

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Radical Depravity

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*I once was rebellious, corrupted by sin,  
Pursuing the Devil's dark path,  
Oblivious, dead to the state I was in,  
An object of God's dreadful wrath.*

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The tremendous optimism that characterized the period immediately prior to World War I, reflected in the writings of H. G. Wells and many others, and that originated in the Age of Enlightenment when Rousseau wrote imaginatively about the noble savages of North America living without the encumbrance of civilization, has disappeared almost entirely. Man is no longer seen as perfectible. Despair has overtaken the humanist idealism of those days, and sin has come to be recognized as a depressing fact of life.”<sup>1</sup>

That analysis of the current cultural mood by Canadian writer Arthur Custance may not be universally valid, since not everyone is willing to call sin, sin. Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic of Topeka, Kansas, asked the famous question: “Whatever became of sin?” even as he called for its rediscovery as a necessary category for understanding human beings.<sup>2</sup> Menninger himself is an example of the new, increasingly realistic outlook, and Custance’s analysis is close enough to what many intelligent spokespersons are saying to be taken seriously. Certainly, in our day humanity no longer seems perfectible, despair has replaced the idealism of the last two hundred years, and sin is no longer reckoned a totally meaningless category for understanding human existence. This new despairing mood is part of what is sometimes called postmodernism.

Yet the point of this chapter is not merely that men and women sin. That truth is established every moment of every day by what we do and by what we see others do. It is documented in our newspapers and magazines, on television and in our own hearts. Nor is the point of this chapter merely that because we sin we are sinners. That is as obvious as saying that the man who murders is a murderer or that the person who steals is a thief. The point of this chapter is more significant than that. Here we are dealing with

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Bantam, 1978). He argues: “There are no substitutes for words like ‘sin’ and ‘grace’” (54).

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the nature and extent of sin, and the point is that we are all radically sinful, so much so that we cannot take even the smallest of steps toward God unless he first intervenes.

This is the Bible's teaching. As early as Genesis 6 we are told that "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). A person whose heart can only incline toward evil certainly does not and cannot seek God. Jeremiah wrote,

The heart is deceitful above all things  
and beyond cure.  
Who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9).

Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Paul, quoting from two of the best known psalms (Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3), declared:

There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands,  
no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,  
not even one (Rom. 3:10-12).

This teaching is the first of the famous "Five Points of Calvinism," commonly called "total depravity." But that wording of the point, like the wording of most of the others, is a bit misleading. To most persons "total" means "utterly," and utter depravity would mean that people are as bad as they can possibly be. That is not true, of course. Given the finite circumstances of our lives, civil laws, and various social and religious restraints, each of us could undoubtedly be much worse than we are. What total depravity is meant to convey is the idea that sin has affected the whole person down to the very core or root of his or her being. That is why many writers prefer the words "radical depravity" or "radical corruption" instead.

Lorraine Boettner, whose book on *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* has probably helped as many people to understand the Calvinistic system as any other modern work, wrote:

This doctrine of Total Inability, which declares that men are dead in sin, does not mean that all men are equally bad, nor that any man is as bad as he could be, nor that anyone is entirely destitute of virtue, nor that human nature is evil in itself,

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nor that man's spirit is inactive, and much less does it mean that the body is dead. What it does mean is that since the fall man rests under the curse of sin, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation.<sup>3</sup>

## THE FALL OF THE RACE IN ADAM

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The Bible's teaching about sin begins with the story of the fall of humanity recorded in Genesis 3, a story that highlights several steps in the first temptation: 1) doubting the benevolence of God, 2) doubting the Word of God, and 3) aspiring to be as God. But that is not our primary concern here. Our concern here is with the *result* of the Fall, its consequence not only for our first parents but also for the race. And what is significant about the Genesis account in this regard is that the consequence of Adam and Eve's sin is described as death—not mere imperfection or a weakening of one's innate capacity to do good, but death: God said, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17).

Most Bible readers recognize that God's warning was not merely about physical death (though it was that) but included spiritual death as well since Adam and Eve showed their newly won depravity by attempting to hide from God when he came to them in the garden, and by blaming each other and the devil for their sin when God confronted them about it. Genesis is pointing to Adam and Eve's moribund condition before God after having fallen. It is a way of saying that Adam and Eve were as unable to love and rightly respond to God as a corpse is unable to respond to attempts at resuscitation.

This is a point the world does not even begin to grasp, even though many may think of sin as a not entirely useless concept for understanding human beings. For that matter, it is something that even many Christians do not grasp. Sinners? Yes, we admit that much because the Bible calls us sinners, but we would like to think that we are able to help ourselves, at least if we are aided by God. However, that is not the Bible's view of sin. According to the Bible, to be a sinner is not merely to be morally imperfect or to be unable to achieve one's full potential without God. It is rather a description of human beings in an utterly ruined state, a state from which we are unable to deliver ourselves and in which we might all have been left to perish, and justly so.

If sin is only an imperfection, a marring of something once perfect and able to become so again, then it is not really right to call it sin, or even to look down on it as something less

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<sup>3</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 61.

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desirable than the next inevitable stage of evolution. This line of thinking eliminates the possibility of any meaningful talk about virtue. Nobody can be said to be better or worse than someone else. No action can ever be viewed as inherently wrong. Yet if sin is only an imperfection to be eliminated over time as a result of the inevitable upward movement of the race, why has so much evil been around for so long? If sin is merely imperfection, why hasn't the imperfection been eliminated long before this? Looking at the historical record honestly, is it even possible to say that there has been such a thing as progress? Are we really morally better than our predecessors? Are we more virtuous than the Greeks? Are we more noble even than the barbarians? It is hard to say so.

This fact alone suggests that sin is a much greater problem than the secularist allows, and it pushes us to seek a better understanding of the Bible's teaching about it.

## PAUL'S TEACHING IN EPHESIANS 2

One place to look for a better understanding of the nature and effect of sin is Ephesians 2:1-3, a passage in which Paul describes the condition of an individual before he or she became a Christian. He says four things about it:

1. *The sinner is "dead in ... transgressions and sins."* That is precisely what we found in Genesis, of course, and the Genesis account of the Fall is certainly one important source of Paul's teaching. Dead in transgressions! Dead in sins! This leads to the observation that in the entire history of the human race there have been only three basic views of human nature apart from God's grace, namely: 1) that man is well, 2) that man is sick, and 3) that man is dead.

The first view is the view of all *optimists*. Optimists may vary as to how healthy they believe human beings are. Some would argue that people are very, very well. Others would admit that they are not as morally healthy as one day they may be. But all would say that the world is getting better and better, and the reason is that there is nothing basically wrong with humanity. This view—as suggested at the beginning of this chapter—is being abandoned, at least by thinking people.

The second view is that man is sick, even mortally sick. This is the view of *realists*. They observe rightly that if people are as healthy as the optimists say, then surely war, disease, starvation, poverty, and other problems we face should have been fixed by now. Since such problems have not been fixed, realists conclude that something is basically wrong with human nature. Still, they contend, the situation is not hopeless—bad, or even desperate, but not hopeless. People are still around, after all. We have not yet blown ourselves off the surface of the planet. No need to call the mortician yet!

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The third view, which Paul articulates in classic language in this passage, is that man is neither well nor sick. He is dead, at least so far as his relationship to God is concerned. Abraham Kuyper observed that, prior to regeneration, a sinner “has all the passive properties belonging to a corpse. ... [Therefore] every effort to claim for the sinner the minutest co-operation in this first grace destroys the gospel, severs the artery of the Christian confession and is anti-scriptural in the highest degree.”<sup>4</sup> Like a spiritual corpse, he is unable to make a single move toward God, think a right thought about God, or even respond to God—unless God first brings this spiritually dead corpse to life. And this is exactly what Paul says God does.

2. *The sinner actively practices evil.* There is something even worse about humanity, according to the biblical view. Ephesians 2:1 teaches that human beings are spiritually dead. But this is a strange kind of death since, although the sinner is dead, he is nevertheless up and about, actively practicing sin. Paul says that we “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, ... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (v. 2). To put it differently, though the sinner is indeed dead to God, he nevertheless is very much alive to wickedness.

John Gerstner, who was a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, compared Paul’s description of our sinful state to what horror stories call a zombie. A zombie is a person who has died but who is still up on his feet walking around. It is a gruesome concept, which is why it appears in horror stories. But it gets worse. This upright, walking human corpse is putrefying. It is rotting away, which is probably the most disgusting thing most people can imagine. But this is a fair description of what Paul is saying about human nature in its lost condition. Apart from Jesus Christ, these sinning human corpses are “the living dead.”

3. *The sinner is enslaved.* Another way to speak of our sinful state is to say that men and women are enslaved to sin, so that they cannot escape from it. Peter wrote, “a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Pet. 2:19). What has mastered us? There is a tradition in the church that identifies the Christian’s three great enemies as “the world, the flesh and the devil”; with that in mind, what Paul seems to be saying in Ephesians 2, though he does not use the word *slave*, is that in our natural state we are in bondage to each one of these three.

We are enslaved to the world because we follow “the ways of this world” (v. 2). We think as the world thinks, without regard for our relationship to God or our final destiny; and

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (1900; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 338.

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because we think as the world thinks, we also act as the world acts. We are enslaved to the flesh because our natural desire is to “[gratify] ... the cravings of our sinful nature and [follow] its desires and thoughts” (v. 3). We want what we want, regardless of God’s law or the effect that what we want to do has on other people. Jesus said, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). We are enslaved to the devil because, just as we follow the ways of this world, so also we follow “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Eph. 2:2). We are Satan’s playthings, and never so much as when we are unaware of his presence. Paul wrote to Timothy that sinners are taken “captive” by Satan “to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).

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4. *The sinner is by nature an object of God’s wrath.* The worst thing about our sinful condition apart from God’s grace in Jesus Christ is that we are objects of God’s wrath. Most people can hardly take this seriously. They do not take wrath seriously because they do not take sin seriously. But if sin is as bad as the Bible declares it to be, nothing is more reasonable than that the wrath of a holy God should rise against it. The Old Testament uses more than twenty words to express the idea of God’s wrath, and more than six hundred important passages deal with it. There are other equally important passages in the New Testament. The Bible says, “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:30-31).

## PAUL’S TEACHING IN ROMANS 3

A third key passage for understanding what the Bible has to say about sin is Romans 3:9-20, in which the apostle Paul summarizes the condition of every human being apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. According to Paul, Jews are no better off than Gentiles, and Gentiles are no better than Jews. Instead, all are alike under sin, and all are thus subject to the wrath and final judgment of Almighty God:

There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands,  
no one who seeks God (Rom. 3:10-11).

This is a serious, indeed a devastating picture of the race, because it portrays human beings as unable to do even a single thing either to please, understand, or seek after God. Sin corrupts the heart, the mind, and the will:

1. *The moral nature: None are righteous.* In the first part of his summary of the hopeless condition of humanity, Paul speaks of our moral nature and concludes that we are unrighteous. This does not mean merely that we are a bit less righteous than we

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need to be to please God and somehow get to heaven. When Paul says that there are none righteous he means that, from God's point of view, sinners have no righteousness at all. The words "from God's point of view" are not meant to suggest that any view other than God's is ever ultimately valid, but merely to make clear that it is from this viewpoint that we need to assess the situation. If we assess the human condition from our perspective, we will always conclude that at least some people are good—simply because they are better than what we think we have observed in others.

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Our problem at this point is that we think of the good we can do—our righteousness—as the same thing as God's righteousness, when actually it is quite different. We assume that by accumulating human goodness we can please God. Taken this way, human righteousness is like Monopoly money. It is useful in the game we call life; however, it is not the currency of God's kingdom. God requires divine righteousness, just as in America one needs United States dollars to pay bills. We find Paul making this distinction a bit further along in Romans, writing of Israel's failure to find God: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:3). That is, Israel wanted God to accept its own currency rather than the currency that Christ alone could provide them. This is not simply Israel's problem, but the failure of our entire race. As Paul goes on to say, "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:12).

2. *The sinful mind: None understands.* The second pronouncement Paul makes about human beings in their sin is that no one understands spiritual things. Again, we need to think of this as a lack of spiritual perception and not merely a lack of human knowledge. If we think on the human level, comparing the understanding of one person with that of another, we will observe that some people seem to understand a great deal about God. They probably do, but only from a human point of view. What we need to see is that in spiritual matters, no one either truly understands or seeks God.

The best commentary on the phrase "no one who understands" is the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians were mostly Greeks and therefore highly prized the wisdom of the philosophers, as virtually all Greeks did. But Paul writes that when he was with them he did not attempt to impress them with such wisdom; rather, he determined to know nothing among them "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). He explains his decision in two ways. First, human wisdom has shown itself bankrupt so far as coming to know God is concerned. Paul says:

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The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18-21).

In making this indictment, Paul was only echoing what the Greeks had concluded themselves. The best of the philosophers knew that they had been unable to discover God by philosophy.

The second way Paul explains his decision to know nothing among the Greeks but Christ crucified is the statement that spiritual things can be known only by God's Spirit. He writes that “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

This does not mean that a person cannot have a rational understanding of Christianity or of what the Bible teaches apart from the illumination of his or her mind by the Spirit. In one sense, a scholar can understand and even teach theology as well as any other branch of human knowledge. An unbelieving philosopher can lecture accurately on the Christian idea of God. An unbelieving historian can analyze the causes of the Reformation and describe the meaning of justification by faith. At universities such as Oxford and Harvard, non-Christian professors present the doctrines of Christianity so brilliantly that even Christians marvel at their lectures. But such professors do not believe what they are teaching. If they are asked their personal opinion of what they present, they say that it is all nonsense. It is in this sense that they, not being “spiritual,” are unable to understand Christianity.

3. *The captive will: None seeks God.* Here again we must not think in merely human terms. If we do, we will conclude, contrary to Paul's teaching, that “seeking after God” is an accurate description of human history. Human beings are religious. There are very few genuine atheists. Even primitive tribes have well-developed religious concepts. However, as anthropologist Robert Brow argues in *Religion: Origins and Ideas*, the study of primitive peoples suggests not that the human race has moved from primitive conceptions of God to higher conceptions of him — thus seeking after “God” constantly, but rather that the human race consistently has



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been running away from ideas of a high and holy God. Brow argues that primitive peoples generally have a truer picture of God than we do, though they do not worship him. They believe in a great and true God who stands behind their pantheon of animistic deities or lesser gods, but they do not worship this God because they do not fear him as much as they do the immediate and hostile powers.<sup>5</sup>

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In any case, what people actually do with their “religion” today is use it to avoid any real contact with God. They may say that they have been seeking him in the Baptist church, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal church, the Methodist church, or any other church. But what they are actually doing is running away from God. They make the round of the churches, and at the end of the line, they look around to see if anyone is watching and then jump back in at the beginning. They are not seeking God. They are running away from God. They are using religion to disguise their true intentions.

According to Romans 3, no one unaided by God 1) has any righteousness by which to lay a claim upon God, 2) has any true understanding of God, or 3) seeks God. But what we do not have, and cannot and have not done, God has done for those who are being saved. First, God sought us. We ran from him, but as the “Hound of Heaven” God pursued us relentlessly. If God had not pursued us, we would have been lost. Second, God gave us understanding. He did it by making us alive in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a result of which our eyes were opened to see things spiritually. This does not mean that we understand things perfectly, but what we do understand about God we now truly do understand—in the sense that we believe it and respond accordingly. Third, God has given us a righteousness that we did not have and could never have had on our own—his very own righteousness, which is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the ground of our salvation.

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

If we are as desperately lost in sin as the Bible says we are, then no one can come to God, choose God, or even believe on Jesus Christ and be saved—unless God first makes that person alive in Christ and draws him. But this is what troubles many. It does not seem consistent with what they know of their ability to choose what they want to choose and reject what they want to reject. What is more, it seems inconsistent with the many free offers of the gospel found throughout Scripture. The Bible says we are “dead in ... transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1), that no one can come to me “unless the Father ...

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Brow, *Religion: Origins and Ideas* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1966).

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draws him" (John 6:44), but the Bible also gives numerous invitations for sinners to repent of their sins and come to Christ. What about invitations like:

Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;

and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat! (Isa. 55:1)?

Or Jesus' words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). One of the last verses in the Bible says, "Whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). Don't these verses imply that every person has a will that is able to choose Christ when the gospel is presented? And if they do, how can it be said, even on the basis of Romans 3:11, that "no one seeks ... God"?

We might suspect that a question as important as this must have been discussed often in church history, and this is indeed the case. In fact, the best way of approaching the subject is through the debates that took place between the theological giants of past days.

1. *Augustine and Pelagius.* The first important debate on this issue was between the British monk Pelagius and the great Saint Augustine of Hippo, toward the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. Pelagius argued for the existence of free will. He did not want to deny the universality of sin, at least at the beginning. He knew that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In this he wanted to remain orthodox. But Pelagius could not see how we can be responsible for something if we do not have free will in that matter. If there is an obligation to do something, he argued, there must be an ability to do it. Pelagius said that the will, rather than being bound by sin, is actually neutral—so that at any moment or in any given situation it is free to choose either good or evil.

This position worked itself out in several ways. For one thing, it led to a view of sin as only those deliberate and unrelated acts in which the will actually chooses to do evil. Thus any necessary connection between sins, or any hereditary principle of sin within the race, going back to Adam, was forgotten. Pelagius argued further that:

- 1) The sin of Adam affected no one but himself;
- 2) Those born since Adam have been born into the same condition Adam was in before his fall, that is, into a position of neutrality so far as sin is concerned; and
- 3) Today human beings are able to live free from sin, if they want to.

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This is probably the root view of most people today, including many Christians. But it is faulty because it limits the nature and scope of sin and because it leads to a denial of the necessity of God's unmerited grace in salvation. Moreover, even when the gospel is preached to a fallen sinner (according to this view), what ultimately determines whether he or she will be saved is not the supernatural working of God through the Holy Spirit but rather the person's will, which either receives or rejects the Savior. This gives human beings glory that ought to go to God.

In his early life Augustine had thought along the same lines. But as he studied the Bible, he came to see that Pelagianism does not do justice either to the biblical doctrine of sin or to the grace of God in salvation. Augustine saw that the Bible always speaks of sin as more than mere isolated and individual acts. It speaks of an inherited depravity as a result of which it simply is not possible for the individual to stop sinning. Augustine had a phrase for this fundamental human inability: *non posse non peccare*, which means "not able not to sin." Unaided by God, a person simply is unable to stop sinning and choose God. Augustine said that man, having used his free will badly in the Fall, lost both himself and his will. The will is free of righteousness, but enslaved to sin. It is free to turn away from God, but not to come toward him.<sup>6</sup>

As far as grace is concerned, Augustine saw that apart from grace no one can be saved. Moreover, it is a matter of grace from beginning to end, not just prevenient or partial grace to which the sinner adds his or her efforts. Otherwise, salvation would not be entirely of God, God's honor would be diminished, and human beings would be able to boast in heaven. Any view that leads to such consequences must be wrong, for God has declared: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Eventually Augustine won the day and the church condemned Pelagius at the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 418. But the church gradually drifted back toward Pelagianism in the Middle Ages.

2. *Luther and Erasmus.* At the time of the Reformation the battle erupted again, first between Martin Luther and the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, and then later between the followers of Jacob Arminius and the followers of John Calvin.

The more interesting debate was between Luther and Erasmus. Erasmus had been sympathetic to the Reformation in its early stages, because, like most perceptive people of the time, he saw that the church badly needed to be reformed. But Erasmus did not

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<sup>6</sup> The subsequent history of Augustine's thinking on this subject is traced in Philip Graham Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State*, Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 67-76.

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have Luther's spiritual undergirdings, and at last he was prevailed upon to challenge the Reformer. Erasmus chose to write upon the freedom of the will. He said that the will must be free—for reasons similar to those given by Pelagius. Still, the subject did not mean a great deal to Erasmus, and he counseled moderation, no doubt hoping that Luther would do likewise.

It was no small matter to Luther, however, and he did not approach the subject with detachment. Instead, he approached the matter zealously, viewing it as an issue upon which the very truth of God depended. In one place, in the midst of demolishing the Dutch humanist's views, Luther wrote: "I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account—that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue."<sup>7</sup>

In this work, *The Bondage of the Will*, which he considered his greatest theological writing, Luther did not deny the psychological fact that men and women do make choices. This is so obvious that no one can deny it. What Luther insisted, however, was that in the specific area of an individual's choice of God or failure to choose God, the will is impotent. In this area Luther was as determined to deny the will's freedom as Erasmus was determined to affirm it. We are wholly given over to sin, said Luther:

[A] man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief ... being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness of volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter. He goes on willing and desiring to do evil; and if external pressure forces him to act otherwise, nevertheless his will within remains averse to so doing and chafes under such constraint and opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, our only proper role is humbly to acknowledge our sin, confess our blindness, and admit that we can no more choose God by our enslaved wills than we can please him by our sullied moral acts. All we can do is call upon God for mercy, knowing that as we seek to do so, we cannot even call for mercy unless God is first active to convict us of sin and lead us to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

3. *Edwards's "Freedom of the Will."* It is sometimes suggested that although we have free will in many areas, we do not have free will in all areas. That is, we can choose

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), 319.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

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what we want in some things—little things like what we will select from a menu, what color tie we will put on, what job we will take—but we do not have free will in the important areas. A person with an intelligence quotient of 120 cannot make it 140 by the exercise of free will. Someone who is not an Olympic class athlete does not have the free will to run a mile in four minutes or the 100-yard dash in nine seconds. In exactly the same way, none of us by the mere exercise of our will can choose God.

This explanation is attractive. However, Jonathan Edwards's treatise on "The Freedom of the Will" persuades us to take a different approach, not on the basic issue or in our conclusions, but in the way the will is defined.

It can hardly escape anyone who looks at this treatise that on the surface Edwards seems to be saying the opposite of what Augustine and Luther said. Augustine said that the will is not free. Luther titled his study *The Bondage of the Will* in opposition to Erasmus's *Freedom of the Will*. But Edward's treatise is called "A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will."<sup>9</sup> Of course, the title does not specifically state that Edwards is asserting the will's "freedom" (though he actually does so in the treatise), only that he is going to investigate the prevailing notions about the will's freedom. But it is not by chance that Edwards uses words entirely opposite from Luther's. In the end, Edwards comes out on the same side as Luther and all the great biblical theologians before him. But along the way he makes a unique contribution to the subject for which the idea of the "freedom" of the will is appropriate.

First, Edwards *defined the will*. It is strange that no one had done this previously. Everyone had operated on the assumption that we all know what the will is. We call the will that thing in us that makes choices. Edwards saw that this was not accurate and instead defined the will as "that by which *the mind* chooses anything." That may not seem to be much of a difference, but it is a major one. It means, according to Edwards, that what we choose is not determined by the will itself (as if it were an entity to itself) but by the mind. We choose what we think is the most desirable course of action.

Second, Edwards spoke of *motives*. Why is it that the mind chooses one thing rather than another? Edwards asked. He answered that the mind chooses what it does because of motives. The mind is not neutral. It thinks some things are better than other things, and because it thinks some things are better than other things it chooses what it judges to be best. If a person thought one course of action was better than another, and yet chose the

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<sup>9</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, rev. Edward Hickman with a memoir by Sereno E. Dwight (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 3-93.

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undesirable alternative, the person would be acting irrationally or, to use other language, he would be insane. Does this mean that the will is bound, then? Quite the contrary. It means that the will is free. It is always free. It is free to choose (and always will choose) what the mind thinks best.

But what does the mind think best? Here we get to the heart of the problem as it involves seeking or choosing God. When confronted with God, the mind of a sinner never thinks that God's way is good. The will is free to choose God. Nothing is stopping it. But the mind does not regard submission to and service of God as desirable. Rather, it turns from God, even when the gospel is presented most winsomely. It turns away because it does not want God to be sovereign over it. It does not consider the righteousness of God to be the way to personal fulfillment or happiness. It does not want its sinfulness exposed. The mind is wrong in its judgments, of course. The way it chooses is actually the way of alienation and misery, the end of which is death. But human beings think that sin is best. Therefore, unless God changes the way we think—which he does by the miracle of the new birth—our minds always tell us to turn from God. And we do turn from him. Loraine Boettner says, "As the bird with a broken wing is 'free' to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but not able. How can he repent of his sin when he loves it? How can he come to God when he hates him?"<sup>10</sup>

Third, Edwards distinguished between *moral and natural inability*. Because man's inability is moral and not natural, according to Edwards, the individual is responsible for the choices he or she makes. Here is a simple illustration: in the natural world there are animals that eat nothing but meat. They are called carnivores, from *caro, carnis*, which means "meat." There are other animals that eat nothing but grass or plants. They are called herbivores, from *herba*, which means vegetation. Imagine taking a lion, who is a carnivore, and placing a bundle of hay or a trough of oats before him. He will not eat the hay or oats. Why not? It is not because he is physically or naturally unable to eat them. Physically, he could munch on the oats and swallow them. But he does not and will not, because it is not in his nature to eat this kind of food. Moreover, if we were to ask why he will not eat the herbivore's meal, and if the lion could answer, he would say, "I can't eat this food, because I hate it. I will only eat meat."

Now think of the verse that says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8), or of Jesus' saying, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (John 6:51). Why won't a sinful person "taste and see that the Lord is good" or feed upon Jesus as "the living bread"? To use the lion's words, it is because he "hates" such food. The sinner will not come to Christ because he does not

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<sup>10</sup> Boettner, *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 62.

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want to. Deep in his heart he hates Christ and what he stands for. It is not because he cannot come naturally or physically.

Someone who is opposed to this teaching might say, “But surely the Bible says that anyone who will come to Christ may come to him. Didn’t Jesus invite us to come? Didn’t he say, ‘Whoever comes to me I will never drive away’ (John 6:37)?” The answer is, “Yes, that is exactly what Jesus said, but it is beside the point.” Certainly, anyone who wants to come to Christ may come to him. That is why Jonathan Edwards insisted that the will is not bound. However, this liberty is what makes our refusal to seek God so unreasonable and increases our guilt. Who is it who wills to come? The answer is, No one, except those in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed the entirely irresistible work of the new birth, so that, as a result of this miracle, the spiritually blind eyes of the natural man are opened to see God’s truth, and the depraved mind of the sinner, which in itself has no spiritual understanding, is renewed to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior.

## OLD AND PRACTICAL DOCTRINE

This is not new teaching, of course, although it may seem new to many who hear it for the first time in our superficial age. It is merely the purest and most basic form of the Christian doctrine of humanity embraced by most Protestants and even (privately) by some Catholics. Perhaps some examples from church history will help:

The Belgic Confession (1561) has this statement: “We believe that through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease, wherewith even infants in their mother’s womb are infected, and which in man produces all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof, and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind” (Art. XV: “Original Sin”).

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1562) say: “The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us [that is, being present beforehand to motivate us], that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that will” (Art. 10).

The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647) states, “The sinfulness of that state whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed,

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disabled, and made opposite to all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually” (A. 25).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) says, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (Chap. 9, Sec. 3).

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The Baptist Confession (1689) says, “Our first parents, by this sin, fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and we in them, whereby death came upon all: all becoming dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body” (Chap. 2: “Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of Punishment Thereof”).

There may be people who are willing to admit that the inability of the will to choose God or believe in Christ is the prevailing doctrine of the church, and perhaps even the true teaching of the Bible, but who are still not certain of the value of this doctrine and may even consider it harmful. “If we teach that men and women cannot choose God, don’t we destroy the main impetus to evangelism and undercut the missionary enterprise?” they ask. “Isn’t it better just to keep quiet about it?” It should be a sufficient answer to say that the very person who gave us the Great Commission said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

But another way to answer is to say that, contrary to being a hindrance, this doctrine is actually the greatest possible motivation for evangelism. If it is true that sinners, left to themselves, never naturally seek out God, then how are they ever going to find God unless people like ourselves, sent by God, carry the gospel to them? It is by the preaching of the gospel that God calls people to faith, and the one who obeys God by taking the gospel to the lost can know that God will work through this means.

“But surely we must not tell the sinner that he cannot respond unless God first does a work of regeneration in him!” someone argues. “That will make him complacent, or even despairing.” On the contrary, that is exactly what the sinner needs to know. For it is only in such understanding that sinful human beings learn how desperate their situation is, and thus how absolutely essential God’s grace is. If we are hanging on to some confidence in our own spiritual ability, no matter how small, we will never seriously worry about our condition. There will be no sense of urgency. Life is long. There will be time to believe later on. We can always bring ourselves to believe when we want to—perhaps on our deathbed, after we have done what we wish with our lives. Or so we think. At least we can take a chance on it. But if we are truly dead in sin, as the Bible says we are, and if that involves our will as well as all other aspects of our psychological and spiritual make-up,



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then we will find ourselves in near despair. We will see our state as hopeless apart from the supernatural and totally unmerited workings of the grace of God.

And that is what God wants! He will not have us boasting of even the smallest human contribution to salvation. It is only as we renounce all such vain possibilities that he will show us the way of salvation through Christ and lead us to him.

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Perhaps one final illustration will serve to confirm this point. During the 1840s, when revival was sweeping through Savannah, a young man came to the Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer to complain about his Calvinism. “You preachers are the most contradictory men in the world,” he said. “Why, you said in your sermon that sinners were perfectly helpless in themselves—utterly unable to repent or believe—and then turned round and said they would all be damned if they did not.”

Palmer sensed that his visitor was wrestling with the great issues of life and death. To make sure that the man really dealt with the gospel, he gave him an indifferent response: “Well, my dear sir, there is no use in our quarreling ...; either you can or you cannot. If you can [repent and believe], all I have to say is that I hope you will just go and do it.” Palmer describes what happened next:

As I did not raise my eyes from my writing ... I had no means of marking the effect of these words, until, after a moment's silence, with a choking utterance, the reply came back: “I have been trying my best for three whole days and cannot.” “Ah,” [I] responded, raising [my] eyes and putting down [my] pen, “that puts a different face upon it; we will go ... and tell the difficulty straight to God.”

We knelt down and I prayed as though this was the first time in human history that this trouble had ever arisen; that here was a soul in the most desperate extremity, which must believe or perish, and hopelessly unable of itself, to do it; that, consequently it was just the case for divine interposition... . Upon rising I offered not one single word of comfort or advice... . So I left my friend in his powerlessness in the hands of God, as the only helper. In a short time he came through the struggle, rejoicing in the hope of eternal life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Morgan Palmer, quoted in T. C. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of B. M. Palmer* (1906), quoted in Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 373-374.

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Far from keeping us away from Christ, the true knowledge of radical depravity actually helps us abandon ourselves to his grace.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Boice, J. M., Ryken, P. G., & Sproul, R. C. (2002). *The doctrines of grace: rediscovering the evangelical gospel*. Crossway Books, chapter three.