

What Is Free Will?
The biblical vs humanist view

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[Unlocking Grace](#)

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The Biblical View: Part One

What is free will according to Scripture?

Free will has been the storm center of controversy for centuries. Volumes have been written on it, and heated debates continue in theological circles.

Much of the heat dissipates when terms are clearly defined.

What is the will? What does “free” really mean?

Does the will govern us, or are we governed by some other faculty?

We encounter little controversy over the definition of *will*. It is the faculty by which we make choices. The disagreements concern the meaning of *free*.

Natural Liberty vs Moral Liberty

One must distinguish between *natural* liberty and *moral* liberty. "Natural liberty" refers to ordinary decisions involving our material welfare and human relationships; what we eat for breakfast, who we marry, and whether to continue reading this page all fall into the category of natural liberty.

The term "natural" can also include religious activities. Unsaved people can memorize Scripture, sing hymns, or join a church. Sinners have a conscience and daily make positive moral choices. They can choose between telling the truth or a lie. No one can deny the *natural* freedom of the will.

Moral freedom is where controversy erupts. The following questions highlight the issue:

- Apart from sovereign grace, is fallen man able to submit to God, trust in Christ, and desire holiness as his supreme value?
- Can his free will generate faith and repentance?

The nature of man and the image of God

What does it mean to be the image of God?

In Genesis 1:27 we read, “*So God created man in His own image.*” The Bible defines a human being as a creature made in God's image. In reverse, we can say "image of God" means a human being. Suppose two angels were talking and one asked what God is like. The other might reply, "Over *there is an example. It's called a human being.*"

The term "image of God" defines our essence as beings. As the image of God, we are responsible to reflect what He is. Since this is the reason for human existence, our responsibility can never change... no matter what else happens. God does not have a body. He is infinite. So the image of God must refer to His nature as holy.

God's holiness and true moral freedom

Is God absolutely holy? Does God have a free will? Of course! He is the most free being in existence. Can God lie? No. Why not? Nothing in His holy character finds a lie attractive. He cannot desire falsehood.

Moral free will means absolute purity and freedom from sin because of a holy nature. From this, we see what cosmic treason it is to be anything other than holy. Ungodliness is a denial of our core essence and the supreme insult to our Creator. The notion of moral free will as a faculty suspended between moral righteousness and evil is fiction.

The moral condition of the will

Is the will morally neutral?

"But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Romans 6:17-18

The will is tied to a person's true nature. In this sense, the will is not the ruling faculty in man. It is not free in the sense of autonomy.

This distinction explains why God tells the truth, the devil does evil, and sinners love sin. They like it that way because of their respective natures. Each person chooses freely according to their desire, without compulsion, and is tied to their true nature.

Second, the will of man is not morally neutral. If it were, we must assume his character is also morally neutral. Nothing in Scripture, reason, or human experience supports such an assumption.

What is a will?

Would you like to see your free will? Stand in front of a full-length mirror. The reflection is your free will. It is you, the totality of everything you are. Now look at the mirror itself, not just your reflection. Your will is like the mirror. It reflects what you are. If it functioned independently of a person's nature, then how could it be said to reflect the person himself? This may explain why the Bible discusses character in depth but says little about the will.

The effects of the fall on human will

Loss of freedom

As a person moves away from God, he moves away from freedom. His bondage increases. By the very definition of *bondage*, he becomes unable to return to God. His will still exists and functions, though it is aimed toward more slavery. From this, we deduce [The Doctrine of Total Depravity](#).

Responsibility and ability

Question: Can God rightly hold him responsible for turning back to God, he lacks the ability to do so? Should God command him to do right, even if he can no longer will to do so? Man is still the image of God, even though that image is marred.

Answer: Man's responsibility is based on his identity, not his current moral ability.

Additionally, fallen man retains some knowledge of God through creation and conscience. Everyone has some degree of light, although they choose to suppress it.

Man's moral responsibility to obey God has nothing to do with his free will

The Bible never suggests our responsibility is based on free will. No logical connection exists between responsibility and free will. One might as well say a debtor is not responsible for his debt if he cannot pay.

Did the will escape the fall?

Bible teaching on the moral state of the carnal mind indicates the will is as bound by the fall as any other faculty. It is dominated by carnal reason, cannot submit to God's law, follows the thought-forms of the world, is God's enemy, under the dominion of Satan, and defiled. Religious humanists who declare the moral freedom of the will must either show from Scripture that the will is not a function of the mind or demonstrate that it is the only human faculty to escape the fall.

Sinners are unable to generate faith or repentance without divine intervention

This is a consequence of our bondage to the carnal nature. By grace, God changes the direction of a sinner's will without forcing it.

In what ways is the will free or bound?

The will of man is free to act according to his desires without compulsion from anything outside. God does not force our will in conversion but works indirectly through influences in our nature. It is never free, however, from the overruling providence of God.

"In him we live and move and have our being." Acts 17:24

Free will and the sovereignty of God

God works indirectly. One of his tools is the free will of man. God uses man's choices, even the fall into sin, to accomplish his plan for history. This involves His ultimate glory and the demonstration of His attributes, such as grace, judgment, and love.

Conclusion

The will is never autonomous, either from God or from the person himself. By falling into sin, man lost the ability to will or do anything to convert himself or submit to God's authority. He did not lose, however, his responsibility to God.

From this first section we learn:

The will is the mental faculty that chooses according to the nature of the being it represents

- Moral freedom of the will and holiness are inseparably linked.
- The will is not the governing factor in man. His nature is.
- Man is essentially the image of God, fallen or not. As such, his responsibility to obey God cannot change however much his will may be in bondage.
- God is perfectly just in commanding fallen man to do what he cannot do.
- Scripture and reason require us to reject any definition of free will involving autonomy.

See Second Section below

The Humanist View: Part Two

What is humanist free will?

Humanism takes two forms, secular and religious. Both assume the will of man is autonomous. According to humanism, man's will is the ruling faculty in his nature, independent from any influences outside of itself. If the respective parts of human nature were a train, humanists would identify the will as the engine. They see the will as the driving force of human nature. In their thinking, man's will drags the other faculties behind it by its autonomous power.

Secular vs religious humanism

Secular and religious humanism arrive at the assumption of autonomy from different approaches. The secular humanist holds to autonomy simply because he believes there is no God. He sees the glory of man as the only worthwhile pursuit because nothing else is supreme.

These assumptions pervade modern culture. In films, the hero lifts himself to victory by the force of his will. He may have a few character flaws, but he has even these under control. The power of the mind to control reality permeates science fiction. The message is clear: Man's potential is limitless. All he needs is to reach into the depths of his own being and draw upon the goodness and power hidden there, and the victory will be his.

For the purposes of this study, secular humanism concerns us little because it is atheistic. We are more concerned with religious humanism because of its insidious influences on evangelicals today. More theological errors stem from wrong views about free will than any other teaching.

The myth of autonomous will

People would rather change God than themselves. The religious humanist looks on the will as a special ground on which God never treads. He feels it is a contradiction to call the will *free* unless it is exempt from divine control. This would be a kind of cosmic cheating.

A common teaching is “*God is a gentleman, He does not violate our free will.*” Secular humanism views man's will as morally neutral. They see babies as morally neutral. They then deduce that their environment and parental influences explain human behavior, not innate tendencies. Because of the doctrine of the fall of Adam, religious humanists have difficulty holding to a view of man's will as morally neutral. They come close to it though, by saying man is born with a mere *bias* toward sin. This allows them to

accommodate biblical teaching about sin without abandoning the basic assumption of autonomy.

The Bible explodes this notion with many texts like, “*There is none who does good, no, not one.*” Romans 3:12

This is why legalism among Christians is so despicable. Like a flower, it may impress at first glance. Then we notice its roots feeding off the muck of *humanist* presuppositions.

Cultural influences on modern views

The assumption of autonomy is the default setting of human nature. The fall of Adam programmed human nature to assume its own autonomy because autonomy was the whole idea behind the fall in the first place.

The fall produced not only sin but also a syndrome of delusions regarding man's own righteousness and his power to produce it. This is why all religions, except biblical Christianity, are works-righteousness systems.

For a fuller discussion of this point, see [*Many Paths to God? A Christian Response*](#)

Arminian Free Will and Religious Humanism

With the influence of modern culture and the default setting of human nature, it is no wonder religious humanism permeates large sectors of Christianity. As a result, an entire theology has grown up to defend it. Some arguments sound plausible until we examine them closer. It is important for Christians today to be aware of these influences and know how to refute them so believers can be *sound in the faith*.

Six common errors about free will

Commands prove ability?

This error assumes *responsibility* proves *ability*. One hears, “*God would never command a person to do what he could not do.*” Or, “*God would only tell a person to repent and believe if they could do it.*” We might as well say a debtor is not responsible for his debt unless he can pay.

As we pointed out, God will never lower His standards of holiness just because His image fell into sin. Man's inability always stems from his corruption, not from any unreasonable demand of his Creator. Did God bestow the Ten Commandments on the Jews, thinking they would obey them? Did he suppose they could?

Here are two reasons why God gave commandments to fallen man:

- To vindicate the righteousness of God

- To expose the sinfulness of man.

Neither proves man's moral free will.

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? 20-... for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Romans 3:4-6, 20

Even more striking is Paul's statement that the carnal mind is unable to submit to God's law. If the will is part of the mind, then fallen man, without grace, is unable to choose submission to God.

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. Romans 8:7

Paul is saying the entire Old Testament was given to prove man's inability to obey God. It hardly makes sense, therefore, to quote from any moral law to prove an ability to obey.

Do commands to repent prove the ability to do that?

The commands to repent and believe are as much a part of the Law as any other. Fallen man is likewise unable to obey these without grace.

A determined will is not free?

This objection assumes the will is morally neutral, neither good nor evil. If so, we would have to say the will of God, as well as the will of Christ, angels, and believers in heaven are not free since they are predetermined to good only. Likewise, we would have to say demons are not responsible for their actions because their wills are entirely determined to evil.

Confusing natural and moral liberty

Choosing our breakfast or which car to buy is part of our natural liberty. Conversion to Christ, though, is a uniquely spiritual experience without precedent in the natural world, which we can hardly equate with a breakfast menu. Nor does choosing a car involve surrendering the ego to the Supreme Authority. Comparing the miracle of conversion to natural liberty is inappropriate.

Does God violate free will?

He does not. If God were to grab a person's will and twist it by direct physical force, such an act would be a "violation." It is not a violation of the will to change the person's inner nature to generate new perceptions and desires.

Is free will essential to the image of God?

Some teachers claim man's status as God's image must include moral free will. If God is free, then man must be *free* also. This confuses "free" with "autonomous" or "uncaused." God is the only autonomous being in the universe. He is uncreated. It is a contradiction to say man is a creation of God and then claim man's will is uncaused or autonomous. The Bible shows man is still the image of God even though fallen. Yet elsewhere the Bible shows man's entire nature is bound by sin. Apparently Bible writers saw no necessary connection between free will and the image of God.

Summary and Conclusions

Fallen man's basic assumption about himself is his own autonomy. This results in two forms of humanism: secular and religious. While the secular form presents a challenge in the public domain, the religious form is even more insidious. The devastating effects of the autonomous view lead to legalism, liberalism, and other theological errors. Christians need to be aware of the arguments for religious humanism and how to refute them.

From this we learn:

- The will is governed by the nature of the person and is not autonomous.
- All forms of humanism, whether secular or religious, stem from the delusion of autonomy.
- Commands and exhortations from the Bible do not prove moral free will.
- Predetermination of will does not contradict the idea of freedom.
- Natural freedom of will does not prove moral freedom.
- God's influence on man's nature to change the direction of his will is not a violation of free will.

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