

“Does Man Have a Free Will?”

By Michael Gowens

**An excellent discourse on
the truth of human nature
in light of our fall in Adam
-- Sovereign Grace Chapel**

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Prior to God's work of regeneration in the soul, therefore, man's will is bound by the old nature. In regeneration, the fallen sinner is made "willing in the day of God's power" (Psalm 110:3). He is given a new nature, a righteous nature, capable of responding to God. Because the old nature is not eradicated, however, a warfare between the Spirit and the flesh ensues (Romans 7) - requiring deliberate and decisive efforts of the will for righteousness (Romans 6:11-23). In other words, the believer must choose, every day, between the options of serving sin or righteousness (Joshua 24:15; Romans 6:13). With such a conflict facing us, we should be glad that the Holy Spirit will continue to work within us "both to will and to do His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

Because man's will, apart from the new nature given in the new birth, is bound, it is incapable of choosing eternal life. Man's only hope of eternal life, then, is rooted in God's initiative and choice. Salvation, in other words, depends on God's choice, not mine, and upon His sovereign will, not man's fallen will (John 1:13; Romans 9:16; Ephesians 1:5,11; Hebrews 10:10). That, my friend, is a firm foundation!

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This pamphlet is not intended as a modern day soul winning tool. Its purpose is in hope of God being pleased to use it to the instruction, edification, and comfort of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

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Walter A Pendleton



“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” Romans 8:7

Man, created in God’s image, possesses a mind, a heart, and a will. The mind, or intellect, allows him to think rationally, not by sheer instinct like an animal. The heart, or emotion, enables him to feel, unlike a robot or machine, human experience. The will, or volition, enables him to make decisions and choices that have moral consequences. It is his capacity for action, a capacity that allows him to choose this over that and those instead of these.

In his unfallen state, man was good and very good. The fall, however, affected every part of man’s being. Man’s mind, by virtue of his fallen nature was darkened, incapable of understanding the things of the Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:18; 1 Corinthians 2:14). Further, his emotions are now deceptive and untrustworthy (Jeremiah 17:9) and his will, that is, his ability to choose good over evil and right over wrong, is bound. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith reads, “Man, by 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, is not able by his own strength to commit himself, or to prepare himself thereto.”

So, is man free? If by the word “free” one means that people have the ability to make certain choices on their own (i.e. free from compulsion, force, or coercion), then the answer is “yes.” For example, people have the ability to choose to go to the store or stay home, to buy a newspaper or not, to eat beef or to eat fish, etc.; such choices are within the natural capacity of human beings. People are free to act according to their nature.

If by the word “free”, however, one means free without any limitation, then the answer is “no.” People are not free to act contrary to their nature. I cannot choose to fly. Yes, I can choose to travel by airplane, but I cannot choose to sprout wings or become a bird. My will, you see, is not entirely free. It is bound by the limits of my nature. We do not have the freedom to be anything we are not.

Man, in other words, is not free to act outside the boundaries of his human nature. He cannot live the life of a fish in

the ocean or fly like a bird in the air without external resources enabling him to duplicate his natural environment. Just as that is true on a natural level, it is also true on a spiritual level. In his fallen state, man cannot choose to be righteous. The Ethiopian cannot by his own sheer willpower, change the color of his skin, nor the leopard his spots. Neither can those whose nature is depraved voluntarily do good (Jeremiah 13:23). Man’s will is enslaved to his sinful nature. Left to himself, his only capacity is fleshly.

Unregenerate people are not free to choose righteousness or wickedness; they are, on the contrary, “free from righteousness” (Romans 6:20). By nature, man’s will is a “will not” (Psalm 10:4; Psalm 58:3; John 5:40, Isaiah 26:10). His only inclination is toward carnality. The natural man will never choose anything but sin, because he cannot operate outside the parameters of his sinful nature (Romans 8:7). The nature of man’s will is not free.

Not until his nature is changed does he have the desire or the capacity to choose righteousness.