

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:31–36

Perhaps no concept is as deeply rooted in the soil of American ideals as the basic human right to liberty. We hold freedom as a self-evident right yet remain scarred and haunted by a history which contradicted those fundamental beliefs. Our past makes the discussion of slavery and liberty extremely difficult. Slavery is no abstract idea divorced from life's biases and prejudices. It is a fresh wound easily reopened to conjure up offensive images of a dark past shamed and soiled by blood, injustice, oppression and violence.¹

Slavery and freedom are not only cultural but also extremely theological. The issues are certainly not foreign to the Scriptures. Freedom and slavery are common biblical images and themes. We can even trace a trajectory from the shadows of Israel's emancipation and exodus from Egyptian enslavement to the spiritual deliverance from the slavery of sin and Satan found in the gospel. The reality of God's rescue and redemption from slavery shines forth as one of the brightest lights of biblical revelation, a beacon to all who are enslaved and oppressed, beckoning them to the free shores of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, assumptions and ambiguity abound in conversations on the topic of theological freedom. Because there is no universally shared definition of "free will," the conversation needs much clarification.

Opening Clarifications

What type of freedom are we considering?

When speaking of free will, one is not typically referring to the freedom to make mundane daily decisions. There is instead a more nuanced realm in which theological free will is discussed. Theologians call this area soteriology, the study of salvation. In this discussion, I want to limit our focus to this realm.

I am explicitly asking about the role of the human will in coming to Christ. Will an unregenerate² person trust Jesus without any external compulsion or must there be a prior work done in us to allow us to come? Furthermore, if there is this prior work, is it granted by God to all or only to some persons?³

Therefore, we should bear in mind that this discussion of "free will" is not concerned with mundane daily choice or decisions believers make. It is concerned with the choice of an unbeliever to believe in Christ.

Unless we specify the conversation within these parameters, we could easily be distracted by peripheral discussions of personal tastes and styles rather than the central issue of salvation. We are essentially asking in what sense unregenerate humans are or are not free to come to Christ.

What is the will?

In order to understand "free will," we must first understand the will. What is the will? Most simply, the will is the mechanism by which humans make choices.

Human choices are made on the basis of preferences, pleasures, loves, affections, delights and desires. Choices may be (and often are) made with respect to a combination of various desires (some of which might even be in competition), but all choices ultimately boil down to preference.⁴ We choose

¹ Those interested in the biblical view of slavery might consider reading "[Slavery in the Scriptures](#)."

² Although regeneration is not a common term in many churches today, it is an essential biblical concept. Regeneration refers to the act of God whereby one is "born again." Those who are "regenerate" are those who have been "born again," while those who are "unregenerate" have not been "born again." For a comprehensive theology of this concept, consider John Piper's "Finally Alive."

³ Theological discussion of free will often includes historical and complex terms like Pelagianism, Arminianism, Calvinism, predestination, election, determinism and indeterminism, fate, compatibilism and incompatibilism, synergism, monergism, sovereignty and responsibility. We will try to avoid these terms for the sake of clarity and simply refer readers to the recommended resources if they desire a more scholarly discussion.

what we find more valuable, enjoyable, pleasurable, etc. We choose what we most desire, what we want, what we “will.”

If one wants to know what will be chosen, one simply needs to consider what he or she most prefers or loves. The concept of “free will” ultimately boils down to a question of desires. What does the human will most desire?

Four eras of freedom

A final clarification before we can answer the question, “Do we have free will?” is to define who “we” are. Man is not as he once was, nor is he as he will always be. The Bible speaks of the nature of man in four distinct ways, corresponding to four movements of redemptive history: man as created, fallen, regenerate and glorified.⁵ We must be careful lest we confuse the freedom of the fallen state with the freedoms of the created, regenerate or glorified states. Each era is distinct, and the freedom possessed within each is subsequently distinct, as well.

- There is man as created. Man was originally created in a state of goodness and innocence. Though we do not know how long this condition lasted, it covers only two chapters of the Bible.
- Since Genesis 3, we see man as fallen. Fallen man is fundamentally different from man as he was originally created. He was no longer innocent or good.
- Though the condition of the Fall is universal in its effect upon all men, it is not permanent for all. There is a third way of understanding man, man as regenerate. Regeneration refers to the work of God to transfer a man or woman out of darkness and into light, out of death and into life. John 3 calls this reality being “born again.” The regenerate state is also a temporary condition awaiting the consummation of God’s work in eternity.
- Man as glorified describes the final state in which God’s work of redemption will be complete.

Given that our discussion of free will is restricted to the question of an unregenerate (fallen) human’s response to his Creator’s work of redemption, we will narrow our focus to the state in which man has found himself since the Fall.

What is the fallen human will like? Given that the will chooses on the basis of desires, we must therefore consider what a fallen, unregenerate person loves, desires, values and esteems.

The Reality of Unregenerate Bondage

The human will universally inherited in Adam is not born into a state of neutrality and apathy. The fallen and unregenerate human will has natural loves, passions, desires, delights and pleasures. The will chooses on the basis of these desires, which are not neutral but, instead, absolutely and universally influenced toward evil. Sinners by nature desire rebellion, and thus their wills always incline toward rebellion.

Fallen humanity is naturally (that is, by nature) broken and depraved. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:3, we are “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” This fallen nature has limitations. It cannot not sin. All it desires (wills) is sin.

This truth is foreign to modern thought. How can Christianity affirm that every action of fallen man is sinful while there exist evidenced examples of social kindness and love throughout the world? The biblical⁶ answer begins with an understanding of sin. Sin is not merely external action, but internal affections and motivations. Helping an elderly lady cross the street, giving to charitable causes, refraining from certain behaviors and engaging in others are not good in the fullest sense of the word. Nothing is good if not done from a posture of humble trust in God and a love for His glory. As the Bible states, anything done in unbelief (Romans 14:23) or done without respect to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31) falls short of righteousness.

Fallen humans love sin. They desire sin. They will sin. They delight in sin. They crave sin. They prefer sin. They choose sin. We abhor the glory of God in lustful craving for our own exaltation and autonomy. We want to glorify ourselves, not our Creator. Because we will (desire) sin, we will (do) sin. We are “willing” participants in sin, and all we can do is sin.

The question is not, “Can we do what we want?” but “What do we want?” Unless and until we come face to face with the radical depravity of fallen man, we will never truly understand who we are and what God has done in bringing us to Himself. As long as we conceive ourselves as neutral in our longings and desires, we will assume a false foundation for understanding the nature of our freedom or bondage.

⁴ For instance, the child who takes out the trash may not “want” to take out the trash, but he or she does not “want” a spanking and, thus, does on the basis of that greater desire.

⁵ This is the progression for those who believe. The unbeliever never moves beyond a state of fallen rebellion.

⁶ See Romans 1:18-32 for a horrifying picture of the depravity of the human creature in his rebellion against Creator. Man has universally declared his preference of creation over Creator such that all are said to be “without excuse.”

The biblical depiction of fallen mankind is desperate, dark and dire. Consider the following descriptions of an unregenerate person:

- Our eyes are blind to the glories of the gospel (Matthew 13:14-15; John 12:39-40; 2 Corinthians 4:4).
- Our minds are darkened and hostile toward God (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 4:18; Colossians 1:21).
- Our ears are deaf to the call of our Creator (Matthew 13:14-15).
- Our hearts are darkened and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 1:21).
- We are enslaved to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:17; Galatians 4:8).
- We are foolish (Romans 1:21; Titus 3:3).
- We hate God (John 3:19-20).
- We are dead (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13).

Is a blind man “free” to see Christ? Is a deaf man “free” to hear Christ? Is a dead man “free” to stand up and walk toward Christ? Is a slave “free” from slavery?

Considering the biblical depiction of mankind, the type of freedom that many simply assume to be true is grounded in an unrealistic understanding of what has happened to man in the Fall. A deeper freedom was once possessed in “man as created,” but man is no longer as he was created. Our nature has changed, and with it the understanding of our liberty. Goodness and innocence fell from us at the Fall, and we forfeited some degree of freedom by eating of the fruit. Fallen freedom consists of the ability to do what one desires; though, those desires are universally directed away from Creator and toward creation.

Considering the Objections

Do we have a choice?

Unregenerate humans are free to do what they want to do, but all they want to do is sin. Jesus stands forth in the gospel and cries out “Believe upon Me, trust Me, come to Me, receive Me.” Yet, the natural human response is refusal. Our blind eyes do not see Him as lovely and good. Our deaf ears do not hear the sweetness and grace of His call. Our minds misinterpret His words. Our hearts love to hate Him. All we have known and loved is darkness, and, thus, we fear the light. The chains of our own choosing constrain us from coming to Him.

If only we would believe, we would be saved (John 3:16), and yet we refuse to do so (John 3:19-20). This understanding illuminates the importance of regeneration (John 3:3-5). Only a regenerate heart will respond correctly. Only a regenerate

heart will believe. Only a regenerate heart will find Christ lovely and good.⁷

We do indeed have a choice and are free to choose as we wish, but the reality of our depravity reveals that we all choose poorly. Not one fallen man in a trillion will trust God unless God first overcomes his natural resistance. This God mercifully and graciously does for the elect.⁸

Is this unfair?

If all man has known is sin and if it is universally inherited from Adam, how can one be considered culpable for sin? By nature man cannot not sin. If he cannot do otherwise, how can God judge him and hold him responsible?

Jonathan Edwards provided a helpful approach to answering this in his distinction between natural and moral inability. According to Edwards, natural inability would be like a man who has been knocked unconscious and tied to a chair. He cannot stand up and should not be held responsible for not doing so since he is prevented from standing up by virtue of the ropes which bind him. Though he wants and wills to stand, he cannot do so.

This is not the type of inability that we possess. We possess a moral inability. Though we are truly bound, our bondage is a result of our own desires. We are responsible because we have willfully rebelled. We reject Christ not because we are restrained by rope, but because we are hindered by our hatred of God. We are shackled only by our own selfish loves.

Some people might object that they were born this way and did not elect Adam to be man’s representative (Romans 5:12-21) in the garden. They did not eat the fruit and, thus, should not be subject to fallen futility or the consequent judgment. Yet, with every sin we commit, we evidence the justice of God’s decree by casting our vote for Adam’s sin. By virtue of our ongoing rebellion, we demonstrate that we accept our allegiance to our Adamic head and fully merit the forfeiture of the degree and type of freedom that mankind once possessed. We are not simply third or fourth generation children born into a slavery inherited from our forefathers. We are prisoners of a war in which we were and continue to be willing combatants.

⁷ The Gospel of John is a great book to walk through to see the tyranny of the flesh to which we are all naturally enslaved. Not only do we have the above discussion from chapter 3 but also the discriminatory drawing of the Father (John 6:44-65), the selectivity of His sheep (John 10:27) and the relationship between belonging and believing (John 10:26).

⁸ See “How Does an Unbeliever Believe?” for more on the process of God overcoming human resistance by the act of regeneration.

Conclusion

Do we have free will? It depends on what we mean by free will, and it depends on who you mean by “we.” The freedom that Adam and Eve possessed prior to the Fall is different from the freedom experienced by all humanity after the Fall. Furthermore, these two types of freedom are different from the freedom experienced as a regenerate believer and what he or she will experience in the eternal state.

It might be helpful to distinguish between two terms in understanding this. This distinction boils down to a differentiation between “true freedom”⁹ and “freedom of choice.” True freedom consists of the ability to act without the hindrances of sin, whereas freedom of choice consists in the ability to do as you wish.

Here is a helpful way to remember the four different eras and the types of freedom experienced within each:

1. Human beings as created had both true freedom and freedom of choice.
2. Human being as fallen forfeited true freedom but retained freedom of choice.
3. Human beings as regenerate have regained a measure of true freedom while retaining freedom of choice.
4. Human beings as glorified will be perfected in true freedom and will retain freedom of choice.

If understood correctly, the Calvinist can affirm the reality of free will but not without properly interpreting the term through the lenses of Scripture. Given the fundamental discussions that most bring to an understanding of “free will,” it is probably unwise to affirm the phrase unless one has the chance to nuance the term as done in this article.

Fallen creatures are free to do what they want. All they want is sin. God overcomes that desire in the elect and creates in them a new desire which subsequently inclines to God and His promises. This inclination is hopefully growing now as they mature, but will certainly one day be fulfilled as the residue of their flesh is destroyed and they experience the fullness of resurrection.

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⁹ I don't really like the term “true freedom” because I don't think that “true” is the best adjective to describe this type of freedom as if other versions are “false.” I think that “complete freedom” or a term like that would be better, but the phrase “true freedom” is the most commonly used in theological discussions, so I will use it for the sake of consistency.

Recommended Resources

Resources on Free Will

- ***Do we Have Free Will?*** by Andy Naselli
- ***An Outline Primer on Free Will*** by Justin Taylor
- ***A Few Thoughts on Free Will*** by John Piper
- ***Does God get more Glory if Humans have Free Will?*** by John Piper
- *Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther
- *Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards
- *Willing to Believe* by R.C. Sproul¹⁰

Resources on Sovereignty, Election and Predestination

- *Still Sovereign* edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware¹¹
- Desiring God's **TULIP** video series¹²

¹⁰ An analysis of the history of Christian thought on this topic.

¹¹ An excellent resource for anyone desiring to study the various questions surrounding the issues of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

¹² A comprehensive teaching on Calvinism by John Piper, well worth the time and effort that one will expend in studying.