

Lesson 14: 2LCF Chapter 9: Of Free Will

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.
Ecclesiastes 7:29

The doctrine of free will has been called a “theologically and practically pivotal” doctrine, because error in one’s understanding here can subvert the gospel and undermine much of the plain teaching of Scripture.¹³⁵

Perhaps this is nowhere more clearly seen than in the life of the second and third century theologian Origen.

In their respective treatments on the development of Christian doctrine in the early church, J.N.D. Kelly and Samuel Waldron point out that Origen’s understanding of free will not only confused his understanding of the gospel, but led to the further development of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory or other doctrinal aberrations, such as universalism. Based on his view of free will, Origen drew the following conclusions:

1. Human sinfulness is the result of the individual transgressions of each human soul in a pre-existent state. [Origen believed in the pre-existences of souls and theorized that individuals had committed transgressions in a pre-worldly existence].
2. The human soul of the God-man, Jesus Christ, merited his position as Messiah because he was the one soul in this pre-existent state that did not sin.
3. The different positions men occupy in the world and their various fortunes are a result of their degree of sinfulness in this pre-existent state.
4. Since men always retain their free will, all will eventually be saved through their purification in the purgatorial fires of hell. Thus, Origen held that universalism and purgatory are grounded in the doctrine of free will. Even the devil may be restored.
5. Since men retain their free Will, it is not certain that their state in heaven will be permanent.¹³⁶

When one considers Origen’s conclusions, it is clear to see why we need to have a sound understanding of free will. Moreover, many modern misconceptions about free will demand that we understand this doctrine and be able to articulate a scriptural explanation in a clear and cogent way.

Multiple outlines of chapter 9 have been offered. Waldron offers two outlines in his own work on the Confession. Perhaps his clearest outline is the found below:

Chapter Outline:

- I. Its Natural Liberty (paragraph 1)
- II. II. Its Original Instability (paragraph 2)
- III. III. Its Fallen Inability (paragraph 3)
- IV. IV. Its Renewed Ability (paragraph 4)
- V. V. Its Ultimate Immutability (paragraph 5)

¹³⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 165.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 165. Here Waldron refers to J.N.D. Kelly’s work: J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 18.

Defining “Free Will”

While many Reformed and Calvinistic Christians are quick to deny the existence of free will, the Confession does nothing of the sort. Rather, the framers of the Confession affirmed free will and offered a careful definition of this doctrine, beginning in paragraph one.

As we will see throughout the course of this chapter, a careful definition of “free will” is sorely needed in the Christian world today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a precise definition of free will is something that the church has often called for in the midst of many excesses and much error related to this area of Christian dogma.

In 1524, the Roman Catholic scholar Desiderius Erasmus wrote a book to counter the teaching of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Of all the Protestant doctrines that he might have taken exception to, Erasmus chose to attack the the Reformed view of the will. That year he published a book entitled, “A Little Book in the Freedom of the Will,” where he argued that man has the ability to choose between good and evil. Here he offered a position that was at least semi-pelagian in its orientation (Pelagianism taught that original sin did not corrupt the will of man and that man was still able to exercise his will to choose good or evil. It was declared a heresy in A.D. 418 at the Council of Carthage).

A year later, in 1525, Luther replied with a book of his own entitled, “On The Bondage of the Will,” where he responded to Erasmus by saying: “Your thoughts about God are all too human.” In his book, Luther went as far as to say that the term “free will” was a problematic, “empty phrase” that should be avoided.¹³⁷

Similarly, John Calvin commented in his “Institutes of the Christian Religion”:

If anyone, then, can use this word [“Free Will”] without understanding it in a bad sense, I shall not trouble him on this account. But I hold that because it cannot be retained without great peril, it will, on the contrary, be a great boon for the church if it be abolished. I prefer not to use it myself, and I should like others, if they seek my advice, to avoid it.¹³⁸

Why then did the framers of the Confession choose to use this word? There are at least two possible answers that should be put forward: i) The Westminster and Savoy included a chapter on “free will” in their confession. In keeping with their pursuit of unity with their Christian brethren, the baptists made no substantive changes to the Westminster. ii) Debate around “free will” remained a live issue that needed to be dealt with.

Rather than avoiding the topic, the baptists promoted the biblical definition that was widely held by the Presbyterian and Congregationalist Puritans of their day.

Paragraphs 1-5, when considered in their entirety, offer a helpful definition of free will. Here Waldron summarizes the Confession’s definition:

Free will is not utter unpredictability. Human freedom is not ultimate. It was under the control of God's sovereign will even in the state of innocence. Divine freedom (God's sovereign, decretive will) and human freedom are not in conflict. Rather, it is only because our wills are made in the image of the freedom of God's supreme will that our derivative

¹³⁷Brian Borgman and Jason Ching, “Chapter Nine: Of Free Will,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 174.

¹³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 266.

wills are free. Human freedom is rooted in God's sovereign freedom... [However], our wills are controlled by our ethical disposition and moral nature... Free will is, therefore, not a kind of immutable faculty for making random decisions. Being tied to human nature, it exists in different states because human nature exists in different states.¹³⁹

Borgman and Ching define free will this way:

Man's free will indeed exists but not as many often define it. Man's free will is always subject to his nature and the changes in that nature change dramatically across the scope of redemptive history. Free will is subject to the milestones of redemption: creation, fall, grace and glory.¹⁴⁰

Paragraph 1.

God has 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.

Matt. 17:12; James 1:14; Deut. 30:19

Exposition

Paragraph one of the confession establishes at least three important truths related to the will.

- i) Man possesses natural liberty and choice (ie. "free will")
- ii) Man's will is not forced by anything outside of himself
- iii) Man's will is not determined to do good or evil by necessity of his nature.

On this, Borgman and Ching write:

We are not free in the libertarian sense, but neither are we automatons. The Confession goes even farther when it notes that not only are our choices unforced, but they are not "by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil." This last phrase of the first paragraph may seem puzzling in light of "the bondage of the will," but the Confession is observing: *There is not an action or decision of ours that can be reduced to some natural law, some kind of inevitable system of causation, some force of the universe, some biological inheritance from our parents. Thus, to consider one sort of influence, if a boy always wills very bad things, it cannot all be blamed on the father; if a woman grows up to will the best things, her mother cannot claim all the credit. We are not determined by these factors.*¹⁴¹

Borgman and Ching conclude that "there is no room in the Confession for biological determinism or psychological syndromes; rather, when a person chooses evil or chooses relative good, it is a real

¹³⁹ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 166.

¹⁴⁰ Brian Borgman and Jason Ching, "Chapter Nine: Of Free Will," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 180.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 175. Here Borgman and Ching also quote Chad Van Dixhoorn's words on the Westminster Confession of Faith (*in italics*): Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), 136.

choice that is not determined in such a way as to undermine the validity and culpability of their choice.¹⁴²

In several place in Scripture, we find direction given to humans, presupposing that they possess a basic unforced natural liberty:

James 1:14-15

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Deuteronomy 30:19

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,

Paragraph 2.

Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well-pleasing to God, but yet was unstable, so that he might fall from it. Eccles. 7:29; Gen. 3:6

Exposition

In Genesis 1:31, we find a humbling description of of the world and man’s condition at the end of the sixth day of creation: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

As we noted in the sixth chapter of the confession, prior to the fall, man was not acquainted with the guilt and corruption that we know today, but existed in a state of innocence. We also saw how theologians have used two Latin phrases to describe this condition of man prior to the fall: “posse non peccare” (“able to not sin”) and “posse non mori” (“able to not die”).

In this condition, “all of [man’s] faculties, mind, will, and affections, were working in perfect harmony.”¹⁴³

Thomas Boston once commented on this condition:

There was light in his understanding, sanctity in his will, and rectitude in his affections; there was such a harmony among all his faculties, that his members yielded to his affections, his affections to his will, his will obeyed his reason, and his reason was subject to the law of God.”¹⁴⁴

Two proof texts are offered by the Confession to demonstrate this “state on innocency”:

¹⁴² Ibid., 175.

¹⁴³ Brian Borgman and Jason Ching, “Chapter Six: Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 126.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Reverend Thomas Boston, Ettrick*. Edited by the Reverend Samuel M’Millan (Published in 1843. Reprinted, Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980), Vol. 1, 232.

Ecclesiastes 7:29

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Genesis 3:6

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate

On this point, the Confession points out that at the time of his creation, man possessed a free will that was undefiled by the corruption of sin, and yet he still had the capacity to fall from this state.

Paragraph 3.

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has 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 convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

Rom. 5:6, 8:7; Eph. 2:1,5; Titus 3:3-5; John 6:44

Exposition

Paragraph three describes the state that we find all unregenerate men in today.

Though man was created with natural liberty, and though this liberty was innocent and uncorrupted prior to the fall, on this side of the garden, all of man's faculties have been perverted, including his will.

Borgman and Ching summarize man's condition succinctly: "Man is fallen in sin, corrupted by sin, transformed by sin, pervaded by sin. Thus, all that natural, fallen man wants to choose is sin."¹⁴⁵

As a result of the fall, the natural man's will is under bondage to sin and is helplessly inclined to sin. Contrary to the writing of Erasmus, man is not able to choose good, but only evil. Consequently, no exercise of the will is able to deliver him from this condition.

A. A. Hodge adds: "A man always wills as upon the whole he pleases, but he cannot will himself to please differently from what he does please. The moral condition of the heart determines the act of the will, but the act of the will cannot change the moral condition of the heart."¹⁴⁶

Here the confession articulates one of the vital elements of the Doctrines of Grace: "Total Depravity" otherwise known as "Total Inability."

¹⁴⁵ Brian Borgman and Jason Ching, "Chapter Nine: Of Free Will," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 177.

¹⁴⁶ A. A. Hodge and Charles Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes* (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), 164.

Sam Waldron has provided a long list of proof texts on this point:

Natural man is enslaved, dead, and blind:

Romans 6:16, 20 you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?... 20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

Ephesians 2:1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins

2 Corinthians 4:4 the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see

Man has lost the ability to please God, do God's will, or perceive and receive the things of God.

Romans 7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh

Romans 8:7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so,

1 Corinthians 2:14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them.

Matthew 7:17-18 "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.18 "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

Jeremiah 13:23 "Can the Ethiopian change his skin Or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good ...

No man ever wills to receive Christ or come to God apart from God's drawing.

John 5:40 and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.

John 6:37 "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me 39 "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.

John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

John 6:65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

Acts 7:51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

Romans 3:10-12 as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; 11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; 12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."

The will of man is not the source or determining factor in the application of salvation.

James 1:18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Romans 9:16,18 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy....¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

John 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Paragraph 4.

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

Col. 1:13; John 8:36; Phil. 2:13; Rom. 7:15,18,19,21,23

Exposition

When God “converts” a sinner, he redeems him and releases him from bondage to sin. As a result, man is once more enabled to do that which is pleasing in God’s sight. This is a reality that many Christians are sadly ignorant of today.

Renihan notes, “The Reformers had a doctrine of ‘*gratia cooperans*’, cooperating grace, which is the ground of all good works in the believer. Renihan recounts that Muller defined this as “the continuing grace of the Spirit, ... which cooperates with and reinforces the regenerate will and intellect in sanctification.”¹⁴⁷

This that Christians can now truly please God from their renewed wills. Though their obedience will always be imperfect, the regenerate man or woman in Christ is able to delight the Lord with evangelical (gospel) obedience—a willing and glad submission to God’s will that is motivated by faith in and love for their Saviour.

Borgman and Ching add these comforting words:

Every Christian battling for sanctification needs to know this. Though our sins be powerful, Christians are not enslaved to their sins anymore. That means, resisting, escaping and killing sin are all possible because of the great work of God in the gospel. We short-circuit the battle of faith when we deem our sins, irresistible unbeatable. God is not outmatched by our sin. The creator of heaven and earth is not overpowered by our weakness. Sometimes the battle is overwhelmingly difficult, but the Christian is a new creation in Christ, empowered for new warfare and new living.¹⁴⁸

Once more, Christians should be emboldened by Scripture, which clearly teaches this new reality in the Christian’s life:

¹⁴⁷ James M. Renihan, *To the Judicious and Impartial Reader: A Contextual-Historical Exposition of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*, Baptist Symbolics 2 (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2022), 253. Renihan quotes from: Muller, DLGTT, 142.

¹⁴⁸ Brian Borgman and Jason Ching, “Chapter Nine: Of Free Will,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 178-79.

John 8:36

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Philippians 2:13

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Colossians 1:13

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Paragraph 5.

This will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone in the state of glory only.
Eph. 4:13

Exposition

One day our regenerate wills will be radically transformed into glorified wills. On that day, our wills will become perfect and unchangeably free!

1 John 3:2-3

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

One last word from Borgman and Ching:

Glorified men are holy and stable. We will want good and we will be good and all our actions will flow out of that perfect nature! We will be forever confirmed in that glorified state. There will be no probationary period. There will be no possibility of failing again. We will be perfectly conformed to the image of the last Adam... This great hope must be enjoyed often. Our sin plagues us so that we can hardly pass a single moment without engaging in some unholy thought or committing some loveless deed. Our course of life at times feels like a ceaseless string of drifting and weakness. It would be natural to draw the worldly conclusion that things will never change. What a bleak conclusion that would be. But the Lord has promised his people that everything will change—including our Will. To accept the world's diagnosis will steal our joy and eclipse God's promises. When the world buffets believers with its torrents of despair, believers must know that our hope lies ahead. It honours God when his promises burned bright in our esteem. Likewise, it warms our souls to draw near to that gladdening fire. In our dark and challenging day, let us often look forward to what is to come.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 179-80.