

THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT HUMANS HAVE GENUINE FREE WILL

THE ISSUE

The prime reason for studying this subject is because of the deterministic teachings which originated in the Reformed Churches. These teachings deny genuine free will for humans and have led in two opposite directions to:

- (1) Calvinism, which teaches that God has, from eternity, predetermined a set number of specific individuals for salvation and the rest for eternal torture or eternal destruction.
- (2) Universalism i.e. universal salvation meaning that everyone gets saved.

These two teachings imply that God is excessively controlling and that humans are virtually automatons. In particular these doctrines propose that although free will is apparent, it is actually illusory.

THE BIBLE'S STATEMENTS CONCERNING CHOICE

Human genuine choice is made clear in the following Scriptures:

- ❖ “So **choose** life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (*Deut. 30:19*).
- ❖ “... **choose** for yourselves today whom you will serve...” (*Josh. 24:15*).

The Bible also contains the words “will,” “free-will,” “willing,” “voluntary,” “choose,” etc., nearly **4,000 times**. Also because man has a conscience he can choose between what is right and what is wrong – these are free will choices. In fact, God encourages the use of our decision making powers:

- ❖ ““Come now, and **let us reason together**,” Says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. **If you consent** and obey, you will eat the best of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword” (*Isa. 1:18-20*).

No one can engage in reason without making choices between differing opinions, options or courses of action. So God presented man with choices:

IS FREE WILL AN ILLUSION?

Because free will is obvious to most of us, Calvinists and Universalists generally teach that human free will is **only apparent** i.e. it is an illusion. However, if this was the case, then it would be totally unjust for God to hold humans responsible for their actions if human free will is not genuine. Yet, throughout the Scriptures God is shown to hold humans responsible for their actions.

The Israelites’ could choose to make “**free will offerings**;” so it’s clearly unreasonable to say that such choosing is an illusion! It would be impossible to make “**free will offerings**” if one does not actually have genuine free will.

Also Paul said: “we **persuade** men...” (2 Cor. 5:11). This was just the same as the prophets trying to persuade Israel; yet if one doesn’t really have free will how can one really be persuaded?

But if free will is, according to deterministic teachings, only illusory what must we say about God if, as the Scriptures show, He holds men accountable for what they do?

GOD HOLDS HUMANS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR CHOICES

The following Scriptures show that humans must have genuine free will because each person is held as responsible and accountable by God for their thoughts, speech, decisions, and actions:

- ❖ “Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* children, nor shall children be put to death for *their* fathers; a person shall be put to death **for his own sin**” (*Deut. 24:16*).
- ❖ “But every one shall die **for his own iniquity**; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge” (*Jer. 31:30*).
- ❖ “And if indeed I have erred, my error remains **with me**” (*Job 19:4*).
- ❖ “So then **each of us** shall give account of himself to God” (*Rom. 14:12*).

Clearly humans are meant to be morally responsible creatures; yet this cannot be the case if they have been denied free will.

Also if free will is an illusion do we imply that God has made it so? In which case He would be deceiving us in telling us to choose when in fact there is no real choice.

BEING MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE MEANS HUMANS HAVE FREE WILL

Because man is made in God’s image he demonstrates God’s qualities, although in lesser measure. Although it is now a tarnished image since Adam’s sin, nevertheless man can reflect to a certain extent all of God’s qualities - with love being a predominant quality. So because God obviously has free will so, too, must man, although with obvious physical restraints and influences. Such freedom is an inherent part of human nature (*Gen. 1:26*) and so it involves human power of choice.

For God not to have granted genuine free will to humans would mean that he acted without love for his human creation because **freedom is a condition of love and “God is love.”**

All the biblical evidence demonstrates that God does not predetermine mankind’s choices. Such freedom is especially pertinent to a person’s relationship to God and in relation to doing His will.

MAN’S WILL IS DISTINCT FROM GOD’S WILL

Indeed, Jesus showed the distinction of human will and God’s will when he said: “*If anyone’s will is to do **God’s will**, he will know whether the teaching is from God*” (*John 7:17*). So a person’s will is clearly something separate from God’s will and individuals have been gifted with the rational power to choose between good and bad. However, they must then take full responsibility for the choice made.

- ❖ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who **does the will of my Father** who is in heaven” (*Matt 7:21*).

Here Jesus implies that some will not do God’s will and so showing that they have their own free will.

- ❖ “May your kingdom come. **Your will** be done on earth as it is in heaven” (*Matt. 6:10*).

This prayer implies that humans are doing their own will on earth rather than God’s and therefore humans have genuine free will to do their own will. This distinction can also be seen in Isaiah 65:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Hebrews 10:36; 1 Peter 2:15, 16; 1 John 2:17.

INFLUENCES ON FREE WILL FROM WITHIN ONESELF

Although having free will, everyone is influenced by their own nature and in particular in relation to sinful thinking leading to wrong actions, just as James tells us that:

- ❖ "...each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by **his own desire**" (*Jas. 1:14*).

Furthermore Jesus made it plain that we can be influenced by negative qualities deep within ourselves when he said:

- ❖ "*all these things* [evil thoughts and actions] *come from within and defile a person*" (Mark 7:23).

So from the time of Adam's sin, the influence of and compulsion to sin has affected and limited an individual's ability to use his free will to the good of himself and others. Again as Jesus said: "*everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*" (John 8:34). However, through Jesus, a person can become a good influence so that his will as it harmonizes with God's will begins to function beneficially for himself and for others i.e. he ceases to do what is harmful and develops valuable Christian qualities. Yet this could never happen if the person did not have genuine free will.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON ONE'S FREE WILL

It is quite evident that human free will is curtailed by the various **physical constraints** of the human body and factors relating to this planet.

Certainly outside forces e.g., Satan or those around us can influence our human 'will' so that we follow a particular course of action. Nevertheless, such influences cannot force us to do so.

Also the **information we acquire** can significantly influence the decisions we make. So, to that extent the application of our free will becomes limited. Worse still is a situation where we have acquired incorrect information and in using it we make a bad decision. Nevertheless, in spite of these factors, humans are still able to apply their free will.

CHANGE CAN ONLY OCCUR IF THERE IS FREE WILL

Change is all around us in the life of humans generally. Furthermore, God requires change to occur toward him for a better relationship – initially for reconciliation and later for growth in the relationship. This was his appeal to Israel:

- ❖ "Yet I **sent you all my servants** the prophets, again and again, saying. "Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate." But **they did not listen** or incline their ears to turn from their wickedness, so as not to burn sacrifices to other gods..." (*Jer. 44: 4, 5*).

Christians are also in a process of change as we grow in our relationships with God and Jesus; yet it would clearly be pointless and cruel for God to appeal to individuals to change to get onto the path to life if they had no free will to do so and that, in fact, they were predestined from eternity past never to be granted that life.

JESUS' EXAMPLE OF EXERCISING GENUINE FREE WILL

Jesus was truly fully human – he was the second Adam. The following texts clearly show that he had free will and so indicating that all humans have free-will:

- ❖ "For I have come down from heaven not to do **my will** but to do **the will of him** who sent me"
(*John 6:38*).

So here Jesus subjugated his own will to that of his Father's will – he made a genuine choice to do so.

- ❖ "No one takes it [*his life*] from me, but I lay it down **of my own accord**. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father"
(*John 10:18*).

The phrase “**of my own accord**” clearly refers to Jesus’ free will and so the GOD’S WORD Translation expresses Jesus’ words as: “No one takes my life from me. I give my life **of my own free will**. I have the authority to give my life, and I have the authority to take my life back again”

- ❖ “And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not **as I will**, but as you will’” (*Matt. 26:39*).

Here Jesus freely harmonizes “his will” to “God’s will.” This is the same pattern for anyone who becomes a Christian.

GENUINE FREE WILL FOR 1ST CENTURY DISCIPLES

Having observed that God’s people in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as Jesus had free will we can also see that the same is confirmed for the early Christians in the following passages:

- ❖ “If anyone thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, and if a critical moment has come and so it has to be, **let him do as he wishes**. He is committing no sin; let them get married. The one who stands firm in his resolve, however, who is not under compulsion but has **power over his own will**, and has made up his mind to keep his virgin, will be doing well” (*1 Cor. 7:36-37*).

So clearly Paul believed that humans have free will as he also shows in the next Scriptures:

- ❖ “All that **will** [*or choose*] to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution...” (*2 Tim 3:12*).
- ❖ “...but I [*Paul*] preferred to do nothing without your [*Philemon*] consent, in order that your goodness would not be by compulsion but of your **own free will**” (*Philemon 1:14*).
- ❖ “...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight **not under compulsion**, but **voluntarily**, according to the will of God” (*1 Pet 5:2*).

Peter’s counsel here is only meaningful if Christians have free will.

BAD CHOICES

- ❖ “But the Pharisees and the lawyers **rejected** God’s purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John” (*Luke 7:30*).

BUT ISN’T GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY DIMINISHED IF HUMANS HAVE FREE WILL?

God’s sovereignty operates in a way that shows His supreme ability to make happen what He determines will happen and to look at possibilities and probabilities of what might happen given the free will of His human creation. This takes dramatically more intelligence than simply having a creation that is going to do what one has determined it will do. Furthermore, all of God’s qualities are balanced so that humans often err in looking at the subject of His sovereignty to the exclusion of His other primary qualities and thereby placing more emphasis on His sovereignty than He Himself places on it according to the Scriptures. Indeed because of His love, justice, and mercy etc. He cannot act in a way that is without love – and love gives freedom i.e. free-will.

So determinists fail to realize that God’s **omnipotence** has made it easy for Him to have given humans the power of genuine free choice and for Him still to be sovereign of the universe. Even man’s rebellion in Eden will not frustrate God’s purposes. As an example, the fact that individuals freely violate the laws of a country does not deny the sovereignty of that country.

CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS REAL

- ❖ “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (*Gal. 5:1*).
- ❖ “Live as people who are free, not using **your freedom** as a cover-up for evil” (*1 Pet. 2:16*).

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS BELIEVED THAT MEN WERE
CREATED WITH FREE WILL

Justin Martyr c.100-165 A.D.

God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to **create them free** to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. So if they repent **all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God.**

Irenaeus c.130-200 A.D.

God made man a free (agent)...because man is **possessed of free will** from the beginning... as many as, according to their own choice, depart from God.

Theophilus of Antioch (2nd Cent.) “For God made man free, and **with power over himself.**”

CONCLUSION

The single factor of humans as having genuine free will as the Scriptures show:

- Gives the lie to the teachings of Calvinism with its teaching that God has, from eternity, predetermined a set number of specific individuals for salvation and the rest for eternal torture or eternal destruction giving them no choice – no free will. Calvinists try to get around the plain facts by using a lot of human philosophy.
- It also gives the lie to the teaching of Universalism with its teaching that everybody supposedly gets saved in the end. Again they have no choice even though it is the nicer belief. Nevertheless, this teaching contradicts what God has said concerning the destruction of the incorrigibly wicked.

So Christians can rejoice over the fact that our genuine free will is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind. It means that the Creator gave people:

- The ability to make choices and meaningful decisions.
- The power to consider things and to be creative in choosing between different possibilities and options that will affect their lives and those of others.
- It also means that their relationships with other people and with God can be truly genuine relationships.

Key Text— *John 7:17* ESV :

“If **anyone’s will** is to do **God’s will**, he will know whether the teaching is from God...”

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