

COMMON QUESTION NO. 19

DO WE HAVE FREE-WILL?

Many people believe that any person at any time can choose to believe in Christ. They believe that there is nothing that hinders their will from choosing to be saved. In other words, the will is totally free to do whatever it wants. So in evangelism the preacher addresses the will, and every pressure is used to get a 'decision' for Christ. Is such thinking about the will according to the Bible?

As with all questions we must first understand what is being asked.

- Is the question about whether we make the choices we do freely, and without external compulsion? If so, then our wills are free. For example, I am writing this article because I want to. No one is forcing me against my will. If someone puts pressure on me, even putting a gun to my head, it is still my decision whether to give in or not! In theology we call this 'Free Agency'.
- Or is the question about whether our wills are independent of our nature? Then our wills are **not** free. We choose according to our nature. We are integrated beings, our mind/thoughts, desires and will working together. If I know that the glass of orange coloured drink before me is mango juice, and I feel hot and thirsty, I will choose to drink it. But if there is a label on the glass that it is poison, I will hate it, and refuse to drink it.

So we shall narrow the question down to whether, today, any person may of his own free and independent will choose Christ unto salvation.

(1) Biblical Evidence

The Bible very clearly states that salvation is not due to the will of man.

"... to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, **not** of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the **will** of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

"So then it depends **not** on human **will** or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Romans 9:16). In the context Paul is writing about the true spiritual Israel within the larger nation (verse 6).

Then there are those texts of the Bible that tell us there are certain things we cannot do. This is very humbling, but true.

We have no free will to come to Christ, to believe on Him, unless God first draws us. "**No one can** come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44, repeated 65). This is the explanation of Jesus as to why the crowd murmured against Him refusing to believe.

No one can know the Father, unless the Son first reveals Him. "... no one knows the Son except the Father, and **no one knows** the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). This again is Jesus' explanation why He was largely rejected.

It is impossible to understand spiritual things, unless the Spirit reveals them. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is **not able** to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Once again, in the context, this is the reason why the message of Christ was almost universally rejected.

Once more, the non-Christian will not and cannot choose to obey the law of God, which includes the command to believe on Christ. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it **cannot**. Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God" (Romans 8:7-8).

Why is the will not free to choose these things? It is because sin rules in our nature and so influences everything we want to do and so choose to do. This is what we call Total Depravity. We might give the example of death, which affects the whole person. Lazarus was dead, and he was not able to choose to become alive. Jesus had to give him life through His life-giving word. Jesus clearly teaches that what we decide to think and do depends on the condition of our heart (see Matthew 12:33-37, 15:17-20). Just like the fruit on a tree, an evil heart only produces a bad life. Note that Jesus says such a person **cannot** speak good: "How can you speak good, when you are evil?"

(2) Historical Evidence

The question of free will was a central one in the Reformation. Martin Luther wrote a book titled, 'The Bondage of the Will', which he highly valued. He believed it dealt with the real problem between Roman Catholicism and Biblical Christianity. The question is whether salvation is all of God's grace, or whether the sinner cooperates with God as Catholicism teaches. But because salvation is all of grace, it cannot be anything of man. Therefore the will of man cannot be a cause of salvation. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). So this denial of free will is not a new doctrine, but one which has been taught by many churches since the Reformation, and back to Augustine in the early church. See the article in this issue on the teaching of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith on Free Will.

(3) Questions

1. Don't the invitation passages imply that I have free will? Why would Jesus say to the crowd, "Come to Me" (Matthew 11:28) and they were not able to come? But Jesus did not have this problem that you have. He had just said that no one can know the Father unless He reveals Him to the person. Also in John 6:37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." Jesus both makes coming to Him dependent upon a person being given to Him by the Father, and assures anyone who comes that he will be received. The truth is that through the invitation the Lord works sovereignly in the hearts of those He chooses. So with Lydia only, amongst other women, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Paul was speaking to them all, but she alone received his word because the Lord opened her heart.

2. If God commands me to believe does it not imply I have the ability to believe? This is not true. Responsibility does not necessitate ability. For example, I am required to work tomorrow, but I have a hangover so that I cannot. I am responsible for my inability. So it is with sin. I am responsible for sin, but sin makes me unable to come to Christ. God commands us to be without sin (as in 1 Peter 1:15), yet no one is able to live a sinless life. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

3. Doesn't the Bible show that even sinful people can do good things? Yes, all people do things which are good in our sight. Even tax collectors love those who love them (Matthew 5:46)! But the Bible says clearly that "no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12), and "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). God is not pleased with anything unless it is done with faith in Him (Hebrews 11:6). It must be done because He commands it, and for His glory. This no unsaved man does or can do.

(4) Conclusion

We do have free will in the sense that we choose according to our nature.

Before the fall into sin in the Garden, Adam and Eve had the freedom to choose to obey or to disobey. After sin came into the world, having a sinful human nature, neither Adam nor his descendants have the freedom to choose good, that which pleases God. Sin prevents us from choosing Christ. Why would someone who loves sin choose Christ who hates sin?

When we become Christians we have both the Spirit and the flesh (indwelling sin) and we may follow the one or the other (Galatians 5:19, see Romans 7:14-25).

In glory we shall not be able to sin, praise God. We shall be like God who cannot sin. We will always choose the good because we are given new glorified bodies.