

A War Against Free Will

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Free will is the concept that we have an ability to make a choice of our own willpower. You got up this morning and chose what to have for breakfast. While there may have been factors that made one choice more pleasing, attractive or easier than the other, it was still a choice that you were able to make. Free will speaks to the idea that all actions we take are rooted in our own purpose. Those who reject this idea believe that our decisions are actually an illusion; that our choices in life are determined by other people or factors that we have no control over. Such ideas ultimately devalue accountability and opportunity for our pursuit of the things of God.

Is free will taught in the Bible? We are told repeatedly in the Bible that we must make the choice to pursue the things of God. In Genesis 4:6-7 God told Esau that he had a choice in how to respond to a disappointment; he could either master sin, or permit sin to master him. Moses told Israel they must choose either life or death in their obedience to God (Deut. 30:15-20); Joshua repeats this to Israel and then adds that his choice would be to serve God (Josh. 24:15). Elijah told Israel to “choose this day whom you will serve” as he stood on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18:21.

The New Testament continues this theme of free will through choice. Abraham told the rich man in Luke 16:25 that his choices in life were why he was in torment after death. We consider the many times we see the command to “sin no more” (John 5:14, 8:11) with the implication that this is a choice. As well, we consider the commands to repent in Revelation 2-3 to those churches which were not being faithful to God. Can people decide to reject the will of God? This is exactly what we read in Luke 7:30 and Matthew 23:37. We are accountable for the decisions we make (2 Chron. 7:11-20, Matthew 12:36), implying that we have the free will to make those choices.

But what if we are convinced otherwise? What if we were told that we actually have no free will, and that our choices are not our own, but the result of either God or nature, and we cannot overcome them? Suddenly, we are not the masters of our lives, but victims of the circumstances we find ourselves in. Satan has a great benefit to cause us to deny our ability to choose; therefore, it makes sense that he would wage war against the concept of our free will.

Sinful Nature

In 400 AD Augustine of Hippo created the idea of the “sinful nature”. He declared that we are born sinful creatures, sinful by our very nature. He also declared that this nature came because we inherit guilt with “original sin”; we are all guilty of Adam’s sin as well as our own. This sinful nature negates free will. It declares that we sin because it is our nature, something we cannot overcome. Therefore, our faith is the work of God (Protestant churches) or the church (Catholicism), but not us.

The Bible says nothing about a sinful nature; the expression is not found in Scriptures. Instead, when we seek our nature in the Bible, we are told that we are all made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), upright (Eccl. 7:29) and without sin (Matt. 18:3). Furthermore, the Bible is explicitly clear

in places such as Ezekiel 18 that we do not inherit the guilt of the sins of others; we are all accountable for our own sins alone (Rom. 6:23, etc.).

Predestination

The next strike against free will was in the 16th century, when John Calvin took the concepts of sinful nature to the next level with his TULIP theology. He concluded that God's sovereignty negates free will; if God is over all, no decision we make is really ours; free will is an illusion. He concluded that we have no choice at all in our destiny, and that God selectively chooses who is saved. The term he used to describe this was "Predestination".

Yet the Bible absolutely contradicts this teaching. We see many people who were ungodly making choices that were righteous, such as Ahab, Cornelius or Josiah. More importantly, the Bible tells us repeatedly that God's desire is that all men should be saved (John 3:16, 1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Pet. 3:9). Since all men are not going to be saved, we can only conclude that God permits us to resist His sovereign nature.

Evolutionary Theory

In the 19th and 20th century Charles Darwin introduced the general theory of evolution, which states that all life evolved from a single source. This idea was based in the philosophy of materialism, which stated that anything real must be manifested in a material manner, thus rejecting the concepts of God, the soul, etc.. Evolution and naturalism negates free will; it declares that we are all the product of random chance and are no more than our nature body. Consider this summary:

Shortly after Darwin put forth his theory of evolution, his cousin Sir Francis Galton began to draw out the implications: If we have evolved, then mental faculties like intelligence must be hereditary. But we use those faculties—which some people have to a greater degree than others—to make decisions. So our ability to choose our fate is not free, but depends on our biological inheritance..... In recent decades, research on the inner workings of the brain has helped to resolve the nature-nurture debate—and has dealt a further blow to the idea of free will. there is also agreement in the scientific community that the firing of neurons determines not just some or most but all of our thoughts, hopes, memories, and dreams. The Atlantic, June 2016

Of course, the very root of evolution is in adversity to the Bible, which repeatedly declares that all things were created *ex nihilo* (Gen. 1, Hebrews 1:1-2, John 1:1-2). Just as important, the Bible declares that We are more than flesh (1 Thes. 5:23, Luke 16:24-26), with the ability to determine what characteristics (the soul or the flesh) will dictate our actions.

Deviant sexuality

In the last part of the 20th century our society suffered the Sexual Revolution, a removal of the normal sexual behaviors of past generations to embrace fornication, homosexuality and other sexual sins. Today we live in a world where sexual promiscuity and other deviancies are defended as actually being natural. These "natural desires" are spoke of in a way that negates free will. People declare "We are born this way" and that "We cannot control our desires". These

unsupported declarations have become part of the mindset of our current generation, and many believe that those who practice deviant sexual lifestyles have no free will to deny themselves.

The Bible has a lot to say about reigning in our desires. In James 1:13-15 James tells us that our desires are always under our control, but that we simply permit them to reign over us. Paul warned the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:5-9) that they needed to exercise self-control (a spiritual virtue, 2 Pet. 1:6) to overcome desire. Indeed, the Bible expects all of us “to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor” (1 Thes. 4:4).

Critical Theory

Most recently in the war against free will have come the Critical Theories¹. Today this school of thought is manifested in things such as Critical Race Theory, Critical Philosophy, and Critical Pedagogy. In very generic terms it states that society and culture dictate much of our behavior, and that we as members of society are therefore both guilty of our culture’s injustices as well as unable to overcome in ourselves personally that mindset. It also speaks to the idea that we personally lack the ability to change our behavior, requiring a movement of society to affect us.

Yet once of the basic concepts of Christianity in Scripture is that we can and must act contrary to culture (Rom. 12:2, 1 John 2:15). The Bible is clear that sin is personal (Ezek. 18, Rom. 2:5-6). The solution to issues such as racism are not societal, but spiritual. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone that truly brings out social justice. All other efforts throughout history to bring about social justice have resulted in tyranny and the oppression of spiritual values.

Ideologies seek to change your view on whether you have the will to change yourself. If you give up your free will, you accept an inability to resist sin and you deny that God empowers us. Surrendering free will allows you become a “victim” of the world, the flesh, and the circumstances of your life. Throughout the Bible there are many times when men stood before God in some manner and rendered the “victim” defenses, claiming that their actions were not of their own will. NONE of them were justified by God.

But if we are able and willing to acknowledge our accountability, we acknowledge the ability to resist sin, and take the first step in ruling over our sin (Gen. 4:7). In this manner we allow God to empower us through His Word. We are then able to overcome the world - *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith* (1 John 5:4).

¹ "Critical Theory" means the Western-Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School.... capitalizing Critical Theory as if it were a proper noun stresses the intellectual lineage specific to the Frankfurt School - Wikipedia