

SOTERIOLOGY (92)

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer once quoted Dr. John Dick, who in *Lectures on Theology*, once wrote, “Upon such a subject, no man should be ashamed to acknowledge his ignorance. We are not required to reconcile the divine decrees and human liberty. It is enough to know that God has decreed all things which come to pass, and that men are answerable for their actions” (Vol. 1, p. 243).

Having said this, it does become our responsibility before God to study to “rightly divide” all biblical matters (II Tim. 2:15). We have been commanded by God to grow in knowledge (II Pet. 3:18). We do know that one of the reasons God gave His Word was to teach us doctrine (II Tim. 3:16). Thus, even though we will never fully understand this issue, it is our responsibility to learn as much as we can so our faith is an accurate reflection of what the Scriptures reveal.

Perhaps the issue of faith is more connected to this doctrine than we might realize, as John Dick said, “If everything in religion were level to the comprehension of reason, there would be no room for faith. It is better to believe humbly, than to reason presumptuously” (*Ibid.*, p. 243).

In approaching this subject, it is legitimate to ask a question and then search for biblical answers to the question. This will be our approach to this matter.

QUESTION #28 – Does the Bible teach that God created beings having a will?

There is only one, true biblical answer to this question and it is YES ! Created beings most definitely have a will.

- 1) That may be seen in Adam and Eve . Gen. 2:15-18
- 2) That may be seen in Satan . Isaiah 14:13-17
- 3) That may be seen in angels . Jude 6
- 4) That may be seen in Israel . Josh. 24:15
- 5) That may be seen in unbelievers . James 4:4; Rev. 9:20-21
- 6) That may be seen in believers . Rom. 7:16, 19; James 4:13-17

An honest examination of the Bible does reveal that created beings do have a will.

QUESTION #29 – Does the fact of the will make the created being accountable to God?

Again, the Bible’s answer to this question is YES !

SOTERIOLOGY (93)

The use of the will in rebellion against God ended up with Satan and one-third of all angels being cast out of heaven (Rev. 12:4). Certainly the way the angels used their will made them accountable and condemnable.

The fact that God has allowed His program to include Gentiles is clear evidence that Israel has an accountable will. It was her refusal to respond to God that prompted God to temporarily sever His program from Israel (Matt. 23:37-38; Rom. 11:20).

The fact that God will punish the unrighteous is clear indication that unbelievers are not robots, but have a will that is accountable and answerable to God (II Pet. 2:12-13). Also, the fact that a lost person can apparently somewhat earn his eternal status in hell indicates that a lost person does have a will that is accountable to God (Rev. 20:11-15; Luke 12:45-48).

When it comes to the believer, the reward system clearly indicates that believers have a will that is accountable and answerable to God (Rom. 14:10-12; I Cor. 3:11-13; II Cor. 5:10; II Tim. 2:19-21).

All of these facts combined certainly lead us to conclude that men were created with a will and that will is accountable to the God who created it.

QUESTION #30 – What do we mean by the term “will of man”?

It is generally accepted that when we use the words “will of man” we are referring to one’s perceived ability to make a voluntary choice.

A voluntary choice naturally presupposes the choosing or selecting something and the refusing or rejecting something else.

QUESTION #31 – Does man have a free will?

It is right at this question that great theological controversy begins. In 1525, Martin Luther, the famed Reformer, wrote a very famous book which he titled *On the Bondage of the Will*. Martin Luther wrote this book in response to a book which had been written by a leading humanistic scholar named Desiderius Erasmus, who in 1524 wrote *On the Freedom of the Will*.

Erasmus was a Roman Catholic scholar who was attempting to combat Luther’s position that salvation was solely by God’s grace, by saying that man’s free will played an important role in salvation. In 1525, Luther responded by writing his famous book which argued that man’s will was so utterly in bondage to sin that only God’s action could save a lost soul. Luther defended the position that salvation, the entire process from beginning to end, was solely the gracious work of God.

SOTERIOLOGY (94)

Who is right, Luther or Erasmus? Did the Roman Catholic Renaissance humanistic scholar, Erasmus, have a better perspective and grasp of theology than the converted Roman Catholic Reformer, Martin Luther?

Actually, the purpose of Systematic Theology is to carefully study the Bible so that we may determine what God specifically says. So the issue of “free will” is not a debate between Luther and Erasmus, it is an issue of the Bible.

QUESTION #32 – What do we mean by the term “free will of man”?

A free will, in an absolute sense is a sovereign will. In order to have a “free will” in an absolute sense, the will must be completely “free” from any influence or restriction and is subject to no one or nothing. In order for a will to be completely and totally free, it must be capable of making any choice in total free sovereignty.

Free will, in an absolute sense, would mean man, according to his own will, chooses to decide everything. It would mean that man, according to his will, is completely sovereign over everything and is servant of nothing. It would mean that man has an absolute freedom to choose without any restrictive influences. In an absolute free will, the will is not controlled by the mind but in fact controls the mind. The will is not controlled by passions but totally controls passions. In an absolute free will, the will is in total free control over every choice. It is subject to nothing and is totally and completely free.

Now the question arises, do we, as human beings, have an absolute free will? Another way to ask this question would be, are we free to choose whatever we want to choose whenever we want to choose it apart from any restrictions? The answer to this question is no! We do not have a free will in an absolute sense and we are not able to choose things free from any restrictions.

Let us illustrate this point. When it comes to an occupation, you are not completely free to choose your occupation. Your choice of occupation is influenced and colored by your personality, by various influences and by your ability. For example, some people could never choose to be a musician. Some do not have any musical ability whatsoever and no amount of training could ever make them a professional musician. Some people could never be a doctor. They do not have an ability to grasp biological matters and cannot cope with the sight of blood. For such a person being a doctor is not an option. Some could never choose to be a great athlete.

For example, when it comes to running, medical science has determined that in the early stages of a child’s life there are observable muscles in the child’s legs called fast twitch and slow twitch muscles. Most people have about a 50/50 grouping. However, it has been observed that in Olympic competitors, the natural muscle scheme is different. World class sprinters have 80% fast twitch and 20% slow twitch. World class marathoners have 80% slow twitch and 20% fast twitch. These were genetically programmed into the child at birth. Now we can dream about being an Olympic competitor all we want and we could even try and train to become one. But the hardcore reality is unless we have the right muscle groupings, we will never be one.

SOTERIOLOGY (95)

We will never qualify for an Olympic team; we are not free to choose to compete in the Olympics. Truth is our will is not absolutely free. We are not in a position to sovereignly choose.

Free will, in a limited sense, would mean man, in accordance with his character, nature and make-up, is free to decide and make choices. Decisions and choices can be made by the will of a man, but those decisions and choices will be consistent with his nature, his character and his limitations. Within the sphere of a man's personality, character and nature, he is free, in a limited sense, to make choices. Generally speaking, once a man's character, nature and personality have been established, it is relatively simple to predict what those choices will actually be. Apart from the transforming work of the Spirit of God, choices will be colored by the limitation of one's own character.

A good illustration of this may be made concerning a deer or elk. A deer or an elk has the freedom to choose and act within the character and nature of a deer or elk. When it comes to being free to choose a meal, a deer or elk is free to choose what it will eat. A deer, being a browser, will choose to nibble on bushes, shrubs and a variety of plants. An elk, being a grazer, will choose to eat grasses and crops. Within the context of the animal's nature, it is free to choose. However, neither a deer nor elk will choose to eat meat because neither animal has a nature that is carnivorous. In fact, many a deer and elk have starved to death with another dead deer or elk lying right at its feet. If the animal had total sovereign freedom, it would choose to eat the meat and live, but the animal does not have the nature of being a meat-eating animal. As a result, it is not free to choose beyond the boundaries of its own nature and therefore, it will not eat meat. If, somehow, the deer or elk could be given the nature of a bear, it would eat meat. However, a deer and elk will always be governed in its choices of food by its own nature. Is the deer or elk free to choose in an absolute sense? The answer is no. It is not free to choose that which is beyond its own nature. Free will, in a limited sense, means man is free to make choices in the context of his own nature. Man's will is limited, not absolute !

QUESTION #33 – Does the Bible teach that man has a “free will” in an absolute sense or a limited sense?

If we are honest with the Bible, we will admit that the Bible teaches that the only will that is absolute is the will of God ! God's will is absolute ; the will of angels and men is limited .

A good illustration of the limitations of a will may be seen in Satan, originally the greatest and highest angel ever created. Satan was so majestic that God said of him, “you had the seal of perfection” (Ezek. 28:12). Satan had a will that wanted to be “like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). If his will were absolute, he makes it very clear how he wanted to use it. But his will was not absolute, it was limited. Even though he wanted to choose something, his will was subject to God's will and he was cast out of heaven.

The Bible is very clear to point out that man's will is not only not free, in an absolute sense, but it is greatly limited and influenced in a variety of ways and by a variety of things:

SOTERIOLOGY (96)

- 1) The will of man is influenced by the heart (Prov. 4:23; Mark 7:21).
- 2) The will of man is influenced by his nature (I Cor. 2:14; Psalm 51:5).
- 3) The will of man is influenced by his sin (Eph. 2:1-2).
- 4) The will of man is influenced by Satan (John 8:44; II Cor. 4:3-4).

Man is obviously and biblically free to choose in a limited sense and will always make choices consistent with his nature, which, theologically speaking, is depraved, alienated from God and lost.

QUESTION #34 – Does the Bible teach that a man is saved by his will or by God’s will?

Again, if we are honest with the Bible and if we are willing to accept the biblical record, we must admit that the Bible clearly establishes that salvation was not by the will of man, but was from the will of God.

- 1) Jesus said the Spirit of God causes a person to be born again, much like the wind blows—completely in its own direction, over which man has absolutely no say or control (John 3:6-8).
- 2) Jesus said, “All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me...” (John 6:37).
- 3) Jesus said, “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing...” (John 6:39).
- 4) Jesus said, “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44).
- 5) Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:63-65).
- 6) Paul said that those who believe on Christ “had been appointed to eternal life” (Acts 13:48).
- 7) Luke wrote that when a person is saved and believes on Christ, it is the Lord who opens the heart so that one may respond (Acts 16:14).
- 8) Paul specifically wrote that it was not the will of man that determined salvation, but the will of God (Rom. 9:16).