

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH IX

(Reading: Genesis 2:4-25; Ephesians 2:1-10)

The Perfectly Free Will Perfectly Goes God's Way

We come to a point at which we Calvinists stand out quite distinctly from the vast majority of Christians. Mind you, not that we haven't already seen points of major difference in the Westminster Confession but here is the point at which we are so often challenged by believers of an Arminian persuasion - because here we are called fatalists.

Let me explain what will be familiar to many of us. You are speaking with a Christian friend or a believer you may met from another church. In the conversation it comes out that you are from a Reformed-Presbyterian church. So they discover that you believe completely in God's sovereignty.

At that point it becomes somewhat negative. There will be remarks made that we don't believe in free will. They will affirm that it was their decision to choose the Lord. They may even be able to tell you the exact time it happened – down to the minute! From that personal experience they will challenge us. They know they chose. They knew that at that point it was their choice.

It's at this point the discussion often starts to collapse. We cannot deny our position. And they feel very strongly about theirs.

So let's see if we can turn this around. We need to show that there's a biblical balance in all of this – a balance in-between God's complete sovereignty and man's total responsibility.

You see, we do believe in free will. We believe in what the Bible says about who we are and what we can do. We agree with Martin Luther when he said, "the will is really a will and not a 'nill'".

And so our first aspect is that **MAN'S WILL PROVES HE CHOOSES HIS WAY.**

Man's Will Proves He Chooses His Way

A number of times in Scriptures there are choices laid out before people. Deuteronomy 30 verse 19 speaks of the choice between life and death, and blessings and curses, for Israel as they entered the Promised Land. James 1 verse 14 talks about how it is our choice to be tempted by evil. And in Matthew 17 verse 12 Jesus is quite frank about the choice that Israel has made in refusing to recognise Him.

We cannot set the sovereignty of God against the freedom of man as though God's sovereignty automatically wipes out man's will. Neither can we believe man's freedom has to limit God's sovereignty.

The Bible doesn't picture human freedom as being free from all restrictions. We cannot act independently of God. In fact, when we go right against God we show we're rebels enslaved by sin not men who are truly free.

On the other hand, the Bible doesn't regard God's sovereignty as a threat to man's freedom. It's God's sovereignty which is fully realised when we truly use free will, because then we are doing things God's way.

This is where we flow into the second Article in this Chapter. To sum it up in a second aspect we see that Scripture tells us that **MAN'S WILL WAS ABLE TO GO GOD'S WAY.**

Man's Will Was Able To Go God's Way

This is where we go back to Genesis chapter 2. There in the verses 16 and 17 we read of the LORD God commanding Adam, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

In the state of innocence man had freedom so that he could live in perfect communion with God. It was a relationship, not a dictatorship. But as in any relationship it had to be constantly vindicated by the choices that were made.

So Article 2 explains why in Ecclesiastes 7 verse 29 the wise teacher can declare that “God made man upright”. This confirms Genesis 1 verse 26 when, during the creation account, God declares that it’s man who will rule over His creation.

At that point in our history it was possible for man to choose not to sin – his nature wasn’t corrupted so what he wanted to do was to do good. G.I. Williamson describes the situation then as man having “absolute liberty and also ability to do good.” He says further that man then “had no more liberty to do good than has fallen man, but he had complete ability which is totally absent in fallen man. Before the fall man was at liberty to do either good or evil and he was able to do either.”

We know what happened. Man failed the test. Instead of choosing that which would keep him in that state of grace he fell out of it.

Man’s Sin Means He Is Going Another Way

So now, in the third place, MAN’S SIN MEANS HE IS GOING ANOTHER WAY. This was what the verses 1 till 3 of Ephesians 2 pictured for us. There we saw the consequences of man’s choice.

It’s certainly not a pretty scene. Because man’s essential freedom depended on his responsible relation to God his choice of irresponsibility shattered it. This put us completely offside with God. And hasn’t human history confirmed that so terribly! All of mankind’s vaunted efforts at making things right just make it worse!

It’s like the man who has broken his marriage by unfaithfulness. He cannot simply choose then to fix it up. That’s not in his power at all. He may want it to be so but he can’t make it so. It’s the tragic paradox of sinful man that by the irresponsible misuse of his freedom he makes the chains of his own enslavement.

Now, this doesn’t mean that sinful man undergoes a psychological change. He still has freedom of choice. He still has a strength of will – unless, of course, he really goes over the edge of depravity. What the Confession is speaking of is that by cutting himself off from God man has become a different man. He is now what the Bible calls “a natural man”. And by “natural” here we actually mean what has become unnatural or denatured. It wasn’t the way we were originally made. As Colossians 2 verse 13 says, this is the state when we are dead in our sins and in the uncircumcision of our sinful natures.

I began this sermon by picturing the situation we can find ourselves in with other Christians. Once a Reformed believer was in such a meeting. His friend was adamant as to it being entirely his choice that at that particular time and place he made the decision to choose Jesus as his Saviour. So the Reformed believer asked him what happened to him. “Well,” he replied, “it was when a Gospel message really struck his heart.”

The Reformed Christian went on, "How did you end up going to that place?" He said it was because a Christian friend had invited him along.

"So how did you meet that Christian friend?" he was asked further. It was through some classes they had together at University, he answered. "And why did you have those classes together at Uni?" he was next asked.

After further questioning like this, the real underlying answer became obvious. It had been God working through all the circumstance of his life to bring him to that particular point. The choice he had to make in the end was the one that could only be made by God's Spirit working around and in him. It couldn't be otherwise. Our condition was as Genesis 6 described man's condition after the fall. For verse 5 there says that "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

That believer didn't have the ability then to make that decision to come to faith. That he had the liberty to do it was never in doubt. But it was only through God's sovereign working that he did make it. As Jesus says in John 6 verse 44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

This is the theme of Martin Luther's famous essay to Erasmus, entitled 'The Bondage of the Will'. There he exposes the hollowness of man's pretensions to freedom. You see, in the natural state of humanity we are just the blind leading the blind. Only if God opens our eyes do we see at all.

Once we've had those eyes opened, though, then the ability is right back again! In the words of Ephesians 2, verses 4 and 5, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, make us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved." And so we move to the fourth Article. Here we see that MAN'S SALVATION BROUGHT HIM BACK TO BE ABLE TO GO GOD'S WAY.

Man's Salvation Brought Him Back To Be Able To Go God's Way

We saw before how a man who has broken his marriage by his unfaithfulness cannot just fix it up. The other party has to come to the party. So the reconciliation of man to God, by grace, restores his freedom because it restores the relationship to which it belongs. That man reconciled to his wife can begin to live as a married man again. And so, we, by salvation, may live in that communion with God again. The Lord has bound us to Himself again. And thus we're again under obligation to Him.

Article 4 talks about us now doing what is spiritually good. Philippians 2 verse 13 describes this as God working in us to will and to act according to His good purpose. This is what we need to clearly understand that free will is.

The thinking of this world is that you can do whatever you feel like doing and that's being free. And that's come into the church as well, in the teaching that now, once we're saved, we're not able to sin anymore. This is what is known as "perfectionism". It teaches that by being saved we are made perfectly right in every way. But that doesn't do justice to the Scriptures.

For sure, we are able to do good. We are new men and women in Christ. It's the new creation that we're a part of. But heaven's not here yet. We're part of the Church militant not the Church triumphant. The Lord hasn't come back yet, despite what the hyper-preterists say about the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD being that time.

In fact, when we become reconciled to God we are actually then in the biggest struggle of all. Because everyday we're fighting in ourselves! The devil's throwing everything against us.

Read the apostle Paul's description of this in Romans chapter 7. What a battle! In verse 15 he confesses, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."

It continues in the verses 18 and 19. He says, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I don't want to do - this I keep on doing."

Dear Christian, to be called to freedom means to be called to join nothing less than the warfare of the Spirit against the flesh. That's the picture painted vividly in Galatians 5. It's a battle alright! And we've been called up!

As with any soldier we've been given the equipment, the support, and the encouragement to join the fight. And what an encouragement it is! For unlike so many human wars this is one that our Military Commander has already won the crucial battle decisively!

It's because we're still fighting that we know there hasn't come the final peace. And so we'll know alright when this war is all over! In the words of the fifth aspect to this Chapter, **MAN'S GLORIFICATION WILL BE WHEN HE PERFECTLY GOES GOD'S WAY.**

Man's Glorification Will Be When He Perfectly Goes God's Way

"...in the state of glory only" Article 5 concludes. And that's our sure hope. The hope which when it's realised will take us beyond any historical stage before. It will be much more than the Garden of Eden back again. You see, then it won't be possible anymore to sin. Our wills will be so entwined with God's will that we will be perfectly free indeed.

That's why we must never think of heaven as somehow being a place where we miss out. You know, that idea that that little bit of naughtiness is what gives that bit of spice to our lives.

Because we should know that it's exactly that little bit of naughtiness which has completely ruined billions of lives.

Actually heaven is the truly happy marriage! It's where trust is taken to a level beyond which we can know here below! This was what the apostle John so much looked forward to. In his first letter, chapter 3 verse 2, he wrote, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall see him as he is." No wonder that Jude ends his brief letter with that marvellous doxology of what's waiting for us. As verses 24 and 25 there declare, "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!"

To that we can only say, "Amen!"