

Lesson 13 - Free Will (WCF 9)

1. One of the amazing things about human beings is that they are free. They can imagine all sorts of things and do different things than have done before. Take the Vikings as an example. The Vikings lived for centuries in their Scandinavian home without venturing out in any extreme way. Then, in the late 8th and early 9th century, they burst forth, seeking adventure. There are many reasons for this, but who can nail down the exact reason why the spirit of a human being heads in a particular direction. They went all over from Baghdad to North America, pillaging, trading, and conquering. Who could have predicted it? The human spirit is free. I think this is what is in view in WCF 9.1: “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined, to good or evil.”
2. At the same time, humans do have limits. These limits involve their moral condition as well as limits related to the people they live with, previous choices of those around them, and their physical limitations.
3. When human beings were created, they were created with an intrinsic goodness but “mutably,” i.e., changeably. They could fall from it. “Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well-pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it” (9.2). We have already talked about the fall of sin. Humans could see the whole and yet also their smallness. Their temptation was to “be as gods” and identify themselves with the whole. In other words, the tension of human existence could tempt them to pride. This is one theory, anyway.
4. The actual result is that human beings did fall into sin. This brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery. The fall brought this limitation, namely, that human beings would not cease to attempt to make themselves the ultimate lord. There is a basic self-will that governs all actions. He “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” (9.3). Thus, as 1 Cor. 2:14, the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. No one can say (and mean it!) that Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).
5. This does not mean that humans are always as evil as they could be, but it does mean that this basic disposition of self-will governs their actions. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr has captured this well: “A person may be thoroughly ‘devoted’ to a cause, a community, or a creative relationship, and yet he may, within terms of that devotion, express his final concern for his own prestige or power or security” (*The Self & the Dramas of History*, 18).
6. Because of this continual self-will, God must free us from our natural bondage to sin in order to enable us to come to Christ. When He does so, He enables us “freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good” (WCF 9.4). Thus, it is God’s gift that enables us to freely will or choose Christ (see Jn. 6:37, 39, 44; 1 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 9:16). Again, it is important to recognize that we believe that people choose freely to come to Christ, but the reason they do so is that God has healed their “chooser,” as one person. God has healed their wills.

7. This is significant for us glorifying and enjoying God. This is captured in Eph. 1:3-5: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will . . .” This beautiful statement indicates the joy the Christian can have in the amazing benefit that God has worked to enable us to come unto Him and be part of His family. It directs our heart upward in praise, i.e., to glorify God.
8. Finally, let us remember, however, and mourn the fact that the Christian is not perfectly healed: “by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly nor only will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil” (9.4). This is extremely important. It’s easy to identify our current state of knowledge, religious attainment, or morals as the final one. This should always make us humble and ready to hear critique and cause us to flee to Christ as our perfect righteousness. I like the way Niebuhr put it, “There is no limit to either the sanctification individual life, or social perfection in collective life, or to the discovery of truth in cultural life; except of course the one limit, that there will be some corruption, as well as deficiency, of virtue and truth on the new level of achievements” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2.156).
9. The good news is that we have a glorious destiny: “The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only” (9.5). This is described as a limit, but it’s a glorious thing to look forward to. We should meditate on it regularly.