

“Free Will”

By Elder David Pyles

Men commonly try to give dubious ideas credibility by assigning exonerating labels to them. Such a thing can be done with the expression “free will.” The Bible endorses the concept of free will inasmuch as it teaches that man is a moral being who is capable of choice and is therefore responsible for his actions. Our consciences attest to the same. The problem is that “free will” is oftentimes used as a label for ideas that go far beyond this. What is commonly called “free will” is actually self-transforming will, or a will that has power to invoke evolution of self from carnal to spiritual. This is a very different thing from free will, and it perverts an idea that is scriptural into an idea that is unscriptural.

The Bible does not endorse free will without qualification. Common sense also dictates that there must be limits. We cannot always act for what we will, nor can we always will for what we act. For example, any man can will to be tall, but he cannot will himself into being tall. This is a case where he cannot act for what he wills. On the other hand, any man can will himself to eat chitterlings, but this does not mean he can will to like them. This is a case where he cannot will for what he acts. The man is limited by his nature in both respects, and he would need a fundamental change of nature to overcome these limits. His free will does not imply that he has unlimited ability to change his nature.

The same principles apply to religion. Any man can choose to keep the law of God, and for this reason he is culpable when he does not. He has free will in this sense. However, this does not mean he can choose to keep the law of God *and like it*. This deficiency poses a formidable problem for him because God expects obedience from the heart. The Bible says a carnal man could sooner will himself into loving chitterlings than will himself into loving God’s law. “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be,*” (Rom 8:7). This would require a change of heart so momentous that it could only be done by Him who said, “*...I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people,*” (Jer 31:33). The same may be

said of belief in God and Christ. Even devils believe (James 2:19), but they are constrained by their natures to *hate* what they believe.

The point is that when we speak of freedom of will, we mean freedom to choose within the confines of our nature. Anything beyond this is not free will. It is self-transformative will. The Bible teaches the former, but it refutes the latter, and so does our common sense.

This then raises the important question: Does a carnal man have power of will to change his own heart and transform himself into a spiritual man? The Bible resolutely and unmistakably answers this question in multiple places, including:

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. – 1Cor 2:14

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. – Rom 8:5-8

Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word... He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. – Jn 8:43-47

Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. – Mt 12:33-35

All of the above verses comment upon the carnal will of man, and all of them say that it is bound up in the corruption of nature so that it does not have power to transform itself into something spiritual. The will of the unsaved man therefore cannot be a

solution to his problem; rather, it is the source of his problem. A carnal man cannot be saved *by* his will; rather, he must be saved *from* his will. This is not only taught in scripture but I think also by the testimony of our own conscience. Salvation must be a thing that is done *to* a man, not merely a thing done *for* a man.

Accordingly, his salvation is not on account of his good will; rather, his good will is on account of his salvation.

Salvation is caused by the good will of God, not by the corrupt will of man. When we see a man possessing a spiritual will, this is the confirmation, not the cause, of his salvation. It shows that he has been born of the Spirit, or born again, and John says of such:

“Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,” (Jn 1:13). Solomon corroborated this saying, *“The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord,”* (Prov 16:1). Every true believer can rejoice that he is saved in Christ, but he did not attain this blessed state by the power of his own free will. “Free will” does not mean self-transforming will.

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