

Fundamentals, Study 9: Free Will (Eph 2:1-5)

by BS Poh

o Fallen man is unable to freely choose what is good in God's sight because his will is in bondage to his sinful nature.

1. God has equipped man with three basic faculties: the *mind* to understand and think, the *affection* to feel, and the *will* to choose or decide. The sense of right or wrong arising from the interaction between these three faculties is known as the *conscience*.¹ The will is free to function according to man's desire or nature without anything from outside or within himself forcing him. The will of man is *free* to make choices, but is it *able* to make certain choices compared to others? *Freedom* and *ability* must not be confused.² (1. Rom 6:17; 2:14-15; 2. Matt 17:12; James 1:14)

2. When the first man, Adam, was created, he had freedom and ability to choose and do what was good and pleasing to God. He could also choose to do wrong.³ After the fall from the state of innocency, man lost the ability to choose, and to do, any good which leads to salvation. His will, and the other faculties, can only function according to what his nature is like, which is sinful. His will is still free in the sense that it is not forced to choose and act contrary to his own wish. He is, therefore, not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself for conversion.⁴ He is like a clock, whose hands are free to turn either in the clockwise or the anti-clockwise directions but only turn in the direction determined by the spring in it. (3. Eccl. 7:29; Gen 3:6; 4. Rom 8:7; Eph 2:1-5; Jer. 13:23.)

3. When God converts a sinner, He frees him from his natural bondage to sin. By grace alone, He enables him freely to choose and to do what is spiritually good.⁵ However, due to remaining corruptions, he is unable to *perfectly* and *always* decide to do good. His will is free, but its ability to do what is good in God's sight is still limited, although vastly improved.⁶ The will of man will be made perfectly and permanently able to do good only when he arrives in heaven.⁷ (5. Eph 2:1-5; Tit 3:3-5; 6. Rom 7:21; Eph 4:13)

4. Many Christians confuse *freedom* with *ability*. They claim that man must be able to freely choose. Otherwise, he cannot be held responsible for his sins. This means that the will of man is somehow not affected by sin. The practice of "the altar call" in gospel meetings is based on this belief. However, the will is a faculty of the person, and not something detached from him. It can function only according to what the person's nature is like. Also, it cannot function independently of the mind and the affection. Since the person's nature is sinful, the will is under bondage to sin. The man is still responsible for his actions, since no one forces him to act the way he does. He makes his choices according to what his mind knows and what his affection likes. His actions flow from his own wishes and desires.⁸ (8. Rom 3: 10; John 6:44; James 1:14)

5. To avoid confusion, it is better to say that man is a free agent, whose will is enslaved to sin. We then say that we believe in *free agency*, and not *free will*, if by "free will" is meant that the will has the ability to act independently of the person's nature and other faculties.⁹ (9. Jer. 13:23; John 6:44.)

= Why not plead with God to save you from your bondage to sin?

Review Questions

1. Name the three basic faculties of man.
2. What is the conscience?
3. What does *free will* mean?
4. What happened to man's will after the fall?
5. What happens to man's will when God converts him?
6. What is the mistake made by many Christians regarding the human will?
7. Why is the human will unable to choose the things that are pleasing to God?
8. Why is man still responsible for his actions?
9. What is the better way of describing man and his will?
10. What definition of *free will* do we not believe in?

Assignment/Discussion

Why is the altar call contrary to Calvinism and harmful to the gospel?

Memory Passage (Rom 7:22-25)

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~