

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	45		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	John 6:35-70; Romans 8:7, 8		
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What About Free Will?¹

24. Lord's Day

Question 65. Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence does this faith proceed?

Answer: From the Holy Ghost, (a) who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. (b)

(a) Eph. 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Eph. 2:9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. Eph. 6:23 Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. John 3:5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Philip. 1:29 For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; (b) Matt. 28:19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Matt. 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. 1 Pet. 1:22 Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: 1 Pet. 1:23 Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

“Justification by faith only is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of sola fide is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of sola gratia.” So wrote J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston in the preface to their translation of Luther’s magnum opus *De Servo Arbitrio* (The Bondage of the Will.)² *“The reason why grace is so little appreciated in our days is that the transcendent majesty and sovereignty and holiness of God are so little appreciated, and we do not see much more than a half step between God and our sinful selves.”*³ Where does *faith* originate? Is it a gift of God or is something we do in order for God’s grace to be activated? Is *faith* wrought in us by the Holy Spirit or does salvation ultimately depend on some innate ability we all possess?⁴ To affirm that men possess such an ability flies in the face of texts like John 6:43, 65 and Romans 8:7; 9:16. It denies the Biblical teaching that we are utterly helpless in and of ourselves. The Bible categorically declares that we are *dead* in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). Why is it that *some* people respond to the Gospel and others do not? Is it because those who respond are righteous or more intelligent than those who do not? Of course not, no Christian would claim that. Then what is the difference? Some Christians who accept the Arminian notion of unrestricted *free will* hold that God makes a universal provision of salvation, and waits to see who will respond to His gracious offer. But, in the Arminian scheme of things, in order for salvation to be secure, we must *cooperate* with God’s grace. R.C. Sproul makes this poignant observation, “Man in

his fallen state must reach out and grasp this grace by an act of the will, which is free to accept or reject this grace. Some exercise the will rightly (or righteously), while other do not. When pressed on this point, the Arminian finds it difficult to escape the conclusion that ultimately his salvation rests on some righteous act of the will he has performed.”⁵ In John 6:41-65 we have one of the clearest statements in the Bible on the question of whether or not we possess the natural ability to please God.

What is meant by the *free will*. Negatively, it is not: (1) Metaphysical; it is not due to the loss or absence of any component element of our own being, nor to any incompatibility between the component elements in our being, nor to any limitation belonging to our being as creatures. (2) It did not belong to man originally. We must distinguish between what man is unable to be, become, or do because of his finitude, and the moral inability arising from sin. In his original state man had plenary ability to fulfil all of God’s demands. To maintain otherwise would mean that sin was a necessity of the condition in which he was created. For all failure to meet the full demands of God is sin. (3) Inability does not mean the loss of natural liberty. This refers to free agency, namely, that man exercise volition according to his character. Inability presupposes liberty. 4.) Inability does not deny the possibility of *justitia civilis*, that is natural and social virtue. Positively, inability means that in sin man is not only indisposed and made opposite to all good but that he is totally unable to be otherwise. It is inability to discern, love, or choose the things that are well pleasing to God. He cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned; he cannot love them because his mind is enmity against God; he cannot choose them because those in the flesh cannot please God. It is the *ou dunatai* (cannot) of the natural man. (I Corinthians 2:15) In the context of Romans 8, the Apostle makes one of the clearest statements possible regarding the helplessness of fallen humanity and whether or not we actually possess the power or ability to, in any way change our condition.

I. JESUS' RESPONSE TO THE MURMURING CROWD

A. The Source of Life and Resurrection (John 6:43-44)

The answer to the question, “How do we come to the Lord?” is found here. The answer, as we shall see, is through efficacious grace. That secures the saving call of God. It is a divine influence on the human spirit, operating immediately, or directly, on the mind and spirit in the context of the teaching of the Word of God. It is a supernatural influence from the Lord, which overcomes man's deadness, blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart. In answer to the murmuring of the Jews Jesus said, “Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” It is clear that Jesus does not really answer the arguments of the men, but he rather goes straight to the heart of the matter. His point is clear: They must be “taught of God” to come to Him! No man can of himself come to Jesus Christ, and in this fact is taught the important truth of the inability of man. This is the unanimous teaching of the Lord and His apostles as G.C. Berkouwer has shown. “To hear, to learn, to be drawn, to be given, and then to come – that is the evangelical incursion of all synergism. It is the reference to God's electing grace (cf. John 3:27), which in faith and experience is understood, not as a coercion and an annihilating superiority which takes away man's very breath, but as divine liberation. This absoluteness of giving, drawing, and learning we meet in the radical and exclusive testimony of Paul when he says, for instance, that 'no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit' (I Cor. 12:3). The message of Scripture repeatedly accentuates that human inability. The impotence of man is not something pessimism has discovered; it is most literally described in Scripture (cf. John 3:27; I Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:5, 6, 7, 8).”⁶ The key word in the statement is “draw.” It is the Biblical word for effectual grace, and it is a word of successful force. If there is one thing plain from the words, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (v. 44), it is that the approach of the soul to the Lord Jesus for salvation and life is “NOT ORIGINATED BY THE MAN HIMSELF, BUT BY A MOVEMENT OF DIVINE GRACE”⁷ The salvation of a soul does not arise from the decision of man's free will. It is the

Godhead that seeks and saves (cf. 4:23; Luke 19:10). What is stated plainly here has been implied in verse thirty-seven (cf. 12:39).

B. The Real Cause of Salvation:

The Greek verb HELKU● (“draw”) is found in the old Testament Septuagint, the Greek translation of the old Testament, in the sense of the divine attraction of Israel to Yahweh, or in the sense of efficacious grace (cf. Jeremiah 31:3, “with loving kindness have I drawn thee”). In its uses, two things may be of interest. In the first place, there is usually involved a certain resistance on the part of the thing or person drawn (cf. John 12:32; 18:10; 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19). But, as Morris has pointed out, “There is not one example in the New Testament of the use of this verb where resistance is successful.”⁸ The words “no man can come” point up the total inability of man, but the same God who sends Christ draws men to Him. Occasionally readers of the Bible and theology draw from this doctrine of man's inability the mistaken notion that, therefore, there is no hope for man. Warfield's strictures are important at that point, “We may point out, therefore, that the doctrine of inability does not affirm that we cannot believe, but only that *we cannot believe in our own strength* (italics mine). It affirms only that there is no strength within us by which we may attain to belief. But this is far from asserting that on making the effort we shall find it impossible to believe.”⁹

C. The Support of the Teaching (John 6:45-46)

The following statement, “It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God,” a reference to Isaiah 54:13, explains that the drawing of the Father is a biblical teaching. In context the passage in Isaiah refers to the messianic community of Israel, and the force of the passage is simply to say that those who belong to the Messiah need no instruction FROM MEN, since they carry within themselves the effects of the divine instruction. The very fact that they belong to the Messiah means that they have been taught of God. All of His have been the recipients of preeminent instruction. Thus, our Lord is simply saying that, if His listeners were readers of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, they would know that all the saved are unable to come to Yahweh of themselves and must be first illumined and taught of God to come to Him for salvation. The “all,” then, is the Messianic community in its Old Testament context. The words in Isaiah are, “And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord,” and one notices that “thy children” are omitted (lit., thy sons), perhaps because in the New Testament context they might be misunderstood to mean that simply all Jews would be taught of God. To be “taught of God,” then, is simply to be “drawn by the Father.” The following words, “Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh to me,” individualizes the “all” of the previous clause. There are three steps, then, in the drawing of the Father: (1) He teaches; (2) they listen and learn; (3) they come. John 6:46 corrects a false impression. It might be thought from the preceding that one must see the Father to be a listener and a learner. This is denied, as 1:18 has indicated. Only one exception exists to the general rule that no man has ever seen God; that exception is the Son of God. He shares the vision of God with no mere man.

D. The Proof of Unconditional Election.

(cf. John 6:37, 44, 65). There is in this passage an airtight case for the doctrine of unconditional election. It sounds the death knell of Arminianism. It is found in comparison with v. 47 thrown in for good measure. In logic, a *necessary condition* is a circumstance in whose absence a given event could not occur, or a given thing could not exist. A *sufficient condition* is a circumstance such that whenever it exists a given event occurs or a given thing exists. A *necessary and sufficient* condition for the occurrence of a given event (say, for example, divine election) or the existence of a given thing (say, election to salvation) is, therefore, a circumstance in whose absence the event could not occur or the thing could not exist, and which is also such that *whenever it exists, the event occurs or the thing exists*. In other words, when

we have a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of a given event existing, then the event occurs, or the thing exists. The reason that the existence of a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of a given event, or the existence of a given thing, makes for an airtight case for the event or thing is that it provides a complete induction and admits of no exceptions. In John 6:37 Jesus says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me." We have here a *sufficient condition* for coming to Christ. If the individual is "given," then he will come. Every single individual given shall come. There is no failure in coming, if one is given. It is sufficient to be given to come or, to put it a bit more clearly, in order to come one must simply be given. All the given come. Now in John 6:65 Jesus says, "Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were *given* unto him of my Father." We have here a necessary condition for coming to Christ. No man can come unto Him, except it were given to him of the Father. Every single individual who comes to Christ must have been previously given to Christ by the Father. There is no failure in coming, if one is *given*. It is necessary to be given, before one can come. To put it as clearly as possible, all who come have been given. Incidentally, what does it mean to be "*given*"? It is clear from the usage of the term in the gospel and elsewhere (although it is particularly a Johannine expression) that the giving by the Father antedates the coming to Christ. The tenses, a perfect passive periphrastic in v. 65 and the perfect in v. 39, make that plain. Further, it is clear that the giving includes the prevenient drawing by the Father, a work indicating convincingly that all the initiative in coming lies with God. Thus, we have in the "giving" a pre-salvation giving of the Father to the Son of all who come, or believe. In addition, they come for salvation and resurrection (cf. vv. 39, 44). And what they are given, life and resurrection, is only for the ones given to the Son. What is it to be given but to be elected to eternal life. To be given to the Son for the divine work of the communication of life and resurrection is simply to be chosen by God for eternal life. Thus, we have an airtight case for divine, unconditional (the ground of the giving is said several times to be simply the will of the Father; cf. vv. 38, 39, 40) election. All the given ones come. All who come have been given. There are no exceptions. The necessary and sufficient conditions for the event, or state, of divine election exist in fact and in history. Divine, sovereign, unconditional election is the teaching of our Lord.

E. Objections:

Let us see if there are worthy objections to the teaching. Suppose one should say, "Suppose all are given." Well, if all are given, then all must come, for Jesus says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me" (cf. v. 37). That would mean that universalism is biblical. We know, however, from countless passages that that doctrine is a heresy. Suppose someone should say, objecting to the doctrine of election, "None are given by the Father to the Son." Then no one could, not simply *would*, come, for Jesus says, "Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father" (v. 65). All would be lost. Suppose one should say, "We come by the initial decision of our free will" or, as one of my friends says, "We come when we are 'on positive volition.'" But Jesus says that we come only if given, or if the Father draws us. Coming by free will is a myth. If our coming depended upon the will, we would never come, for the will is naturally rebellious against God (cf. Romans 8:7-8). It cannot be subject to God, unless God works in the will to subdue its enmity and transform it. The will, of course, must act, if men are to be saved, but its acting in obedience to God is the work of God. The inability under which man and his will labor is not an inability to exercise volitions. It is an inability to be willing to exercise holy volitions. Luther once said, "Free will is an empty term, whose reality is lost. And a lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all." Man cannot originate the love of God in his heart. To assume that, because man has the ability to love, he, therefore, has the ability to love God of himself, is about as foolish as to assume that, since water has the ability to flow, it, therefore has the ability to flow uphill. A final word from Calvin, "The whole faculty of free will which the Papists dream about is utterly overturned by these two clauses (he is speaking of

v. 45). For if we begin to come to Christ only when the Father has drawn us, neither the beginning of faith, nor any preparation for it, lies in us. On the other hand, if all come whom the Father has taught, He gives them not only the freedom to believe but faith itself.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Paul declares that sin has affected fallen man in *four* important ways: (1) In regards to his *thinking*: he has his mind set on those things that exclude God (8:5). (2) In regard to his *state* he is in a state of *death* (8:6). (3) In regards to his *religion*: he is hostile to God and refuses to submit to God’s Law (8:7). (4) In regards to his *present condition*: he cannot please God in any way, shape, form or fashion. Could anything be clearer than this? Then why do Christian people run around proclaiming the decidedly unbiblical notion that fallen humanity possesses the ability (free will) to please God? May God grant us grace and wisdom to oppose such folly and to proclaim a Gospel of sovereign grace.

Suppose one says, “We must exercise faith.” True (cf. 6:35). Faith is the coming to Christ, but Jesus says that is the result of the Father’s giving, the Father’s drawing (cf. vv. 44, 65). Faith, as other divine blessings, is the gift of God (cf. 3:27; I Corinthians 4:7; Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 2:8-9, etc.). There is no escape from the matter. Men, if they are saved, are saved through the divine, unconditional election of God, brought to its fruition in resurrection by the effectual grace, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification of the mighty Spirit of God. Let us respond in joy, praise, and thanksgiving for the “sovereign sovereignty” of our great Triune God, who has conquered our rebellion and brought us to Himself!¹¹

¹ What is meant by *freewill*? One should never assume that a term like this one means the same thing in everyone’s vocabulary. Some use the expression to make the obvious point that we do, as human beings, possess the power of choice. In a stricter or more philosophical sense, the term refers to the belief that the human will has an inherent power to choose with equal ease between alternatives. This is commonly called the power of contrary choice or the liberty of indifference. This belief does *not* claim that there are no influences that might affect the will, but it does underscore the fact that the will can (and often does) overcome these factors and choose in spite of them. This is another way of saying that the will is autonomous from outside determination. When Arminians use the term *free will* they are referring to an independent and self-determining ability by which we are free to make autonomous choices. Calvinists agree that the faculty of will is itself free, and that the bondage into which sinful humanity has fallen is not a bondage of the faculty of the will (we do make choices) but rather a bondage of being. Our choices are not free from our soul’s anatomy. We choose according to our nature. The sinner does not act by *external* compulsion—but according to his strongest desire. Our disposition to sin colors our choices. The natural fallen will cannot even prepare itself for regeneration, let alone convert itself. It is apparent that Calvinists believe that the will (1) is free only in the sense that it is free to express the person’s character, (2) must be regenerated before it is free for obedience to God and (3) is never forced to act against its own nature. For extended discussion cf. R.K. McGregor Wright, *No Place For Sovereignty: What’s Wrong With Free Will Theism?* (IVP, 1996), pp. 43-50; R.A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), pp. 176-177; G. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Craig Press, 1978), pp. 203-210.

² J.I. Packer, O.R. Johnson, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will* (Revell, 1957), p. 59.

³ A.N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism* (Banner of Truth, 1979), p. 8.

⁴ Noted Evangelical apologist Norman Geisler emphatically declares that saving faith is *not* a gift of God. On the contrary, he claims that all men possess the ability to please God by exercising common, ordinary faith. Cf. His, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Bethany House, 1999), pp. 181-191. (I wrote a critical review of this book for *Reformation & Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* (Vol. 8, No. 4, fall 1999). The foremost evangelist of this century, Billy Graham, takes a similar approach when he says, “the new birth is something God does for man when man is willing to yield to God.” *How to be Born Again* (Word, 1977), p. 150.

⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Baker, 1997), P. 26.

⁶ G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 49.

⁷ J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John I* (T & T Clark, 1928), p. 204.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 371.

⁹ *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (P & R, 1973), P. 726.

¹⁰ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries IV* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 165.

¹¹ I am indebted to my former professor of Theology, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson for his penetrating analysis of this section of John’s Gospel. Cf. His “Human Inability and Divine Ability, or Thinking Christians and Unconditional Election,” *Believer’s Bible Bulletin* (Dallas, June 1982).