



Around the Word
BIBLE STUDY
Summer 2016

Free Will

Part 1

Martin Luther on Original Sin:

For here the text applies that Christ and the Evangelists so often quote from Isaiah: "You shall indeed hear but never perceive." What else does this mean but that free choice or the human heart is so held down by the power of Satan that unless it is miraculously raised up by the Spirit of God it cannot of itself either see or hear things that strike the eyes and ears themselves so plainly as to be palpable?

(On the Bondage of the Will; LW 33:98)



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Introduction: Free will has always been a topic in both philosophy and theology. Especially when it comes to the place of man's will in salvation, the topic of free will is of highest importance.

Errors regarding free will are constantly pushing their way into the church's teaching. It was no different in the years after the death of Martin Luther. The theologians of the church gathered up the teaching of the Scriptures regarding our will and its freedom and powers. In this series of studies we will let them guide us to the Scriptures and its truth and comfort.

*The non-italicized portions of this study are excerpted (with slight amendments) from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II:2,5-11. (Triglotta: The Lutheran Confessions, which is in the public domain. See www.bookofconcord.com for more.) There are a lot of Scriptures in this study. The most important texts are marked with **.*

Opening: Psalm 80:1-7

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph | like a flock!*
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, |
shine forth.
²**Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Ma- |
nasseh,***
stir up your might
and come to | save us!
³Restore us, | O God;*
let your face shine, that we | may be saved!
⁴**O LORD | God of hosts,***
how long will you be angry with your |
people's prayers?
⁵You have fed them with the | bread of tears*
and given them tears to drink in full | measure.
⁶**You make us an object of contention for our |**
neighbors,*
and our enemies laugh a- | mong themselves.
⁷Restore us, O | God of hosts;*
let your face shine, that we | may be saved!
Glory be to the Father and | to the Son*
and to the Holy | Spirit;
as it was in the be- | ginning,*
is now, and will be forever. | Amen.

A Summary

By the fall of our first parents man was so corrupted that in divine things pertaining to our conversion and the salvation of our souls he is by nature blind, that, when the Word of God is preached, he neither does nor can understand it, but regards it as foolishness. Also, that he does not of himself draw nigh to God, but is and remains an enemy of God until he is converted, becomes a believer and is endowed with faith, is regenerated and renewed, by the power of the Holy Ghost through the Word when preached

and heard, out of pure grace, without any cooperation of his own. *(The Scriptures to support this teaching will be considered through these studies.)*

Our Will in Regards to Spiritual Things

In spiritual and divine things, the intellect, heart, and will of the unregenerate man are utterly unable, by their own natural powers, to understand, believe, accept, think, will, begin, effect, do, work, or concur in working anything, but they are entirely dead to what is good, and corrupt. In man's nature since the Fall, before regeneration, there is not the least spark of spiritual power remaining, nor present, by which, of himself, he can prepare himself for God's grace, or accept the offered grace, nor be capable of it for and of himself, or apply or accommodate himself thereto, or by his own powers be able of himself, as of himself, to aid, do, work, or concur in working anything towards his conversion, either wholly, or half, or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part, but that he is the servant and slave of sin.

See John 8:34. What does Jesus say about those who commit sin? Is a slave free?

[The unregenerate is] a captive of the devil, by whom he is moved.

See Ephesians 2:2. Who directs the deeds of the unbeliever?

***See 2 Timothy 2:26. How does this verse explain how it is with the unbeliever and the devil?*

Hence the natural free will according to its perverted disposition and nature is strong and active only with respect to what is displeasing and con-

trary to God.

This doctrine of the Scriptures is contrary to proud reason and philosophy, yet we know that the wisdom of this perverted world is only foolishness before God, and that articles of faith must be judged only from God's Word.

For although man's reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law.

See Romans 1:19ff. According to Paul in this verse, where can the knowledge of God be found?

Yet man's reason is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true, but the more diligence and earnestness they employ, wishing to comprehend these spiritual things with their reason, the less they understand or believe, and before they become enlightened and are taught by the Holy Ghost, they regard all this only as foolishness or fictions.

**See 1 Corinthians 2:14. What are the limitations on the natural man towards God? (Notice that Paul speaks both about action and capacity. It "does not" and it "cannot" receive the things of God.)

See 1 Corinthians 1:21. Does the world's wisdom know God?

**See Ephesians 4:17-19. This verse describes the state of the mind, will, and heart of the unbeliever. How does Paul describe the unbelievers' capacity?

See Matthew 13:11-12. What does this tell us about the ability of the unbelieving mind to understand the Word of God?

See Luke 8:18. Notice how Jesus teaches that understanding is given or taken away by God. What does this teach us about man's ability to receive God's Word?

**See Romans 3:11-12. St. Paul is quoting Psalms 14 and 53 to describe the state of the unbelievers' will. What can and does the unbeliever do towards God? (Notice the completeness of the text, "none," "all," "no, not one.")

Accordingly, the Scriptures flatly call natural man in spiritual and divine things **darkness**.

See Ephesians 5:8 and its context. Why does Paul call the unbeliever "darkness"?

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**See Acts 26:18. St Paul is quoting Jesus, who is promising to use Paul to preach to the Gentiles and convert them. How does Jesus describe the state of the unbeliever before and after their conversion? (Remember to use the words of the text to answer.)

See John 1:5. What is the darkness in this text describing?

Likewise, the Scriptures teach that man in sins is not only weak and sick, but **defunct** and **entirely dead**.

**See Ephesians 2:1,5. This verse is particularly important and wonderfully clear. How does St. Paul describe the condition of the unbeliever?



See Colossians 2:13. Conversion is again described in this text. From what and to what is the Christian converted?

Now, just as a man who is physically dead cannot of his own powers prepare or adapt himself to obtain temporal life again, so the man who is spiritually dead in sins cannot of his own strength adapt or apply himself to the acquisition of spiritual and heavenly righteousness and life, unless he is delivered and quickened by the Son of God from the death of sin.

Closing Hymn: Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice (st. 3-4)

Martin Luther, 1523 (TLH 387)

3. My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining;
Free will against God's judgment fought,
Dead to all good remaining.

My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share;
The pangs of hell I suffered.

4. But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of His mercies great,
He planned my soul's salvation.
A father's heart He turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently:
He gave His dearest Treasure.

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