to change the character of the action is to change the permanent character or moral tendency and habit of the heart of the agent. Matt. Vii. 16-20; xii. 33-35.”⁸ We must recognize, as Chad Van Dixhoorn summates, “...that neither a fall into the fullness of sin nor salvation by sovereign grace destroys the will or obliterates its liberty.”⁹

II. MAN’S ORIGINAL VOLATILITY IN THE STATE OF INNOCENCE (9.2)

Original Text

Man, in his state in innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well-pleasing to God,² but yet was unstable, so that he might fall from it.³

Modern Text

Humanity in the state of innocence had freedom and power to will and to do what was good and well-pleasing to God.² Yet this condition was unstable, so that humanity could fall from it.³

² Ecclesiastes 7:29. ³ Genesis 3:6.

This state refers to the time before the guilt and corruption that Adam and Eve experienced as a direct result of their disobedience to God. Prior to the fall, man “had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well-pleasing to God.”¹⁰ They possessed true freedom and the genuine ability to please God in their actions. Sadly, this state was “unstable, so that he might fall from it.” Thus Adam and Eve were placed in their estate “under the possibility of transgressing” (see 4:2).

⁸ A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (1869; reprinted, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 160-161.

⁹ Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 137.

¹⁰ See Chapter 4, Paragraph 2: “...having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it, and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject to change.”

In their state immediately following creation and up to their original disobedience, Adam and Eve were utterly free to do good, and yet utterly free to do evil. God informed them of this mutable standing. Dixhoorn states, “The writer of Ecclesiastes was surely right when he noted, ‘God made man upright’ (Eccles. 7:29). Men and women needed to be upright so that they could choose to exercise a wise and God-pleasing dominion over creation, the very task they were created to do (Gen. 1:26).”¹¹

This is wholly unlike the state of glory, where this change is not even a remote possibility. That state of glory is not dependent on our perfect obedience, but upon Christ’s alone. The terms of the covenant of grace are unconditional, for Christ is our surety, and since he purchased that eternal inheritance for us, the state of glory is not unstable. Therefore, this future hope is far better than what was experienced by Adam and Eve before the fall.

III. MAN’S POWERLESSNESS IN THE STATE OF SIN (9.3)

Original Text

Man, but 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 that good and dead in sin,⁵ is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.⁶

Modern Text

Humanity, by falling into a state of sin, has completely lost all ability to choose any spiritual good that accompanies salvation.⁴ Thus, people in their natural^a state are absolutely opposed to spiritual good and dead in sin,⁵ so that they cannot convert themselves by their own strength or prepare themselves for conversion.⁶

^awithout the Spirit ⁴Romans 5:6; Romans 8:7. ⁵Ephesians 2:1, 5. ⁶Titus 3:3-5; John 6:44.

¹¹ Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 139.

The unholy evolution from innocence to sin occurred by the will acting upon the choice to eat the forbidden fruit as Adam and Eve discovered the evils of this dreadful reality.¹² They and all their posterity “wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.” The emphasis here is unmistakably on the words “wholly” and “all.” What was lost entirely was the ability to will to do any spiritual good of any kind. No longer could mankind will to do any spiritual good whatsoever. All determinations were entirely corrupted by original sin, including the very nature of man. Athanasius likewise taught that the woe of mankind is linked to the first “lapse” in the Garden.¹³ This loss of ability specifically relates to salvation, and not that the power to act upon chose is wholly lost in the state of sin;¹⁴ rather the loss is the ability to will any spiritual good regarding salvation.

The explanation provided in the following phrase begins, “so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good.” The Apostle Paul calls this individual in an unregenerate, fallen state a “natural man” (KJV) or “natural person” in the ESV: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14 ESV). The word “that” refers us back to the spiritual good accompanying or leading to salvation. “Averse” speaks of antagonism toward that spiritual good, and “averseness” is precisely why Jesus speaks of the need for the Father’s powerful and effective drawing: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me

¹² See Chapter 6, Paragraph 2. Adam and Eve became “...wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body...”

¹³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christians Doctrines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1976), 347. It is important to add that Athanasius never hinted that we directly participate in Adam’s actual guilt, i.e. his moral culpability, nor does he exclude the possibility of men living entirely without sin. In one passage, for example, he even claims that Jeremiah and John the Baptist actually did so.

¹⁴ God is the only One who has endowed man with this ability, thus only He can take it away. This hypothesis, while held by theologians like Origen, is inconsistent with the breadth of Scripture’s teaching on the matter.

draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44 ESV).¹⁵ Without the Father’s drawing, the averseness to “that good” which accompanies salvation would forever keep the sinner from salvation.

The Confession continues: “...natural man...being...dead in sin.” Paul gives us perhaps the bleakest of images to show us what this looks like: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:1-3 ESV). Notice especially that this life is lived according the passions of his flesh (i.e. sinful desires). They serve as the guide to his will, effectually making him a slave to his own sinful nature. In this deadness to sin, the natural man “is not able by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself thereunto.” Conversion must then be a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit that literally changes a person’s nature through effectual grace, enabling him to embrace the gospel of Christ, without which man is wholly unable to obey the Jesus’ command to repent and believe. This applies to even the inability to “prepare himself.”¹⁶

¹⁵ R.C. Sproul relates a story regarding an incident where he was debating John 6:44: “I was asked to debate this question at an Arminian school several years ago with the head of the New Testament department. When he quoted John 6:44, I mentioned to him that the Greek verb translated “draw” in this verse is the same verb that is used in the book of Acts when some men dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities for casting an evil spirit out of their slave girl (Acts 16:19). Those men did not try to entice them to come before the magistrates; they compelled them to come. The professor interrupted: “But there are references in the Greek poet Euripides (or somebody) where this same verb refers to drawing water out of a well.” Smiling to the audience, he asked, “And Dr. Sproul, does anybody compel the water to come out of the well?” Everybody laughed, and I responded, “How do you get water from a well? Do you stand at the top of the well and call, “Here, water, water, water”? Or is that water dead in the pit and absolutely inert unless you lower the bucket into the water and you drag it up to the surface?” Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 9.

¹⁶ See Chapter 8, Paragraph 8: “To all those for whom Christ hath obtained eternal redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same...all of free and absolute grace, without any condition foreseen in them to procure it.”

Even after the fall, the wills of Adam and Eve, in some sense remained free. But this liberty in choice after the fall so corrupted the nature of mankind that the will of man lost its ability to act in any way spiritually good as it relates to salvation. Their freedom was to choose to run and hide from their Maker, freely blaming one another and evading responsibility. We see in a moment of desperation, even the twelve disciples asked their Master: “Then who can be saved?” But as Jesus said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18:26-27 ESV).

By demonstrating the hopelessness of fallen man, this paragraph directly primes the next chapter, “Of Effectual Calling”, where the very thing the natural man is incapable to do, God performs by his effectual call. This work is spoken of in Titus: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4-5 ESV).

IV. MAN’S CONVERTED ABILITY IN THE STATE OF GRACE (9.4)

Original Text

When God converts a sinner and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin,⁷ and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good;⁸ yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.⁹

Modern Text

When God converts sinners and transforms them into the state of grace, He frees them from their natural bondage to sin⁷ and by His grace alone enables them to will and to do freely what is spiritually good.⁸ Yet because of their remaining corruption, they do not perfectly nor exclusively will what is good but also will what is evil.⁹

⁷Colossians 1:13; John 8:36. ⁸Philippians 2:13. ⁹Romans 7:15, 18, 19, 21, 23.

In this paragraph, the Confession begins: “When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace.” We see in Scripture the converting power of God, that He “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Colossians 1:13 KJV). God “frees him from his natural bondage under sin.” Paul declares, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17-18 ESV). This new state of transformation from natural bondage to sin to a free spiritual man (1 Cor. 2:14-15) is made possible only by God’s effectual grace.

By this conversion of sovereign effectual grace, man’s state, nature, inclination and character are changed in such a way that the very will of man is affected to its core. The Confession goes on, “by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.” What a wondrous contrast to paragraph 3, where man “hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.” A monumental change of nature is necessitated and has divinely occurred. Jesus himself states, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36 ESV). And, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13 ESV). This translation of natural man from darkness to light makes us marvel, but the verbiage in the Confession is also realistic, since the Bible does imply that we are brought back to the previous state of innocence enjoyed by our first parents.

The last phrase adds, “yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he doth not perfectly, nor only will, that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.” The stark

reality every regenerate believer faces in various extremes is that the remaining corruption which still exists in our nature,¹⁷ affecting our desires and choices. Hodge states: “And yet, because of lingering remains of his old corrupt moral habit of the soul, there remains a conflict of tendencies, so that the Christian does not perfectly nor only will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.”¹⁸ The Apostle Paul, speaking of this remaining corruption in his own life, articulates in this familiar passage:

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I hate the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Romans 7:15-23 ESV).¹⁹

We see from this struggle that we do not automatically serve the Lord joyfully and with zeal and sincerity the rest of our lives. Submission to the will of the Father, servitude to the Son, and sensitivity to the direction of the Holy Spirit are hallmarks of genuine belief; but these are not an involuntary guarantee in every waking moment of consciousness. “The devil still hisses; the world still calls; at times we feel like there is no strength left in us to escape or resist...we sometimes do not even understand our own actions.”²⁰ But thanks be to God that there is now a choice between good and evil, whereas in the previous state of bondage to the nature of flesh and

¹⁷ See Chapter 6, Paragraph 5: “The corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated...”

¹⁸ Hodge, *The Westminster Confession*, 165.

¹⁹ John Murray makes a persuasive case that in Romans 7:7-13, Paul speaks of his pre-regenerate state, but that in verses 7:14-25 he speaks of his regenerate state with its remaining corruption. John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. In one edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 255-273.

²⁰ Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 143.

sin, the choice laid before us was only of evil. This makes the ensuing paragraph so wondrous because the freedom in the eternal state of glorified mind and body will be to do good alone.

V. MAN'S UNASSAILABILITY IN THE STATE OF FUTURE GLORY (9.5)

Original Text

This will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone in the state of glory alone.¹⁰

Modern Text

Only in the state of glory is the will made perfect and unchangeably free toward good alone.¹⁰

¹⁰Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 12:23.

Perhaps it is the uncertainty of the unknown, but the will of man in the state of glory is as intriguing as it is curious to the believer. A wondrous state is described in the final paragraph, “This will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone.” There in the presence of the Lord, our will is to be made perfectly free from corruption and free to good alone. Sproul opines, “In heaven, when we are in glory, we are free only to obey. That is what we call royal freedom, the most wonderful freedom, where our choices will only be good. We will have no inclination whatsoever to do anything wicked or evil.”²¹ The word “immutable” affirms the idea that our wills glorified state cannot change from acts of good to acts of evil, regardless of how long our state will last—forever.

²¹ Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 10-11.

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