

*A*polo^gia: The Human Will: Free or in Bondage?

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Introduction: The Human Will: Free or in Bondage?

Have you ever misdiagnosed something that physically ails you? Most of us have learned that self-diagnosis has its limits. We often find that our problem is either more serious than supposed, or that it is less grave than feared. How fortunate we are that so much great technology is available to find out what is really going on!

When it comes to the human spiritual condition, self-diagnosis always fails. Human intellect, sinful and self-centered as it is, always puts a smiley face on the human condition—most especially on the capacity of the will. And a false diagnosis in this case is loaded with danger.

We need God's Word, the instrument of divine revelation, to tell us how things really are. The Scriptures function as God's MRI (magnetic resonance imaging system), you might say.

Here's the issue: What is the condition of the human will [from God's perspective] of fallen human beings before their conversion? Do they have a spark of goodness that can be fanned into faith?

Scripture Connect

Ephesians 2:1,3 "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

In this passage St. Paul makes three basic points. First, the reference to "transgressions and sins" tips us off immediately that he is discussing the inner moral condition of people prior to ["you were"] becoming Christians. Second, dead means dead—a flat line on God's spiritual electroencephalogram. Third, the human problem spiritually is innate or inborn; fallen creatures are subject to God's wrath for who they are by nature, not merely for what they do. (Paul is not talking simply about external religiosity, as for example in Acts 17:22, where pagans are called "religious"!). If dead means dead, then how can anyone conclude that after birth and prior to rebirth (in Baptism) some spark of spiritual life still flickers?

1 Corinthians 2:14 "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Think about this: "A blind man cannot see the sun; a deaf man cannot serve as a music critic" (G. Lockwood, Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 99). That is essentially what Paul is saying here. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit natural man (Greek: psychicus; NIV "man without the Spirit") cannot know spiritual things. If he or she pretends to do so, they are like a blind person playing the expert, for example, on the varied hues of fall colors.

Romans 8:7 "...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

Thumb your way down a few verses in this chapter and you will see that "the sinful mind" is the spiritual state of one who does not have the Spirit of Christ and therefore one who does not belong to Christ (v. 9). In its portrait of a person's spiritual profile (from birth), the Bible paints the human will black, the color of death, but also red, the

color of aggression. The will's inability to obey God has a flip side: it does have ability to fight against God. It gets angry with God.

God created us with a will, and we can do certain external things (unbelievers can get out of bed and drive to church). But spiritually the will is in total bondage to sin—until God makes us alive through Word and sacrament. "...it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13).

Doctrinal Quotation

"As Dr. Luther says, in comments on Psalm 90, 'In temporal and external affairs, which concern nourishment and bodily needs, the human being is clever, intelligent, and up to a point industrious, but in spiritual and divine matters, which concern the soul's salvation, the human being is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, indeed like a block of wood or a stone, like a lifeless statue....But before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay....'"

Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 20, 24.

Notice that the subject under discussion here is the capacity of the human will to make decisions in spiritual matters. In our incapacity to do so, we are like blocks of wood. But we are not blocks of wood when it comes to other issues involved in our temporal life as God's creatures. People today likely will find this offensive, because their assessment of human ability, spiritually, is generally optimistic ("little bit of good in the worst of us" philosophy). To become more effective witnesses to God's saving truth, it may be helpful to discuss how and why people come to believe this.

In its context the above quotation makes clear, though, that the Bible's picture of us is a matter of serious consequence. The danger lies in being lulled into "a sense of security," not knowing the extreme danger that faces those who do not believe in Christ (paragraph 21). So, a proper diagnosis of our condition is the first step on the road to recovery.

How thankful we can be that God has provided a way so that our will may be freed from its bondage to sin and become alive to serve Him! "In his immeasurable goodness and mercy, God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and of the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save" (FC SD II, 50). The Word and sacraments are "the Holy Spirit's tools" through which he converts people and causes them to will and do what pleases God.

Application

Scriptural teaching regarding the human will can be compromised and/or denied in very subtle ways. Perhaps you can add to the examples below.

+A local family church sponsors a TV ad in which its pastor, in a warm and appealing way, regularly invites the general public to "turn their lives over to Jesus" and to experience what He can do for them. Certainly such invitations are well-intentioned and reflect a sincere desire that non-Christians come to believe in Jesus as their Savior. However well intentioned, however, such an approach gives the impression that unconverted persons can decide on their own to become Christians, or at least, that they can cooperate in conversion.

We have learned from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, though, that unconverted persons have neither the desire nor the spiritual strength to make such a decision.

+Puzzled over why some people become Christians and others do not, some suggest that some people resist God less than others. In Reformation times, in some thought, in fact, that the “non-resisting will” was a “third cause” of conversion (in addition to the Gospel and the Holy Spirit). But this error makes the unregenerate will a participant in conversion—contrary to scriptural teaching that the Holy Spirit alone makes alive and creates faith in us through the means of grace (Gospel and sacraments).

+Some Christians speak of “the age of accountability,” “a stage of life when moral consciousness emerges and with it responsibility for conduct before God” (The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 9). This thinking, however, does not take seriously original sin as a spiritual condition (not just sinful acts) for which God holds people accountable (Rom. 3:9-20). Nor does it consider seriously the total corruption of the human will

A proper understanding of what the Bible teaches regarding article of faith on the human will gives glory to Christ, Who alone has saved us and makes us spiritually alive together with Him.

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