Predestination and Free-Will—Is There a Contradiction?

Charles Simeon

In the Scriptures, there are found sentiments, not really opposite, but apparently of an opposite tendency. John 5.40, for instance, ‘You will not come to me that you might have life’, does not hesitate to lay the whole blame of man’s condemnation on the obstinacy of his own depraved will; whereas John 6.44, ‘No one can come to me, unless the Father draw him,’ does not scruple to state that ‘we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will’ (Article X, Book of Common Prayer, p. 869). While too many set these passages at variance, and espouse the one in opposition to the other, the present writer dwells with equal pleasure on them both; and thinks it, on the whole, better to state these apparently opposite truths in the plain and unsophisticated manner of the Scriptures, than to enter into scholastic subtleties that have been invented for the upholding of human systems.

He is aware that they who are warm advocates for this or that system of religion will be ready to condemn him as inconsistent; but if he speak in exact conformity with the Scriptures, he shall rest the vindication of his conduct simply on the authority and example of the inspired writers. He has no desire to be wise above what is written, nor any conceit that he can teach the apostles to speak with more propriety and correctness than they have spoken.

Can These Doctrines be Reconciled?

It may be asked, perhaps, How do you reconcile these doctrines, which you believe to be of equal authority and equal importance? But what right has any man to impose this task on the preachers of God’s word? God has not required it of them; nor is the truth or falsehood of any doctrine to be determined absolutely by this criterion. It is presumed, for instance, that everyone will acknowledge the holiness of God and the existence of sin; but will anyone undertake to reconcile them? Does anyone consider the inability of man to reconcile them as a sufficient ground for denying either the one or the other of these truths? If neither of these points are doubted, notwithstanding that they cannot be reconciled by us, why should other points, equally obvious in some respects, yet equally difficult to be reconciled in others, be incompatible merely because we, with our limited capacity, cannot perfectly discern their harmony and agreement?

But perhaps these points, which have been such a fruitful source of contention in the church, are not so opposite to each other as some imagine: and it is possible that the truly Scriptural statement will be found not in an exclusive adoption of either, nor in a confused mixture of both, but in the proper and seasonable application of them both; or, to use the language of St Paul, in ‘rightly dividing the word of truth’ (II Tim 2.15).

Here the author desires to speak with trembling. He is aware that he is treading on slippery ground; and that he has little prospect of satisfying any who have ranged themselves under the standard of Calvin or Arminius. But he wishes to be...
understood, and with much deference submits to the public his views of Scripture truth.

Can we Doubt the Truth of Either Doctrine?

It is supposed by many that the doctrines of grace are incompatible with the doctrines of man’s free-will, and that therefore one or the other must be false. But why? Can any man doubt one moment whether he be a free agent or not? He may as well doubt his own existence. But on the other hand, will any man who has the smallest spark of humility affirm that he has something which he has not received from a superior power (I Cor 6.7)? Will anyone refuse to say with the apostle, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am’ (I Cor 15.10)?

Again, just as men differ with respect to the first beginnings of a work of grace, so do they also with respect to the manner in which it must be carried on, some affirming that God has engaged to ‘fulfil His purpose for us’ (Psalm 138.8), and others that even St Paul had reason to fear lest he himself should be disqualified (I Cor 9.27). But why should these things be deemed incompatible? Does not every man feel within himself a liableness, even a proneness to fall? Does not every man feel that there is a corruption within him to drive him to the commission of the greatest enormities, and eternally to destroy his soul? He can have little knowledge of his own heart who will deny this.

On the other hand, who that is holding on in the ways of righteousness does not daily ascribe his steadfastness to the influence of that grace which he receives from God, and look daily to God for more grace, in order that he may be ‘guarded by God’s power through faith for salvation’ (I Peter 1.5)? No man can in any measure resemble the Scripture saints unless he be of this disposition.

Why then must these things be put in opposition to each other, so that every advocate for one of these points must controvert and explode the other? Only let any pious person, whether Calvinist or Arminian, examine the language of his prayers after he has been devoutly pouring out his soul before God, and he will find his own words in almost in perfect consonance with the foregoing statement.

The Calvinist will be confessing the extreme depravity of his nature, together with his liability to fall, and the Arminian will be glorifying God for all that is good within him, and will commit his soul to God so that he who has laid the foundation of his own spiritual temple may also finish it (Zech 4.9).

Doubtless either of these points may be injudiciously stated or improperly applied. If the doctrines of Election and Predestination be so stated as to destroy man’s free agency, and make him merely passive in the work of salvation, they are not stated as they are in the Articles and Homilies of our church, or as they are in Scripture. On the other hand, if the doctrines of free-will and liableness to final apostasy be so stated as to rob God of His honor, and to deny that He is both the ‘pioneer and the perfecter of our faith’ (Heb 12.2), they are equally abhorrent from the sentiments of our church, and from the plainest declaration of Holy Writ.

Application is the Key to Understanding

The writer humbly suggests that there is a perfect agreement between these different points, and they are equally helpful, or equally destructive, depending on whether they are properly or improperly applied. If, for instance, on hearing a person excuse his own supineness by saying, ‘I can do nothing, unless God give me His grace,’ we were to reply, ‘This is true; it is God Who alone can give you either to will or to do,’ what would be the consequence? We should confirm him in his sloth, and encourage him to cast all the blame of his condemnation on God Himself. But if we should bring before him the apparently opposite truths, and bid him arise and call upon God, we should perhaps convince him that the fault was utterly his own, and that his destruction would be the consequence not of God’s decrees but of his own love of sin.

Suppose, on the other hand, that a person having ‘tasted the goodness of the word of God’ (Heb 6.5) began to boast that his superiority to others is merely the result of his own free-will; if, in answer to him, we should immediately speak of our freedom to do good or evil, we should foster the pride of his heart; whereas if we should remind him that ‘by the grace of God we are what we are’ (I Cor 15.10), and that all must say, ‘Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory’ (Psalm 115.1), we should lower his overweening conceit of his own goodness, and lead him to acknowledge his obligations to God.

Persistence and Apostasy

Let us illustrate this in reference to the two other doctrines we mentioned, namely the perseverance of the saints and our liableness, in ourselves, to be ‘disqualified’. Suppose a person say, ‘I need not be careful about my conduct, for God has begun a good work in me and has engaged to perform it till the day of Christ’: if we were to begin extolling the covenant of grace, and setting forth the truth of God in His promises, we should countenance his error at the very time that he was turning the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 1.4). But if we should warn him against the danger of being given over to a reprobate mind, and of perishing under an accumulated
load of guilt, we should counteract his sinful disposition, and stimulate him to flee from the wrath to come.

On the other hand, if a humble person should be drooping and desponding under a sense of his own corruptions, and we should spread before him all our difficulties and dangers, we should altogether ‘break the bruised reed, and quench the smoking flax’. But if we should point out to him the fulness and stability of God’s covenant, if we should enlarge upon the interest which Christ takes in His people, and his engagements that ‘no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand’ (John 10:29), it is obvious that we should administer a cordial to his fainting spirit.

Meat and Milk

These sentiments may perhaps receive some confirmation from the conduct of the apostle Paul. In administering the word, he considered the state of his hearers, and gave them either milk or strong meat according to their ability to digest it (I Cor 3.1f). In reference to this, we may say that the doctrines of human liberty, and human frailness, together with the other first principles of Christianity are as milk, which those who are still ‘babes in Christ’ must have set before them; but that the doctrines of grace, or the ‘deep things of God’, are as strong meat, which no one can digest unless they have grown to some stature in the family of Christ. Strong meat which would nourish an adult would destroy the life of an infant, and milk that would nourish an infant would be inadequate to the support of a man oppressed with hard labor; and so it is with the points we have been considering. The one sort of truths are as food proper to be administered to all, the other are cordials for the support and comfort of those who need them.

In a word, there seems to be a perfect correspondence between God’s works of providence and grace: in the former, ‘He accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will’ (Ephesians 1.11), yet leaves men perfectly free agents in all that they do; in the latter, He accomplishes His own eternal purpose both in calling and in keeping His elect, but never puts upon them any constraint which is not perfectly compatible with the freest operations of their own will.

The writer trusts that he shall be pardoned if he goes further, and says that in his judgement there is not only no positive contradiction between these doctrines, but they are both necessary, because they are subservient to each other. God elects us, but He carried His purpose into effect by the free agency of man. So also He carries on and completes His work in our souls, by causing us to feel our proneness to apostatize, and by making us cry to Him daily for the more effectual influences of His grace. Thus, while He consults His own glory, He promotes our greatest good, by teaching us to combine humility with earnestness, and vigilance with composure.

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