



Around the Word
BIBLE STUDY
Summer 2016

Free Will

Part 4: Conversion is the Holy Spirit's Work Alone

Martin Luther on Original Sin:

For here the text applies that Christ and the Evangelists so often quote from Isaiah: "You shall indeed hear but never perceive." What else does this mean but that free choice or the human heart is so held down by the power of Satan that unless it is miraculously raised up by the Spirit of God it cannot of itself either see or hear things that strike the eyes and ears themselves so plainly as to be palpable?

(On the Bondage of the Will; LW 33:98)



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Introduction: Free will has always been a topic in both philosophy and theology. Especially when it comes to the place of man's will in salvation, the topic of free will is of highest importance.

Errors regarding free will are constantly pushing their way into the church's teaching. It was no different in the years after the death of Martin Luther. The theologians of the church gathered up the teaching of the Scriptures regarding our will and its freedom and powers. In this series of studies we will let them guide us to the Scriptures and its truth and comfort.

*The non-italicized portions of this study are excerpted (with slight amendments) from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II:25-27. (Triglotta: The Lutheran Confessions, which is in the public domain. See www.bookofconcord.com for more.) There are a lot of Scriptures in this study. The most important texts are marked with **.*

This is part 4 in a series of Bible Studies. Part 1-3 can be found at www.whatdoesthismean.org.

Opening: Psalm 80:1-7

- ¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph | like a flock!*
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, | shine forth.
 - ²**Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,***
stir up your might and come to | save us!
 - ³Restore us, | O God;*
let your face shine, that we | may be saved!
 - ⁴**O LORD | God of hosts,***
how long will you be angry with your | people's prayers?
 - ⁵You have fed them with the | bread of tears*
and given them tears to drink in full | measure.
 - ⁶**You make us an object of contention for our | neighbors,***
and our enemies laugh a- | mong themselves.
 - ⁷Restore us, O | God of hosts;*
let your face shine, that we | may be saved!
- Glory be to the Father and | to the Son*
and to the Holy | Spirit;
as it was in the be- | ginning,*
is now, and will be forever. | Amen.**

The Scriptures Ascribe the Work of Conversion to the Holy Spirit

The Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and all that belongs to their efficacious beginning and completion, not to the human powers of the natural free will, neither entirely nor half, nor in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part, but entirely, solely, to the divine working and the Holy Ghost.

Reason and free will are able to a certain extent to live an outwardly decent life; but to be born anew, and to obtain inwardly another heart, mind, and disposition, this only the Holy Ghost effects. He opens the understanding and heart to understand the Scriptures and to give heed to the Word.

See Luke 24:45. Who opened the disciples' understanding?

Read Acts 16:14. Again, who opened Lydia's heart so that she would understand the preaching of the Gospel?

Read Philippians 2:13. Who is working in us that we would will and do God's good pleasure?

See Acts 5:31 and 2 Timothy 2:25. Who gives repentance?

See Philippians 1:29. Who works faith?

Read Ephesians 2:8. What is the gift of God that Paul talks about in this verse?

Consider John 6:69. According to this text, what is God's work?

See Deuteronomy 29:4 and Matthew 13:15. What gifts of God are we taught about in this verse?

Read Titus 3:5-6. To whom does the "washing of regeneration" and "renewal" belong?

Read Ezekiel 11:19. How is the heart of the unbeliever described? The heart of faith? Who performs this heart transplant? (Compare this to Deuteronomy 30:6 and Psalm 51:10.)

See Ephesians 2:10. Who "creates us"?

See 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15. Who makes us new creatures?

And, in short, "Every good gift is of God," (see James 1:17).

See John 6:44. What is required for a person to come to Christ?

Read Matthew 11:27. How can a person know the Father?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3. How do we confess and call Jesus "Lord"?

See John 15:5. What can we do without Christ?

See 2 Corinthians 3:5. From where is our sufficiency?

See 1 Corinthians 4:7. What have we received from God as a gift?

Augustine's Change of Mind on this Topic

Accordingly, St. Augustine particularly writes of this passage that by it he was convinced that he must lay aside his former erroneous opinion, when he had maintained the following in his treatise *De Praedestinatione*, chap. 3:

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I erred in this, that I held that the grace of God consists only in this, that God in the preaching of the truth reveals His will; but that our consenting to the preached Gospel is our own work, and is within our own powers.

Likewise, St. Augustine writes further:

I erred when I said that it is within our own power to believe the Gospel and to will; but it is God's work to give to them that believe and will the power to effect something

How does St. Augustine agree with the Scripture passages listed above?

Closing Hymn: Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice (st. 3-4)

Martin Luther, 1523 (TLH 387)

3. My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining;
Free will against God's judgment fought,
Dead to all good remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share;
The pangs of hell I suffered.

4. But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of His mercies great,
He planned my soul's salvation.
A father's heart He turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently:
He gave His dearest Treasure.

Painting: *Adoration of the Holy Trinity* (1509-1511) by Albrecht Durer.

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