

36. Do We Have “Free Will”?

No, has to be the Lutheran answer if one wants to identify with Martin Luther. One of Luther’s greatest books is *On the Bondage of the Will*. He was arguing with a great scholar, Erasmus, and both of them overreached in writings well worth reading. We can let Luther take care of his own affairs and then consult his record only where it reaches to help us.

Whenever a complex and uncomfortable Christian teaching comes along, it is profitable to begin by asking what it is out to protect, what limits it is setting. In this case we can begin by saying what the absence of free will is *not*. It is not a claim that we are robots, unable to think for ourselves, decide for ourselves, take responsibility for ourselves. Such notions about limits go against almost everything Christians assert about human responsibility.

Instead, this assertion exists to remove the temptation to think that morally we can do everything we want. Instead, we stand with the apostle Paul, who confessed that the good that he would he did not, and that which he knew he should not, that he did (Romans 7). He was not writing autobiography so much as analyzing the human condition.

When an athlete is elected to the Hall of Fame, we often get a testimony like, “My parents taught me that anything I willed and really worked for, I could attain.” No doubt a million other parents said the same thing and half a million kids had just as much will and worked just as hard, but they are not in the Hall of Fame. Such sayings are sort of humble expressions of profound pride. “I did it!” A five-foot-five collegian is not going to become a professional middle linebacker because of will. A pipsqueak-voiced person is not going to get to the Metropolitan Opera stage by willing.

So, morally—and now the case is universal—despite the best of intentions, we *cannot* always make the right decisions and follow them. That is a dangerous-sounding phrase, because it can breed apathy, loss of interest, failure to want to be what God intended us to be. Celebrating the will without claiming that it is simply and absolutely “free”—and freedom of the will means nothing if it is not simply and absolutely free—can be liberating.

Here’s why: God takes the broken beings that we are and makes us straight so we can fulfill divine purposes. Lutherans live by such biblical words as, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)). God plays tricks on the Strong Man, the Super Woman. God works through those who do not matter much in the world. With divine help and mercy, they are free.

It’s time to quote a Lutheran charter document, the Augsburg Confession (XVIII.1–2) “A human being has some measure of free will, so as to live an externally honorable life and to choose among the things reason comprehends. However, without the grace, help, and operation of the Holy Spirit a human being cannot become pleasing to God, fear or believe in God with the whole heart, or expel innate evil lusts from the heart.”

Humans have all the freedom of the will they need to meet at least minimal standards of moral expectations. It’s only where it counts, the free will that effects rightness with God, that will has to be seen as totally limited or, in Luther’s phrase, “bound.”

In the end, Lutheran teaching on “original sin” is not so much a statement about the human as it is about God, the absence of God, and how God would address the human in need. It turns out that God would meet him or her with liberating rescue. Original sin is a grim and joyless teaching if we use it to concentrate on how morally bad we are, but it is anything but that when it is used

to point to how good God is and what God intends to do with messed-up humans, humanity, and “me.”