



## Free Will or the Bondage of the Will: Definitions are Critical

BY BOB DEWAAAY

*“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” (Romans 9:16)*

*“Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.” (Psalm 135:6)*

Questions from readers prompt the writing of many CIC articles. The most frequently asked question that I have not addressed until now concerns free will. I thoroughly researched this topic nearly ten years ago. The reason for the delay is the complexity of the topic. Given, however, that the question continues to be asked, I shall address it now.

Dear readers, be warned in advance that the irreducible complexity of the topic will make this article difficult for many to follow. If you are a new reader, please be patient, this is not standard fare on these pages. To help those who have difficulty digesting philosophical arguments, I have provided summary statements at the end of sections. Feel free to skip forward to those summary statements if you see fit.

Please realize that free will is more of a philosophical concept than a theological one, although it has theological implications. However, I often see well meaning Christians misled by certain teachers who make their own understanding of free will a test for orthodoxy. I think this is unfortunate and confusing. If the following discussion does nothing else, it will show you that free will is not the simple solution to many important theological issues that many people think it is.

### Two Definitions

I will be discussing two alternative definitions of free will. The first is the typical definition demanded by Arminians (those who believe that a free will choice to believe brings about salvation): “The ability to choose between options, either of which could be actualized by the act of choosing.” The second definition was proposed by Jonathan Edwards: “The ability to choose as one pleases.” I will explain these in the pages that follow and defend the second one. In so doing I will discuss several problems that arise in seeking to understand free will.

#### Key Problems with Free Will Problem 1 – The Bible Does Not Address Free Will Directly

*Free will is assumed from passages that teach human responsibility.*

As we begin our discussion we confront our most important problem: free will is never directly addressed in the Bible. Even in passages where prophets and others asked God why He allowed so much evil to harm the innocent, it was not discussed. The answer was never that God was committed to the principle of free will and determined that allowing evil was a necessary by-product

of free will.<sup>1</sup> The will of humans is discussed in the Bible and the New Testament has a Greek word for it, but its relative freedom of choice is not directly discussed. To derive our understanding we have to go by implications from other Scriptures.

One lady wrote a long letter rebuking me for not teaching free will to her satisfaction. I asked her to provide scriptures that teach free will so I could discuss the concept with her. She sent a long list of scriptures on human responsibility. Her assumption was that if we are responsible, we must have free choice in the matter.<sup>2</sup> Many people think the same way.

If we say that in order for a person to be responsible, that person must be perfectly able to make correct choices to obey God—it is the same as rejecting the teaching of the Bible. The Bible teaches that humans are both responsible for their sin and in bondage to their sin. It teaches that God’s grace is necessary to deliver us from sin. If man were free to perfectly choose obedience, then someone other than Christ could have lived a sinless life and escape judgment based on human merit. That idea denies Paul’s teaching in **Romans 3:9-18**. Also, Paul teaches in Galatians 3 that the command to obey all of the Law or be cursed proves that those who are under the Law **are** cursed. Logically, if people had the ability to obey the Law perfectly, then it would not follow that being under the Law insured that they would be cursed. But Paul said that it did. This provides a fatal counterexample to any universal claim that responsibility implies ability.

Charles Finney, the 19<sup>th</sup> century revivalist, championed the idea that Biblical passages about man’s moral responsibility imply complete ability to perfectly obey God. Finney taught perfectionism and created a heretical system of theology called “moral government.” The following citation shows

Finney's belief in human ability as a "first truth" of reason:

Moral agency implies the possession of free will. By free-will is intended the power of choosing, or refusing to choose, in every instance, in compliance with moral obligation. Free-will implies the power of originating and deciding our own choices, and of exercising our own sovereignty, in every instance of choice upon moral questions of deciding or choosing in conformity with duty or otherwise in all cases of moral obligation. That man cannot be under a moral obligation to perform an absolute impossibility is a first truth of reason. But man's causality, his whole power of causality to perform or do anything, lies in his will.<sup>3</sup>

This sounds logical to the unregenerate mind, but it is not Biblical. Finney's position is a reiteration of the Pelagian heresy. It goes so far in the direction of human ability that even Rome anathematized it at Trent: "If any one saith, that the grace of God, through Jesus Christ, is given only for this, that man may be able more easily to live justly, and to merit eternal life, as if by free-will without grace, he were able to do both, though hardly indeed and with difficulty: let him be anathema."<sup>4</sup> Rome also anathematized Luther's opposite position on this, the bondage of the will: "If any one saith, that, since Adam's sin, the free-will of man is lost and extinguished; or, that it is a thing with only a name, yea a name without a reality, a figment, in fine, introduced into the Church by Satan: let him be anathema."<sup>5</sup> Roman Catholic theology is semi-Pelagian, which it viewed as middle ground. That means Rome taught "prevenient grace": "If any one saith, that without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and without his help, man can believe, hope, love, or be penitent as he ought, so that the grace of Justification may be bestowed upon him: let him be anathema."<sup>6</sup>

### Summary Statement

*Let me summarize the three basic positions on the will of man in relationship to ability to choose to obey God: 1) Pelagianism like that of Finney teaches that humans are fully able to obey God without any special work of grace. The mere presence of a command from God, they say, requires the reality of free will ability to comply. 2) Semi-Pelagians teach that without prevenient grace, man would not be able to respond freely to the call to believe; but that God has already provided such grace to all humans. "Prevenient" is an old English term that means "to go before." The semi-Pelagian view also is synergistic—meaning that salvation and sanctification are a cooperative effort between God and man. 3) Luther and the other reformers taught the bondage of the will. This position, anathematized by Rome in several canons on justification, was that all fallen sinners are in bondage to their own sin so much so that they will not submit to God without a prior sovereign work of God's grace. This became the Reformation doctrine of "grace alone," also called "monergism." By this thinking salvation is an act of God alone. I agree with Luther on this matter. ❀*

### This Topic is Complex

Why is this topic so complex? It is complex because the relative freedom or bondage of the will is different for different types of people addressed in the Bible. For example, the freedom of will that Adam and Eve had before the Fall is surely different from the freedom or lack thereof experienced by people born with a sin nature after the Fall.<sup>7</sup> Also, the relative freedom of will experienced by a regenerate person differs from an unregenerate sinner. Furthermore, consider the uniqueness of freedom for the redeemed in heaven. Clearly these differences are important to any discussion of the freedom or bondage of the will as the case may be. Whatever definition of free will we defend should account for these cases.

Most free will theology is based on philosophical considerations that are imported to the discussion from outside the Bible. Since the Bible does not directly discuss the meaning of "free

will," the concept must be derived from passages about human bondage to sin and human responsibility and culpability before the Law of God. You will see this as we examine literature on the topic. This complexity is why I find simplistic demands for belief in "free will" inappropriate. Those who make these demands have not provided enough information to explain what we are required to believe to be considered orthodox in their eyes.

### Problem 2: Defining Free Will

It might be surprising to many that defining free will is controversial. Jonathan Edwards wrote a profound work on this subject entitled: *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will which is supposed to be essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame.*<sup>8</sup> Though very laborious reading, it is the best material I have found on this issue. While in seminary I spent a lot of time digesting Edwards' arguments so that I might understand the issue of the relative freedom of the human will. What follows contains some of the fruits of that effort.

I will provide an overview of Edwards' reasoning and describe the process he used to define free will. He begins by defining an act of the will: "The faculty of the will is that faculty or power, or principle of minds, by which it is capable of choosing: an act of the will is the same as an act of choosing or choice."<sup>9</sup> Edwards' key premise is this: "A man never, in any instance, wills any thing contrary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to his will."<sup>10</sup> These desires are determined by a man's nature. After contemplating Edwards' writings on this, I decided that I agree with him.

This brings us to Edwards' next consideration, the cause of acts of the will. Are acts of the human will caused or uncaused? Philosophers often discuss this topic. The short answer is that the only uncaused being or thing in the universe is God. Everything else has a previous cause. To argue that acts of the

will are uncaused, says Edwards, is absurd. Then he deals with the challenge that acts of the will are self-caused—which some have asserted. In reality the soul determines acts of the will.<sup>11</sup> However, when one introduces the idea of self-determined acts of the will, one just pushes the problem further back. Previous acts of the will determine the conditions for future acts of the will. This creates an infinite regress that must go back to some initial uncaused cause. Writes Edwards, “But if that first volition is not determined by a preceding act of the will, then that act is not determined by the will and is not free in the Arminian notion of freedom, which consists in the will’s self-determination.”<sup>12</sup> Edwards concludes, “Thus, this Arminian notion of liberty of the will, consisting in the will’s self-determination, is repugnant to itself, and shouts itself wholly out of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Infinite regresses are always problematic.

#### Summary Statement

*Those who assert absolute self-determining freedom of the will have serious problems. Dependent human beings, coming into the world with their own desires and inclinations, will not choose contrary to their own natures. For example, a person who utterly loathes beef liver (for whatever reason) will not choose to eat it. Whatever it is about that person’s nature that makes him hate liver, also causes him to choose not to eat it. The human will does not show up out of nowhere, uncaused, sovereign (to use Finney’s term for it) and fully capable of self-determination. Whatever makes a person the way he is causes him to choose as he does.*

*To further summarize, asserting that acts of the will are self-caused creates an infinite regress to some uncaused beginning. When Edwards says that this uncaused beginning defeats the Arminian definition, he means that their definition requires that all acts of the will are self-caused. But in reality, there is a chain of causes that has to start somewhere and that beginning would be somewhere other than in the will itself. This shows that their definition does not work. Edwards demolishes the idea of self-caused acts of the will and to my thinking does so validly. ❀*

#### Further Discussion of Self-determination

Norman Geisler argues for self-determination when he states: “Sooner or later those proposing this argument will have to admit that a free act is a self-determined act that is not caused by another.”<sup>14</sup> Geisler claims to resolve the problem by saying a person is the cause of his acts of the will. This view grants sinners, who are dependent on something outside of themselves (God) for their own existence, the power of self-determination through choices that are somehow disconnected from their own nature and their previous choices. Geisler includes in his doctrine of self-determination, “the ability to choose the opposite.”<sup>15</sup> This ability is essential to the typical Arminian definition of free will and was refuted by Edwards. Later we will show that this definition does not fit God, the holy angels, or the redeemed in heaven; all of whom we know to be free.

Edwards fully anticipated what he called “evasions” such as those offered by Geisler.<sup>16</sup> Having established that acts of the will are choices, and these choices arise from the human soul, Edwards argues that they are still caused, not uncaused. Edwards wrote, “To say it is caused, influenced and determined by something and yet not determined by any thing antecedent, either in order of time or nature, is a contradiction.”<sup>17</sup> Pushing the cause back from the will to the moral agent does not resolve the problem. What causes the moral agent to choose as he does? Geisler asserts full self-determination—the person is the sole cause of his own choices. This would mean that humans have the ability to escape from their own natures, desires, consequences of previous choices, and every other influence that causes them to choose as they do and with sovereign will power make self-determined choices.

In my opinion, Geisler is using a semantic sleight of hand to try to assert at one and the same time that human choices are caused and uncaused. Edwards refuted those who did the same

in his day.<sup>18</sup> Geisler claimed that the human soul being the cause of free choices was the only cause necessary; so did a writer in Edwards’ day. Here is Edwards’ rebuttal: “The activity of the soul may enable it to be the cause of effects; but it does not at all enable or help it be the subject of effects that have no cause, which is the thing this author supposes concerning acts of the will.”<sup>19</sup> The soul making a choice is not pristine (sovereignly free to choose any option whatsoever without bias, reason or motivation) and unaffected previous causes.

Luther also argued strongly against the type of philosophy espoused by Geisler in our day and others in Luther’s day:

[T]hat is, a man void of the Spirit of God, does not evil against his will as by violence, or as if he were taken by the neck and forced to it, in the same way as a thief or cut-throat is dragged to punishment against his will; but he does it spontaneously, and with a desirous willingness. And this willingness and desire of doing evil he cannot, by his own power, leave off, restrain, or change; but it goes on still desiring and craving. And even if he should be compelled by force to do any thing *outwardly* to the contrary, yet the craving will *within* remains averse to, and rises in indignation against that which forces or resists it.<sup>20</sup>

Luther’s view was central to the Reformation and the very view anathematized by Trent. Geisler’s apparently semi-Pelagian view is very much like Rome’s. Geisler also asserts synergism (that salvation is a cooperative effort between God and man).<sup>21</sup> This is also a rejection of a key doctrine of the Reformation and certainly is a rejection of “grace alone.” Luther wrote, “And hence it follows, that ‘Free-will,’ without the grace of God is, absolutely, not FREE; but, immutably, the servant and bond-slave of evil; because, it cannot turn itself unto good.”<sup>22</sup> I agree with Luther and Edwards that choices are caused by the nature and desires of the

person choosing. Only God's grace can change that, not some supposed principle of self-determination.

#### Summary Statement

*The soul of the person determines what the person chooses. A person chooses according to what appears the most desirable. What appears most desirable is determined by the nature of the person holding the desires. When Norman Geisler and other Arminians<sup>23</sup> claim that choices are self-determined and need no other cause, they are dissociating the choice from the nature of the person making it. However, the "self" that chooses is not sovereign and self-caused, only God is that. The reason Arminians argue for self-determination and choices that are self-caused is that they want to argue that fallen sinners are free to choose to obey God in spite of their sin nature. Luther and Edwards show that the sinner chooses sin because it is his nature to do so.* ❀

#### More on Defining Free will

We still need further discussion about the definition of free will. Edwards next dealt with the Arminian objection that there can be a state of indifference in the soul out of which the will is able to sovereignly choose. Edwards dealt with that by pointing out that if the will does make a choice, at that point of choice it cannot be called "indifferent." Edwards wrote, "Choice and preference can no more be in a state of indifference, than motion can be in a state of rest, or than the preponderation of the scale of a balance can be in a state of equilibrium."<sup>24</sup> He called a choice made out of total indifference a "contradiction" and "absurdity," thus rejecting a definition proposed by some Arminians in his day.<sup>25</sup>

Edwards, after lengthy argumentation, offers a definition of an act of the will: "[E]very act of the will is some way connected with the understanding, and is as the greatest apparent good is, in the manner which has already been explained; namely, that the soul always wills or chooses that which, in the present view of the mind, considered in the whole of that view, and all that belongs to it, appears most agreeable."<sup>26</sup> Citing

Arminian objections to this principle which seek to disassociate acts of the will from the understanding in order to make them fully "free," Edwards charges them with inconsistency:

And if so, in vain are all the applications to the understanding, in order to induce to any free virtuous act; and so in vain are all instructions, counsels, invitations, exhortations, and all arguments and persuasives whatsoever; for these are but applications to the understanding, and a clear and lively exhibition of the objects of choice to the mind's view. But if, after all, the will must be self-determined, and independent of the understanding, to what purpose are things thus represented to the understanding, in order to determine the choice.<sup>27</sup>

So if total, undetermined, sovereign freedom of choice, disconnected from previous causes or states of the soul is the great good of the universe as asserted by some Arminians — then why try to convince people to change their minds and make different choices? Doing so shows a belief that the state of a person's mind or soul determines their choices, which is the very doctrine that Edwards asserted and Arminians reject.

Having established that an uncaused act of the will is impossible and that pushing the cause back to the human soul does not alleviate the problem, Edwards concludes: "And as it is in a manner self-evident, that there can be no act of will, choice, or preference of the mind, without some motive or inducement, something in the mind's view, which it aims at, seeks, inclines to, and goes after; so it is most manifest, there is no such liberty in the universe as Arminians insist on; nor any such thing possible or conceivable."<sup>28</sup>

#### Summary Statement

*To summarize Edwards' argument thus far: 1) All acts of the will have causes. 2) Acts of the will arise from the human soul according to its own desires and nature. 3) Acts of the will are determined by whatever appears most desirable at the moment by*

*the person choosing.* ❀

### By the Arminian Definition of Freedom, God Would Not Be Free

A key problem with the type of definition of freedom espoused by theologians like Norman Geisler in our day, and others in Edwards' day, is that it cannot apply to God Himself and other moral agents such as holy angels and the redeemed in heaven. This is a problem because the definition they propose demands the ability to choose the contrary—when there is such a choice between options, either one could be actualized. They argue for this definition on this basis: it is the only definition that makes moral agents praiseworthy or blameworthy (remember that Edwards used the terms "praise and blame" in his long title). Why do they make this claim? They assume that if a moral agent had no option but to do good or to do evil, that agent could not be praised or blamed for what exists as a matter of necessity. They would consider that as foolish as blaming a leopard for having spots.

Again, Edwards takes on this argument in a full and compelling manner. The simple form of Edwards' rebuttal is that God Himself, because of His own perfect, holy and virtuous nature, cannot be anything but holy and just. The Bible says "God cannot lie."<sup>29</sup> Since the Arminian definition of freedom requires the real option of choosing the contrary, God is not "free" because His nature determines that He must be truthful. Likewise, if this definition were to hold, God would not be praiseworthy for His holy virtues because the real possibility of choosing and actualizing the contrary does not exist for God.

I cannot resist the opportunity to share with my readers some vintage Edwards, including his aversion to periods:

So that, putting these things together, the infinitely holy God, who always used to be esteemed by God's people not only virtuous, but a Being in whom is all possible virtue, and every virtue in the

most absolute purity and perfection, and in infinitely greater brightness and amiableness than in any creature: the most perfect pattern of virtue, and the fountain from whom all others, virtue is but as beams from the sun; and who has been supposed to be, on the account of his virtue and holiness, infinitely more worthy to be esteemed, loved, honored, admired, commended, extolled, and praised, than any creature: and he who is thus every where represented in Scripture; I say, this Being, according to this notion of Dr. Whithy, and other Arminians, has no virtue at all: virtue, when ascribed to him, is but an empty name; and he is deserving of no commendation or praise; because he is under necessity, he cannot avoid being holy and good as he is; therefore no thanks to him for it.<sup>30</sup>

Since this common Arminian definition of freedom logically leads to an absurdity (according to Edwards) it must be rejected.

It could be argued that the term "freedom" when predicated of God is not the same as when predicated of a human being. This, of course, is true of other attributes of God. When it is said that God is holy, it is not univocally the same as saying an angel is holy, or a person who is saved is holy. But there is a valid analogical relationship that still holds. God as being God, is holy according to his order of being; holy angels, though created and deriving their holiness from God, nevertheless are holy as is fitting for their order of being.

Therefore, freedom that a person has is analogically related to freedom that God has. For example, consider the redeemed in heaven. We know that the redeemed in heaven are free from sin. Let us apply the Arminian definition of freedom of the will to the redeemed in heaven. Are they fully able to choose between options, either of which could be actualized in reality? Being informed by the Bible that the redeemed shall have the type of holiness necessary for living perfectly in God's presence for all eternity, we have to answer that they

will not have the freedom to choose the contrary. There is no real chance the redeemed in heaven will ever choose to sin. This being the case, the aforementioned definition of freedom would not apply to the redeemed in heaven either.

Edwards also argued that if it is countered that God is indeed worthy of praise though He is necessarily holy and upright, but that humans have to make themselves praiseworthy through free choices, then man has a greater claim to esteem and commendation than God does.<sup>31</sup> This too is absurd. Edwards puts forth many similar examples and arguments, including the holiness of Christ in His incarnation, to show that the Arminian definition of free will is untenable and fails to account for what we know to be true from the Scriptures. He also deals with the obverse of this: that sinners must be able to choose not to sin if they are to be blamed for their own evil. He gives many examples from the Scripture that sinners such as Judas who are given over to sin through the judgment of reprobation, are nevertheless blameworthy for their sinful condition.<sup>32</sup>

Luther argued that the only truly free being in the universe is God. Wrote Luther, "It now then follows, that free-will is plainly a divine term, and can be applicable to none but the divine Majesty only: for He alone 'doth, (as the Psalm sings), what He will in Heaven and earth.'"<sup>33</sup> Most certainly we need a definition of free will that applies to the one truly free being in the universe!

D. A. Carson claims that a definition of free will that includes the ability to actualize the contrary possibility is not compatible with God's sovereignty. Carson writes, "If its [free will's] essence is the absolute power to contrary, a logical contradiction is entailed when this absolute power to contrary is coupled with a divine providence which in some sense foreordains all things with certainty."<sup>34</sup> Carson concludes that the definition that requires the "absolute power to the contrary" cannot be maintained in light of the Biblical material he discusses.<sup>35</sup>

#### Summary Statement

*I will not labor any longer over this point that Edwards makes so well. The definition of freedom of the will that requires the real ability to choose the contrary and the possibility of that contrary choice being actualized fails to account for what is stated in the Bible. If a reprobate sinner is powerless to choose holiness and virtue, his sin is still blameworthy. If the righteous in heaven have no desire or opportunity to choose sin and evil, their holy estate is still praiseworthy. The same goes for God Himself and the holy angels. If Satan has neither desire, opportunity, nor ability to choose good and virtue, Satan is still blameworthy for his evil. If humans born after the nature of Adam had no opportunity to choose to be born sinless, they are nevertheless blameworthy for their sin. I make these statements in light of what we know the Bible teaches. Since the definition of freedom that Arminians typically assert fails to account for these realities, the definition must be rejected. ❀*

#### A Simple Alternative

Edwards proposed a most simple solution to this debate. He proposed a simple definition of freedom: "the ability to do as one pleases." He states this fact: "The plain and obvious meaning of the words freedom and liberty, in common speech, is power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has to do as he pleases."<sup>36</sup> He pointed out the obvious fact that "freedom" is something a person who has a will has, not something the will itself has: "That which has the power of volition or choice, is the man or the soul, and not the power of volition itself."<sup>37</sup> So if a person has the opportunity to choose whatever seems best to him, he is thereby freely exercising his volition.

#### Summary Statement

*Edwards' simple definition of freedom of the will is the ability to choose as one pleases. This definition, along with the definition that a person chooses according to his greatest desire at the moment, resolves the many problems that the Arminian definition created. Now, God is free because He freely chooses all that is holy and virtuous from His perfectly holy nature. The same goes for holy angels and the redeemed*

in heaven. Likewise all other moral agents are free to choose as they see fit, including the wicked. ❀

### The Underlying Concern

Why would anyone reject this simple solution? The answer lies in certain theological priorities. If this definition is accepted, then it would follow that no sinner would ever choose to come to God on His terms: *“because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7, 8)*. If this be true, then Luther’s position against Rome that salvation is fully an act of God is true because the dead sinner is not about to cooperate in his own salvation. This idea is as repulsive to many evangelicals today as it was to the Roman Catholic Church when Luther first taught it. But what really matters is what the Bible says.

### Implications

Free will is not the simple answer to important theological questions that people think it is. It raises more questions and complications than it answers. I set about to study this matter in great detail over ten years ago. I read the best material I could find, much of it cited in this article. The bottom line for me is that we need to accept what the Bible teaches and not try to escape from clear Biblical passages through philosophical speculation. I am not minimizing the sincere desire people have to answer the difficult question about God’s relationship to time, evil, and human choices. But I am saying that outside of Divine revelation in Scripture there are true mysteries.

People, for example, want to know why Adam and Eve sinned. The doctrine of free will that many cherish is deemed the obvious answer. I would affirm that Adam and Eve freely chose to rebel against God. Some suggest that this proves God’s ultimate commitment to the principle of self-determination. But the Bible does not teach that God is committed to a principle of creaturely

self-determination that explains the whole history of sin and redemption. If God left all sinners the full power of self-determination, then all would be damned. We need to be delivered by God out of our self-determined course on the road to hell.

But, back to the question, why did Adam and Eve sin? Let’s push the question back further. Why did God allow the Serpent into the Garden? Why did not God utterly destroy Satan when he first rebelled? The Bible does not say. Whatever is not revealed is a mystery, and the answers to the last two of these questions are mysteries.

How could it be that Adam and Eve, being created good by a good God, chose to do evil? Doesn’t that violate Edwards’ definition of choosing what one desires? The real question from Edwards’ perspective would be where did Adam and Eve get such a desire, being innocent? They obviously had the desire or they would not have acted on it. Since the Bible only explains this in terms of the Serpent enticing Eve to question God’s word, we must accept that answer. What is not revealed is rightly described as “mystery.”

Some argue that if God could have kept Adam and Eve from sinning He would be morally obligated to do so. He did not, so obviously God was incapable of keeping Adam and Eve from sinning because if He did He would have violated the right of self-determination of the creature. Do you realize how many unbiblical presumptions this thinking involves? Where does the Bible say God is morally obligated to keep His creatures from sinning if He has the power to do so? That is a philosophical premise that is not taught in Scripture. Where does the Bible teach that God has obligated Himself to the principle of the creature’s right to self-determination? That is a philosophical premise that is not taught in Scripture. Where does the Bible assert that evil is due to some inability in God to prevent it? It does not; that is philosophical speculation not taught in Scripture.

I am not saying that it is wrong to ask philosophical questions and to seek their answers. I am saying that it is

wrong to demand that other Christians believe what one teaches under pains of being declared heretical or unbiblical **based on** philosophical questions not raised or answered in Scripture. That is precisely what prompted me to write this article. At the very least, consider what the Bible teaches:

*Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4-6)*

Would it not be kind and charitable to allow Christians to literarily believe what this says without being forced to redefine it based on someone’s philosophical speculations?

### Conclusion

I share this discussion to further demonstrate how exceedingly complex the discussion of free will is when engaged in from a philosophical perspective. I want to emphasize again, this is a philosophical discussion about matters that the Biblical writers appeared to be unconcerned about. Secular writers and philosophers often address the issue of free will. For example, consider the following from Stephen Hawking, the famous scientist who wrote *A Brief History of Time*:

Of course, you could say that free will is an illusion anyway. If there really is a complete theory of physics that governs everything, it presumably also determines your actions. . . . So one way to look at it is that we say humans have free will because we cannot predict what they do. However, if a human goes off in a rocket ship and comes back before he set off, we will be able to predict what he will do because it will be part of recorded history. Thus in that situation, the time traveler would not in any sense have free will.<sup>38</sup>

Philosophers advance a similar argument only concerning God's foreknowledge. If God foreknows all things, then all things have been certain since before the foundation of the world. Somewhere we have to leave off philosophical speculation and accept the testimony of Scripture. I appreciate D. A. Carson's appeal to Scripture and suggestion that it teaches both Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

I am bemused when I hear Arminians suggesting that so-called "Calvinists" are always bringing philosophical considerations to the table. What they do not realize is that their free will idea is philosophical. Philosophers with no interest in theology discuss it constantly. Conversely, monergism and synergism are purely theological issues. Secular philosophers have no concern whether salvation is an act of God alone, or a cooperative effort between man and God.

Edwards' simple definition of free will gives us a great starting point to discuss the matter of God's grace in salvation. If everyone is free to choose according to his or her own desires and nature, then how does a sinner choose to come to God on His terms? The answer has to do with God's sovereign grace.

We need to decide between the Roman Catholic doctrine of synergism, and the doctrine of "grace alone" taught by the Reformation. This debate centers on the issue of human ability or human inability as the case may be. The next CIC article will explore issues about salvation and whether it is an act of God, or a cooperative effort. I will further defend the idea that the whole human being, including the faculty of the will, is in bondage to sin and death and is incapable of extracting himself of it. Salvation is an act of God alone.

### End Notes

1. See Bob DeWaay; *The Hebrew Lament and the Problem of Evil*; Critical Issues Commentary issue 64: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue64.htm>
2. The passages she cited are Genesis

3:17; Genesis 4:17; Hosea 8:4; John 15:6; Romans 2:28; Romans 8:7, 8 (which is ironic since these verses teach human inability); Romans 11:19; and John 3:16. None of these passages directly mention the human will.

3. Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology*, Lecture 2 "Conditions for Moral Obligation" 25, from Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 8.0 [CD-ROM] (Rio WI: The Master Christian Library Series, 2000).
4. Council of Trent, Canons on Justification, Canon II. Anathema means "cursed by God."
5. Council of Trent, Canons on Justification, Canon V.
6. Council of Trent, Canons on Justification, Canon III.
7. Pelagius denied that the sin nature was passed down from Adam to his descendents. <http://www.passionfor-grace.org.uk/doctrine3.html>
8. This was written in 1754 and is usually referred to as "The Freedom of the Will."
9. Jonathan Edwards *A Careful and Strict Inquiry . . .*, from Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 8.0 [CD-ROM] (Rio WI: The Master Christian Library Series, 2000). 8.
10. Ibid. 10.
11. Ibid. 37.
12. Ibid. 38.
13. Ibid. 39.
14. Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free – A Balanced View of Divine Election*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999) 177.
15. Ibid. 176.
16. I have benefited greatly by many of Norman Geisler's books and teachings. That I am disagreeing with him on this point should not be taken to mean I do not appreciate and respect Geisler, because I do. However, in *Chosen But Free* his theological prejudices appear to cloud his usual logical brilliance.
17. Edwards, 40.
18. Here is how he shows their contradictions: "If there be an act of the will in determining all its own free acts, then one free act of the will is determined by another; and so we have the absurdity of every free act, even the very first, determined by a foregoing free

act. But if there be no act or exercise of the will in determining its own acts, then no liberty is exercised in determining them. From whence it follows, that no liberty consists in the will's power to determine its own acts; or, which is the same thing, that there is no such thing as liberty consisting in a self-determining power of the will." Ibid. 41.

19. Ibid. 51.
20. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1976) 72, 73.
21. Geisler, 233.
22. Luther, 75.
23. Geisler denies he is an Arminian and calls himself a "moderate Calvinist." Calvinists nevertheless consider his doctrine Arminian. I am calling him that because of his defense of synergism.
24. Edwards, 67.
25. Ibid. 72.
26. Ibid. 76.
27. Ibid. 82, 83.
28. Ibid. 95.
29. Titus 1:2
30. Edwards, 131.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid. 147, 148.
33. Luther, 76. The passage he cites is this: "Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Psalm 135:6).
34. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility – Biblical Perspectives in Tension*; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981; 1994 edition) 206.
35. Ibid. 209.
36. Luther 32.
37. Ibid. 33.
38. Stephen Hawking with Leonard Mlodinow, *A Briefer History of Time*; (London: Bantam, 2005) 115.

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