

## **WCF 09: Of Free Will**

One of the fundamental differences between Calvinism and Arminianism, or between Reformed Theology and Liberal Theology rests on the question of what the free will of man is and whether man has free will. This is a question of utmost importance, for a failure to understand what the Scripture teaches on the subject could lead either to the error of fatalism (Calvinism gone awry) on the one hand or to some form of humanistic atheism (Arminianism gone awry) where man, not God, is ultimately sovereign in regard to his eternal destiny.

In this chapter, the framers of our Confession presents one of the most succinct and biblical balanced treatment of the subject ever to appear in Reformed creeds.

### **On the Liberty of Free Agent**

*9.1 God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined, to good or evil.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Mt 17:12; Jas 1:14; Deut 30:19.

- One of the most common questions asked about the doctrine of predestination is: “Does not absolute predestination make us robots?” This question is a valid one if we understand predestination and providence as the Westminster divines did, viz.: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (*WCF* 3.1), “God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least...” (*WCF* 5.1), and “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission...” (*WCF* 5.4).
- This section anticipates the question and answers simply: God does not force the will of man, nor is man created with a nature that must necessarily do good or evil. In other words, the doctrine of absolute predestination and providence does not make us robots. Though all our actions considered abstractly,—apart from the goodness or badness of them,—are foreordained and ordered by the providence of God, the quality, motive or morality of the action belong to us, and thus the actions as a whole rightly belong to us as individual creatures. Predestination is a remote cause. It does not manipulate us as do electrical signals that manipulate robots. Unless we are suffering from some mental disorder, we would normally be fully conscious of every one of our free actions as being determined by ourselves—according to our intellectual and emotional state; to our desire and affection; and to what we perceive to be the best course of action at the moment of decision. Even if we are held at gun-point and demanded of our money or our life, we make a decision based on what we deem to be best at that moment. To put it in yet another way, the primary cause of an action in a robot is the controller of the robot or, at the most, a sophisticated program which runs it—robots do not have feelings nor minds of their own! The primary cause of our action is our own will,—we do have a mind of our own,—whereas God is the remote cause of our actions by way of foreordination and providence.
- This conclusion is not without scriptural warrant, for Christ taught: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Mt 12:34–35). Or if the thought in this profound statement is too obvious, consider the expostulation of Solomon in regard to the freedom of man: “The preparations of the heart [belongs to] man, [but] the answer of the tongue, is from the LORD. All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the [motives]” (Prov 16:1-2; paraphrased with a few word-replacements to clarify what Solomon is saying). What Solomon is saying is exactly what our Confession is saying, namely that while all actions, including speech is ordained, by the LORD, man does or speak according his desires and is therefore held responsible by the LORD for his actions.

### **On Free Will in the Fourfold State of Man**

*9.2 Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God;<sup>1</sup> but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Eccl 7:29; Gen 1:26; <sup>2</sup>Gen 2:16–17; 3:6.

9.3 Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation;<sup>1</sup> so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good,<sup>2</sup> and dead in sin,<sup>3</sup> is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rom 5:6; 8:7; Jn 15:5; <sup>2</sup>Rom 3:10, 12; <sup>3</sup>Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13; <sup>4</sup>Jn 6:44, 65; Eph 2:2–5; 1 Cor 2:14; Tit 3:3–5.

9.4 When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He freeth him from his natural bondage under sin,<sup>1</sup> and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good;<sup>2</sup> yet so as that, by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly nor only will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Col 1:13; Jn 8:34, 36; <sup>2</sup>Phil 2:13; Rom 6:18, 22; <sup>3</sup>Gal 5:17; Rom 7:15, 18–19, 21, 23.

9.5 The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Eph 4:13; Heb 12:23; 1 Jn 3:2; Jude 24.

These four sections describe the will of man in his four states, namely: (1) state of innocence; (2) natural corrupt state; (3) state of grace; (4) state of glory. It must be understood that the will considered by itself remains the same in all four states. Or, to put it in another way, the *liberty* of the will remains the same today as before the Fall. But the will of man is bounded to the heart or soul of man, and since the condition of the heart or soul of man differs in the four states, the freedom and power,—or *ability*,—of the will is affected.

The four states may be summarised as follows:

State	Natural Inclination	Nature inherently mutable?	Will's relation to sin
Innocence	Only Good	Yes	Able to Sin
Nature	Only Evil	No. Needs regeneration	Unable not to Sin
Grace	Good & Evil	--	Able not to Sin
Glory	Only Good	No	Unable to Sin

A few remarks are in order for each of the four states:

1. *State of Innocence* (section 2)

Cf. *WCF* 6.1–2. Man was created with Original Righteousness: “God hath made man upright” (Eccl 7:29). How then could Adam and Eve fall into sin? The divines answer: their nature was mutable. How? The divines make no attempt to explain. A.A. Hodge speculates: Adam was “liable to be seduced by external temptation, and by the inordinate excitement of the propensions of his animal nature, such as in their proper degree and due subordination are innocent” (p. 162).

2. *Natural Corrupt State* (section 3)

Cf. *WCF* 6.3–4. “Spiritual good accompanying salvation” refers to anything that can be considered good in the eyes of God. The Roman Catholic church teaches that salvation is by faith and works accompanying, but the Reformed Church teaches that all our works are as filthy rags in the eyes of God. The natural man is dead, not sick in sin. Thus the natural man is unable to convert himself—unlike what is taught by the Arminians, that the Holy Spirit will woo but the sinner must make his own decision. Moreover, the sinner is unable “to prepare himself” for his conversion. Most of the Puritans taught that sinners should seek salvation. Since conversion or regeneration is wholly a work of God, it was deemed by many Puritans that sinners should wait for God to convert them, so that they may say that they have wholehearted trust in Christ. But they should not remain idle while waiting, since they are able to read the Bible, attend church, hear sermons, etc. Yet, these actions are not meritorious: there is no guarantee that God will convert them when they engage in such activities. However, many misunderstood that these actions were absolutely essential and efficacious, and that they actually prepare the sinners for grace. (Many of the Puritans did indeed use the word ‘prepare’ when they meant ‘seek,’ and that could have given rise to the misunderstanding). The divines were in a sense correcting this false notion. There is no way that man can prepare themselves for grace. Even their seeking is not truly seeking after God,

but after the comforts and benefits of salvation. Such seeking is selfish and sinful, though, as Edwards taught, less sinful.

The inability of the soul to convert itself is clearly taught in the Scripture in its insistence:

- a. That the natural man is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1); is afflicted with blindness of heart and darkness of understanding (Eph 4:18); is a slave of sin (Rom 6:16, 20); and is a captive of Satan (2 Tim 2:26).
  - b. That the natural man cannot change himself: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (Jer 13:23). “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (Jn 6:44a). See also Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 2:14.
  - c. That a sovereign intervention by way of God is necessary for a man to enter into the kingdom of God: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). Thus the act of conversion is called creation (Eph 2:10) and resurrection (Jn 5:21).
  - d. That the conversion of sinners is God’s own work: “And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezk 11:19–20; 36:26–27; Jer 31:33). “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14).
  - e. That the increase of faith and holiness in Christians is a work of God: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6); “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).
3. *State of Grace* (section 4)

The state of grace is entered by a sinner upon regeneration. In the act of regeneration, two things happen, first, negatively, God “freeth [the sinner] from his natural bondage under sin.” The regenerate man is not longer a captive or a slave to sin and Satan. “Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. ... If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (Jn 8:34, 36). To put it in another way, the sinner is now enabled not to sin. Secondly, positively, God “by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.” We learn from the next chapter (*WCF* 10) that this is effected by Holy Spirit changing the heart or implanting a new spiritual principle, habit or tendency, in the affections of the soul.

God has, however, deemed it fit that while in this life, the corruption of nature of the regenerate will not be fully eradicated. Thus, by reason of the remaining corruption, the regenerate does not will only that which is good, but also will that which is sinful. And even when he wills what is good, it is mixed with sin. “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Gal 5:17; cf. Rom 7:15–23).

More on this subject in *WCF* 13, On Sanctification.

4. *State of Glory* (section 5)

This is the state that the elect enters when he passes from this present world into eternity, at which point he is “made perfect in holiness” (*WSC* 37), and will sin no more. In terms of his will, he is in this state of glory “*made perfectly and immutably free to do good.*” He might do good after he was regenerated. However, his good works are never perfect, for they are always tainted with sin. But now, he will forever be able to do good, and to do good perfectly. He is unable to sin.

But take note that when we say that a glorified man is “unable to sin,” we do not mean that he is therefore no more a free agent. What it does mean is that the old corrupt tendencies are completely eradicated, and the soul is perfectly sanctified (Eph 4:13; Heb 12:23) so that it has an immutable holy disposition. There is no longer any desire to do anything sinful. While he remains in this world, the remnant of corruption may deceive the regenerate man by making sin and its fruits seem attractive. But now the remnant of corruption is eradicated, and therefore the glorified man hates sin and will never choose ever again to sin. It is in this sense that glorified men are unable to sin.