

CHAPTER 9

OF FREE WILL

The will is free

“1. 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.”

The will is that part of the human mind which determines what it shall do. Every person has a will. It is the capacity to make rational decisions.

We all know that we make free choices all the time. This ability is our “natural liberty” of the will. The Bible often appeals to this freedom of choice in people (as in Dt. 30:19).

God did not create our wills so that they must always lead to good or always lead to evil; he made them free to follow the inclinations of the particular person’s nature, whether good, bad, or mixed.

And God does not force anyone’s will to act against his nature. Rather than forcing our wills, he changes our natures, our hearts. Then our wills automatically begin to desire good things.

The will in our fourfold state

The human will always is free, as defined in Paragraph 1. But is it not always free to do good, or evil. Its freedom in that regard is limited by the state of the person’s heart or nature; we may speak better of its “ability” when talking about good or evil. The Confession traces the ability of the will in each state that humanity has gone through and that Christians will go through.

In the state of innocence

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

Adam and Eve were created good, not neutral. But still they had a free will, not bound to be good forever. They were under a period of trial, to see if they would obey God voluntarily. Obviously, their will was mutable, or changeable (Gen 3:6; Eccl 7:29).

In the state of sin

“3. 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.”

The reason a sinner cannot will to do good is this: even though his will still is free, his nature is corrupt; and since his nature controls his will, his will is bound to sin and unable to look to Christ (John 6:44, 65; 15:5; Rom 3:10-12; 5:6; 8:7; Eph 2:1-5; 1 Cor 2:14).

During the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther wrote a book called *The Bondage of the Will*, in which he defended this important doctrine against those who said that all humans had the capacity to choose good over evil.

In the state of grace

“4. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from this 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.”

When we are saved by God, he looses us from the bondage of sin, and since our natures are made more and more holy, our wills are enabled to direct us to do holy and good things instead of evil things. This new ability is real Christian freedom (John 8:34-36; Rom 6:18, 22; Phil 2:13).

However, our wills still can lead us into sin, even after we are saved for a long time (Rom 7:15-23; Gal 5:17). For this reason our wills need to be strengthened in righteousness by constant diligence and exercise (Eph 6:10-11 [Greek passive, “be strengthened”]; 1 Tim 4:7; Heb 5:14).

In the state of glory

“5. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.”

In at least one way heaven will be better than the Garden of Eden—we will not even be able to sin; there will be no possibility of falling (Eph 4:13; Heb 12:22-23, 28; 1 John 3:2; Jude 24). Our natures will be confirmed in holiness, and therefore our wills will always desire God’s will.