

Chapter IX.

Of Free Will

SECTION I.—God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil.

Exposition

The decision of most of the points in controversy between Calvinists and Arminians, as President Edwards has observed, depends on the determination of the question—Wherein consist that freedom of will which is requisite to moral agency? According to Arminians three things belong to the freedom of the will:—1. That the will has a self-determining power, or a certain sovereignty over itself, and its own acts, whereby it determines its own volitions. 2. A state of indifference, or that equilibrium, whereby the will is without all antecedent bias, and left entirely free from any prepossessing inclination to one side or the other. 3. That the volitions, or acts of the will, are contingent, not only as opposed to all constraint, but to all necessity, or any fixed and certain connection with some previous ground or reason of their existence. Calvinists, on the other hand, contend that a power in the will to determine its own determinations, is either unmeaning, or supposes, contrary to the first principles of philosophy, something to arise without a cause; that the idea of the soul exerting an act of choice or preference, while, at the same time, the will is in a perfect equilibrium, or state of indifference, is full of absurdity and self-contradiction; and that, as nothing can ever come to pass without a cause, the acts of the will are never contingent, or without necessity—understanding by necessity, a necessity of consequence, or an infallible connection with something foregoing. According to Calvinists, the liberty of a moral agent consists in the power of acting according to a choice; and those actions are free which are performed without any external compulsion or restraint, in consequence of the determinations of his own mind. “The necessity of man’s willing and acting in conformity to his apprehensions and disposition, is, in their opinion, fully consistent with all the liberty which can belong to a rational nature. The infinite Being necessarily wills and acts according to the absolute perfection of his nature, yet with the highest liberty. Angels necessarily will and act according to the perfection of their natures, yet with full liberty; for this sort of necessity is so far from interfering with liberty of will, that the perfection of the will’s liberty lies in such a necessity. The very essence of its liberty lies in acting consciously,

choosing or refusing without any external compulsion or constraint, but according to inward principles of rational apprehension and natural disposition."

Section II.—Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and well-pleasing to God; but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Section III.—Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath 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.

Section IV.—When God converts a sinner and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth 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 corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.

Section V.—The will of man is made perfectly and immutable free to good alone, in the state of glory only.

Exposition

The human will is not a distinct agent, but only a power of the rational soul. It is essential to a soul to have a moral disposition, good or bad, or a mixture of both; and, according to what is the prevailing moral disposition of the soul, must be the moral actings of the will. Hence there is a great difference in regard to the freedom of the will in the different states of man. In the state of innocence, the natural inclination of man's will was only to good; but it was liable to change through the power of temptation, and therefore free to choose evil. In his natural corrupt state, man freely chooses evil, without any compulsion or constraint on his will; and he cannot do otherwise, being under the bondage of sin. In the state of grace, he has a free will partly to good and partly to evil. In this state there is a mixture of two opposite moral dispositions, and as sometimes the one, and sometimes the other, prevails, so the will sometimes chooses that which is good, and sometimes that which is evil. In the state of glory, the blessed freely choose what is good; and, being confirmed in a state of perfect holiness, they can only will what is good.

The important truth laid down in the third section concerning man's inability, in his fallen state, to will or do that which is spiritually good, claims some further notice. It has been opposed by various sects. The Pelagians maintained "that mankind are capable of repentance and amendment, and of arriving to the highest degrees of piety and virtue by the use of their natural faculties and powers." The Semi-Pelagians, though they allowed that assisting grace is necessary to enable a man to continue in a course of religious duties, yet they held "that inward preventing grace was not necessary to form in the soul the first beginnings of true repentance and amendment; that every man was capable of producing these by the mere power of his natural faculties; as also of exercising faith in Christ, and forming the purposes of a holy and sincere obedience." The Arminians, in words, ascribe the conversion of the sinner to the grace of God; yet they ultimately resolve it into the free-will of man. In opposition to these various forms of error, our Confession asserts that man, in his natural corrupt state, "has lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation," and that "a natural man is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto." This may be confirmed,—1. By the representations given in Scripture of the natural condition of mankind sinners. They are said to be "dead in trespasses and sins;" to be not only blind, but "darkness" itself; to be "the servants of sin;" to be "enemies of God," who are not, and cannot be, subject to his law.—Eph. ii. 1, v. 8; Rom. vi. 17; Col. i. 21; Rom. viii. 7. 2. The Scripture contains explicit declarations of man's inability to exercise faith in Christ, or to do anything spiritually good.—John vi. 44, xv. 5. 3. God claims the conversion of sinners as his own work, which he promises to accomplish.—Ezek. xi. 19, 20, xxxvi. 26, 27; Jer. xxxi. 33. 4. The conversion of sinners is uniformly ascribed to the efficacy of divine grace.—Acts xvi. 14; 1 Thess. i. 6. 5. The conversion of the soul is described in Scripture by such figurative terms as imply that it is a divine work. It is called a creation,—Eph. ii. 10; a resurrection,—John v. 21; a new birth,—John i. 13. 6. If the sinner could convert himself, then he would have something of which he might boast—something which he had not received.—Cor. i. 29, 30, iv. 7. 7. The increase of Christians in faith and holiness is spoken of as the work of God; which must more strongly imply that the first beginnings of it is to be ascribed to him.—Phil. i. 6, ii. 13; Heb. xiii. 20, 21. We only add, that man's incapacity of willing or doing that which is spiritually good, being a moral inability, is not inconsistent with his responsibility.