

Man's Will before and after the Fall

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 21, [Nu 25](#) July 23, 2006GG

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions. ([Ec 7:29](#))

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely?? die. ([Ge 2:16-17](#))

Before the fall what was the state of man's will, his innermost state of mind that determined what he did and why he did it? What is the state of man's will subsequent to the fall? Is there a difference? These questions take us to some of the most disputed theological ideas in the entire history of Christianity.

Paul's emphasis on salvation being of God's will, not man's, in Romans and elsewhere indicates that there was some difference of opinion even in the first century. In this case we have the witness of inspired New Testament writers to know the right view of the question. Perhaps the first major controversy on this question after the apostolic age surfaced about four hundred years later. W. G. T. Shedd concisely identifies the errant views of Pelagius in this controversy.

Pelagianism the theological position associated with the fifth-century monk Pelagius. He is best known for his views on the freedom of the will and original sin. Pelagius's teaching is elaborated in great detail in the writings of his nemesis Augustine, who vigorously opposed it. Pelagius affirmed the freedom of the will, which for him meant that a person always has the ability to choose good as well as evil. That is, for Pelagius the power of contrary choice is essential to free moral agency. According to Pelagius, a person is always "able to sin and able not to sin" (*posse peccare et posse non peccare*). Naturally, such a view of freedom carries implications for the doctrine of original sin. Pelagius denied that human beings derive a corrupt nature from Adam; if they did then they would not be responsible for their sins. Rather, Adam's transgression served merely as a bad example to his descendants. Against the charge that Pelagius's teaching rendered grace to no effect, he countered that he affirmed divine grace in at least two senses. First is a grace of nature, meaning that God graciously constituted humans after such a fashion that they could meet the moral requirements placed on them. Second is special grace, which helps people to do what they could do without it but are more readily able to do with it. In this latter category are Christ's example, the Scriptures, the sacraments of the church, etc. Pelagianism was condemned officially at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and again at Orange in 529.⁴¹

What is wrong with Pelagius' ideas? First of all he has a fall without a fall. Man had full freedom to will and perform good and evil before the fall, and he has equally free will and ability to do both good and evil after the fall. Thus for Pelagius there is actually no fall whatever.

Norman Geisler examines this question regarding the nature of man's will subsequent to the fall.

This is the view that all events, including man's behavior, are caused (determined) by God. One of the most famous advocates of this view was the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards. He maintained that the concept of free will or self-determinism contradicted the sovereignty of God. If God is truly in control of all things, then no one could act contrary to his will, which is what self-determinism must hold. Hence for God to be sovereign he must cause every event, be it human or otherwise.

...Like natural determinism, theistic determinism may be objected to on several grounds. First, to view freedom as that which one desires is inadequate. People do not always do what they desire; no one desires to carry out the garbage or clean a dirty oven. Further, people often desire to do what they do

not decide to do, such as taking revenge on someone for wronging them.

Second, according to self-determinism, Edwards' position evidences a misunderstanding of free will. The acts of free human beings are not uncaused but self-caused. To say they are self-caused is not to say that they arise out of nothing or exist prior to themselves. Such would be an uncaused or self-caused *being*, which is nonsensical. However, self-determinism maintains that man's exercise of his freedom is self-caused *becoming*, which is not contradictory. In other words, persons exist and can freely cause their own actions (not their own being).

Third, Edwards' argument suffers from a faulty view of man. Human beings are not like a machine (scale) which cannot be moved until some outside force tips it in one direction or another. Rather, man is a person created in the image of God as a personal living soul ([Ge 1:26-27](#); [2:7](#)), and he retains this image even after the fall ([Ge 9:6](#); [1Co 11:7](#)). This image includes the ability to make choices and act upon them. Hence since man is personal, it is at best inadequate to illustrate his behavior by impersonal, mechanical models, such as a scale.

And fourth, Edwards is mistaken when he argues that human freedom is contrary to God's sovereignty. God sovereignly gave man his freedom by creating him a free creature, and God sovereignly continues to allow man to exercise his freedom by sustaining him moment by moment in existence ([Col 1:17](#)). Thus the sovereignty of God is not thwarted by human freedom but glorified through human freedom. For God gave man free will, he sustains man so he can act freely, and he brings about all his purposes without violating man's free will.⁴²

I would not entirely agree with Geisler in his arguments against Edwards⁴³, but I believe in the main he carries the point. If the theistic determinism view of Edwards and others is held to logical consistency, making God cause every thing that occurs (human behavior and otherwise), there is no logical or rational way to avoid making God the ultimate cause of sin. If God cannot be sovereign without causing everything that occurs, advocates of this view cannot avoid the conclusion that God caused the fall and thus God, not man, is responsible for sin. If God caused sin, Paul argues in [Ro 3:1-10](#), then God cannot judge man for those sins. The Edwards view that any form of human freedom compromises God's sovereignty builds on a faulty view of divine sovereignty. It demands that God must control—actively and causatively—everything that occurs, or else God is not in control and thus not sovereign. Consider the clearly self-contradictory conclusion of the theistic determinism view. God caused Edwards and others to believe this view. He equally caused me and others not to believe it. Then why does He also cause those who hold to the view to try to convince those of us who do not believe it that we should change our minds? According to their belief, God caused us not to believe it, so why should they go against God's sovereign determinism and try to convince us of something that God has deterministically caused us to believe? When applied to the real world, the idea appears just as nonsensical as this example illustrates. Consider an even more absurd thought. If everything man does is caused by God, then God created man, gave him the law in the Garden of Eden, forbade his eating of the fruit, then caused him to eat of it, and had the audacity to condemn him for eating it. According to theistic determinism, Adam was merely doing what God caused him to do. Thus you have the absurd conclusion that if man refused to eat the forbidden fruit, he was obeying the stated law of God. However, if he ate the fruit in violation of that law, he still obeyed God by doing what God caused him to do. How can we avoid the absurdity of such an idea? More to the point, how can thinking Bible reading people believe such an idea?

The whole Genesis account of man's fall lays specific responsibility on man, not God, for breaking the divine law. [Ec 7:29](#) corroborates the point, along with every New Testament passage that deals with the fall and the divine judgment that man's sin brought upon humanity. Man is held responsible for his sin, not God (either in His reveal will or in His imaginary "secret will"), I find it fascinating that folks who build their deterministic theology on God's "secret will" seem to know so much about it. Apparently

they think that God revealed the secret to them! Scripture never discusses or teaches anything about a divine “secret will,” especially a will that is contradictory to the revealed will of God in Scripture. This notion grows out of Andrew Fuller’s rejection of Biblical doctrine among the Baptists of his day and his perverting the gospel from a proclamation to a proposition. Followers of the Fuller theology will tell us that God “wishes” the salvation of all humans, but has purposed the salvation of the elect only, justifying the two divergent ideas by laying the divine wish for the salvation of all to God’s revealed will and the effective salvation of the elect to God’s secret will, or vice-versa. Forgive me if I cannot follow this illogical reasoning.

If we read the Genesis account of man’s creation and fall, and follow that study with a careful examination of other passages that develop and reason from those events, we may safely reach some sound and logical Biblical conclusions. A fall really occurred! Before the fall in his created state, man was perfectly capable of obeying the divine law, and he was under no divine compulsion or secret orchestrating foreordination to break that law. God created him upright and responsible. He freely made a choice—he was not divinely compelled—to break the law. We may conjecture as to why he made such a self-mutilating and self-destructive choice, but Scripture simply does not say, so we should not superimpose our unsanctified guesses onto the written account of Scripture.

Scripture further leaves no doubt that immediately upon eating the forbidden fruit, man fell. His immediate reaction as recorded in Scripture reveals his fall. It was decisive and immediate. To that moment he lived under the divine blessing of life in fellowship with his Creator. Immediately he began to die. Many marginal references in Bibles, Hebrew linguistic works, and conservative commentaries affirm that the Hebrew grammar of the divine curse “...thou shalt surely die,” conveys a progression that began immediately, “...*dying thou shalt die,*” and culminated several centuries later when Adam physically died.

The reality of the fall appears clearly in Scripture, but it is often obscured by the aberrant thinking of such men as Pelagius, James Arminius, and Andrew Fuller, all of whom to one extent or another reject that a fall truly occurred. In their view man could keep the divine law prior to the fall, but he chose not to do so. He broke the law, but he merely set a bad example by his action, so his offspring need merely ignore Adam’s bad example and keep the law, the new law given to them to believe and obey the gospel. For this reason George Ella refers to Fuller’s and similar ideas as “neonomianism,” a new law, one contrived by these men and imposed upon a man who, in their theology, didn’t fall too far. He merely stumbled and is quite capable of getting up and moving ahead with God. In this theology man doesn’t need a new life, a true Savior who replaces man’s sins with His righteousness; man merely needs a fresh start, a “new beginning.”

Ella’s depiction of “neonomianism” refers to the Fuller idea that the gospel is to be “offered” to unregenerate people, and that salvation occurs only upon their response to it in faith. In other words one law; “Do not eat; if you eat, you shall die,” goes away, and is replaced by “Believe this gospel, and live; reject it and die for ever in hell.” If man fell so as to lose his ability to obey God and even to will to obey, how can the unregenerate, unsaved person, believe and obey the gospel *before* he is born again? The law that man was able to keep, but chose not to keep, is replaced in this faulty theology with a law that man cannot keep until after he has been born of God.

The Biblical truth is that a fall occurred. Man had a free will before the fall, and he chose by himself—not by a secret divine deterministic decree or cause—to break the divine law given to him. He suffered precisely the consequences that God warned him would occur because of his sinful action. Today, he lives with a fallen nature, and that fallen nature produces a fallen will. Oh, it is still free, but its abilities have been substantially altered. No creature is capable of willing or acting above or outside its nature. We may wish to do so, but our physical nature precludes us from “leaping tall buildings in a single bound.” In spiritual matters man’s will reflects man’s fallen nature. While he could obey the divine law

in the Garden, now he cannot. He has fallen!

In our next chapter we shall distinguish between man's free will and the Pelagian concept known as "free moral agency."

Elder Joe Holder