

Do We Really Have Free Will?

Big Question: Do we REALLY make choices that are 100% neutral or are our choices influenced by something else?

Selected Scripture Passages:

- Genesis 6:5 *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* (ESV)
- Psalm 53:3 *They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.* (ESV)
- Romans 1:18 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* (ESV)
- Romans 3:10–12 *as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”* (ESV)
- Romans 6:17 *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,* (ESV)
- Romans 7:5–6 *For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.* (ESV)
- Romans 7:15 *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* (ESV)
- Romans 7:23 *but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.* (ESV)
- Romans 8:5–8 *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. [6] For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* (ESV)
- 1 Corinthians 2:14 *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* (ESV)
- James 4:1 *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* (ESV)

What is Free Will? -R.C. Sproul (Transcript)

I want to direct our attention to an examination of what we mean by the words *free will*. What does it mean to have a free will? What does it mean to be a free moral agent, a volitional creature under the sovereignty of God?

First of all, let me say that there are different views of what free will comprises that are bandied about in our culture. I think it's important that we recognize these various views.

Spontaneous Choice

The first view is what I'm going to call the "humanist" view of free will, which I would say is the most widely prevalent view of human freedom that we find in our culture. I'm sad to say that, in my opinion, it's the most widely held view within the church as well as outside the church.

In this scheme, *free will* is defined as our ability to make choices spontaneously. That is, the choices we make are in no wise conditioned or determined by any prior prejudice, inclination, or disposition. Let me say that again: this view says that we make our choices spontaneously. Nothing previous to the choice determines the choice—no prejudice, prior disposition, or prior inclination—the choice comes literally on its own as a spontaneous action by the person.

I see at the outset two serious problems that we face as Christians with this definition of free will. The first is a theological, moral problem and the second is a rational problem. I should really say that there are three problems because the whole lecture will focus on the third one, but, at the outset, we immediately see two problems.

No Moral Significance

The first is, as I said, a theological, moral problem. If our choices are made purely spontaneously, without any prior inclination or disposition, then in a sense we're saying that there is no reason for the choice. There is no motive for the choice; it just happens spontaneously.

If that is the way our choices operate, then we immediately face this problem: how could such an action have any moral significance at all? This is because one of the things the Bible is concerned about in the choices we make is not only what we choose, but also what our intention is in the making of that choice.

We recall, for example, the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. When he has this reunion with his brothers many years later, and they repent of that former sin, what does Joseph say to his brothers? When he accepts them and forgives them, he says, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" ([Gen. 50:20](#)). God made a choice in the matter. God had chosen, at least, to allow this to happen and to befall Joseph. His brothers made a choice about what to do with Joseph. Their inclination in the making of that choice was wicked. God also made a choice in allowing it to take place, but God's intention in this activity was altogether righteous and holy.

So God, in considering a good deed, not only examines the outward deed itself (the action), but He also considers the inner motivation (the intent behind the deed). But if there are no inner motivations, if there is no real intentionality (to use the philosophical term), then how could the action be of any moral significance? It just happens.

A Rational Impossibility

Even deeper than that problem, the humanist view immediately faces the question of whether or not such a choice could actually be made. That is, the question is not simply whether it would be moral if it were made, but whether a creature without any prior disposition, inclination, bent, or reason could even make a choice.

Let's look at this by way of a couple of examples. What is attractive about the idea that I have no prior inclination or disposition is that my will would be neutral. It is inclined neither to the left nor to the right. It is neither inclined toward righteousness nor toward evil but is simply neutral. There is no previous bent or inclination to it.

I think of the story of *Alice in Wonderland* when Alice, in her travels, comes to the fork in the road, and she can't decide whether to take the left fork or the right fork. She looks up, and there is the Cheshire Cat in the tree, grinning at her. She asks of the Cheshire Cat, "Which road should I take?" And the Cheshire Cat replies by saying: "That depends. Where are you going?" Alice says, "I don't know." Then what does he say? "Then I guess it doesn't matter."

If you have no intent, no plan, no desire to get anywhere, what difference does it make whether you take the left or the right? In that situation, we look at it and think, "Alice now has two choices: she can go to the left, or she can go to the right." But really she has four choices: she can go to the left, she can go to the right, she can turn and go back where she came from, or she can stand there and do nothing until she perishes from her inactivity, which is also a choice.

So, she has four choices, and the question we're going to ask is: Why would she make any of those four choices? If she has no reason or inclination behind the choice, if her will is utterly neutral, what would happen to her? If there is no reason to prefer the left to the right, nor to prefer standing there to going back, what choice would she make? She wouldn't make a choice. She would be paralyzed.

The problem we have with the humanist notion of freedom is the old problem of the rabbit out of the hat, but without a hat and without a magician. It is something coming out of nothing, an effect without a cause. A spontaneous choice, in other words, is a rational impossibility. It would have to be an effect without a cause. I would add that, from a biblical perspective, man in his fallenness is not seen as being in a state of neutrality with respect to the things of God. He does have a prejudice. He does have a bias. He does have an inclination, and his

inclination is toward wickedness and away from the things of God. I just say that in passing as we look at various Christian views of the freedom of the will.

The Mind Choosing

I personally think that the greatest book ever written on this subject is simply titled *The Freedom of the Will* by America's greatest scholar, Jonathan Edwards.

Incidentally, that designation of "America's greatest scholar" is not my own. That comes from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which voted Jonathan Edwards the greatest scholarly mind the United States ever produced. His work, *The Freedom of the Will*, is the closest examination and analysis of this thorny question that I've ever read. Martin Luther's famous work, *On the Bondage of the Will*, is also one that's very important and that Christians need to read. But let's look for a moment at Edwards' definition of the freedom of the will.

Edwards says that free will is "the mind choosing." What he is saying is that, though he distinguishes between the mind and the will, the two are inseparably related. We do not make moral choices without the mind approving the direction of our choice.

It is closely related to the biblical concept of conscience that the mind is involved in moral choices. When I become aware of certain options, if I prefer one over the other, I have to have some awareness of what those options are for it to be a moral decision.

So, the will is not something that acts independently from the mind, but rather it acts in conjunction with the mind. Whatever the mind deems as being desirable is what the will is inclined to choose.

The Strongest Desire

In addition to definitions, Edwards gives us sort of an iron rule that I call "Edwards' Law of Free Will." I think this is perhaps his most important contribution to the discussion of human freedom.

Edwards declares that free moral agents always act according to the strongest inclination they have at the moment of choice. To say it another way, we always choose according to our inclinations, and we always choose according to our strongest inclination at a given moment.

Let me put it in simple terms: any time you sin, this action indicates that, at the moment of your sin, your desire to commit the sin is greater than your desire is to obey Christ. If your desire to obey Christ were greater than your desire to commit the sin, you would not sin. But at the moment of choice, we always follow our strongest inclination, our strongest disposition, our strongest desires.

It seems to us, however, that there are lots of times we choose things for no apparent reason whatsoever. For example, if I were to ask you, "Why are you sitting in the chair that you are sitting in right now?", could you analyze your own internal thought processes and responses to the options that were before you when you came into this room? Could you say with clarity, "The reason why I'm sitting on the end here is because I always like to sit on the end chair," or, "because I wanted to sit next to Jean," or, "I wanted to be in the front row so I could be on the video camera," or, "this was the only chair left open, and I didn't want to stand. I'd rather sit than stand. My desire for sitting was stronger than my desire for standing, so I sat down."

What I'm saying is that there is a reason you are sitting where you are sitting, and it may have been a very quick decision. It may have been simply that you're lazy, you don't like to walk, and the chair you saw vacant was the closest one available to you. Chances are the reasons go deeper than that.

There are some people that, if you walk them into a park where there is a vacant park bench with room for three people, one hundred times out of one hundred they'll sit on the end of the bench rather than in the middle of the bench, and usually on either the left end or the right end. Other people, however, will always choose the middle. Why? Some people enjoy crowds. They like to be in the middle of the action. They have a gregarious personality. Other people like to stay where they can have a safe exit, so they will stay on the end of the bench.

As I was saying, we're not always analyzing very carefully why we make the choices we make. But there is a reason for every choice that we make, and we always act according to our strongest inclination at the moment.

Your Money or Your Life

There are two issues we may raise immediately to object to Edwards' law of choosing. The first one is: "I can tell you lots of occasions where I have done things I really didn't want to do. I have experienced coercion." Coercion involves external forces coming into our lives that seek to force us to do things, that, all things being equal, we would not choose to do. But in most instances, the power of coercion can severely reduce our options, even to just two.

For example, if a gunman comes up to me on the sidewalk, puts a gun to my head, and says, "Your money or your life," he has just reduced my options to two by external force and coercion. All things being equal, I was not looking for somebody to give my wallet away to that night, so I had no great desire to give this man my money. But when the gun is at my head and my options are my brains on the sidewalk or my billfold in his pocket, suddenly I have a stronger desire to live and lose my money than to die and still lose my money. At that moment, my desire level to live might be stronger than my desire level to resist this man, so I give him my wallet.

Now there may be people in that same situation who would say: "I would rather die than to give in to coercion, even though I know that if I refuse to give him this wallet, he's going to kill me anyway and take my money. Still, I'm not going to help him at all." So they say, "Shoot me." But even then, their desire to resist is greater than their desire not to resist, and so they resist.

Even when our options are severely reduced and external forces change our desire levels, human desires fluctuate, and they are many. In situations where we are making choices, it's rare that we're only choosing between two options—or even just between a good option and a bad option. One of the toughest moral choices for a Christian to make is between rival goods. That is, sometimes we have two opportunities but are not always sure which one will enable us to most serve Christ. That becomes very difficult. We know that our desire levels change and fluctuate.

"What I Want, I Do Not Do"

The second objection that I can hear coming is the statement from the Apostle Paul when he says, "The good that I would do, I do not, and that which I would not do is the very thing I do" ([Rom. 7:15–19](#)). This seems to suggest that the Apostle Paul, by apostolic authority, is telling us that it is indeed possible for a person to choose against his desires.

I can only say in response that I do not believe it was the Apostle's intention to give us a technical treatment of the intricacies involved in working out the faculty of choosing. Rather, what he is expressing is something we all experience: we have within us a desire to please Christ, but that desire does not always win out when the moment of truth comes.

All things being equal as a Christian, if you were to say to me, "R.C., would you like to be free from sin?" I would say, "Of course I'd like to be free from sin." However, I say that now, until the temptation of sin presses in upon me and my desire for that sin intensifies. Then I surrender to it freely—because when I work and act according to my desires, I am working and acting freely.

Calvin, in examining the question of free will, says that if we mean by free will that fallen man has the ability to choose what he wants, then of course fallen man has free will. But if we mean by that term that man in his fallen state has the moral power and ability to choose righteousness, then, said Calvin, "free will is far too grandiose a term to apply to fallen man." And with that sentiment I would agree.

Free and Determined

We have seen Edwards' view and Calvin's view, so now we'll go into the "Sproulian view" of free will by appealing to irony, or to a form of paradox.

I would like to make this statement: in my opinion, every choice that we make is free, and every choice that we make is determined. Again, every choice that we make is free, and every choice that we make is determined.

Now that sounds flatly contradictory because we normally see the categories of “determined” and “free” as mutually exclusive categories. To say that something is determined by something else, which is to say that it’s caused by something else, would seem to indicate that it couldn’t possibly be free.

But what I’m speaking about is not determinism. *Determinism* means that things happen to me strictly by virtue of external forces. But, in addition to external forces that are determining factors in what happens to us, there are also internal forces that are determining factors.

What I’m saying, along with Edwards and Calvin, is that if my choices flow out of my disposition and out of my desires, and if my actions are effects that have causes and reasons behind them, then my personal desire in a very real sense determines my personal choice.

If my desires determine my choice, how then can I be free? Remember I said that, in every choice, our choice is both free and determined. But what determines it is me, and this we call *self-determination*. Self-determination is not the denial of freedom, but the essence of freedom. For the self to be able to determine its own choices is what free will is all about.

The simple point I’m trying to make is that not only may we choose according to our own desires but, in fact, we always choose according to our desires. I’ll take it even to the superlative degree and say that we *must* always choose according to the strongest inclination at the moment. That is the essence of free choice—to be able to choose what you want.

Sinners Want to Sin

The problem with the sinner is not that the sinner has lost the faculty of choice in his fall. Sinners still have minds, sinners can still think, sinners still have desires, sinners still have wills, and the will is still free insofar as it is able to do what the sinner wants it to do. The problem is in the root of the desires of the heart in fallen man: because he has an evil inclination, a desire for sin, he sins.

Sinners sin because they want to sin. Therefore, they sin freely. Sinners reject Christ because they want to reject Christ. Therefore, they reject Him freely. And before a person can ever respond positively to the things of God, choose Christ, and choose life, he must have a desire to do so. The question is: Does fallen man retain any desire in his heart for God and for the things of God?

In Bondage to Sin

Quickly, I will introduce our next subject, which will be the biblical view of the radical character of man’s fallenness with respect to his desire for the things of God. But before we get to that lecture, let’s tie this one up by speaking of another distinction Jonathan Edwards made famous. He made a distinction between moral ability and natural ability.

Natural ability has to do with the abilities we have by nature. As a human being, I have the natural ability to think. I have the ability to speak. I can walk upright. I do not have the natural ability to fly through the air unaided by machines. Fish have the ability to live underwater for great periods of time without tanks of oxygen and diving equipment because God has given them fins and gills. He has given them the natural equipment necessary to make them able to live in that environment. Hence, they have a natural ability that I do not have. God has given natural abilities to birds that I do not have.

When we’re talking about *moral ability*, we’re talking about the ability to be righteous, as well as to be sinful. Man was created with the ability to be righteous or to be sinful, but man has fallen. Edwards is saying that, in his fallen state, man no longer has the ability in and of himself to be morally perfect because he is born in sin. Because of original sin, He has a fallen nature, a sin nature, which makes it utterly impossible for him to achieve perfection in this world.

He still has the faculty of thinking. He still has the ability to make choices. But what he lacks is the inclination or disposition toward godliness.

Now, we're going to see whether or not that is consistent with what the Bible teaches about man's fallen condition, but I'm just giving it to you now by way of preview.

At this point, Edwards is merely echoing what Augustine had taught centuries earlier with a similar distinction. Augustine said that man had a *liberum arbitrium*, or a free will, but what man lost in the fall was *libertas*, or liberty—what the Bible calls “moral liberty.”

The Bible speaks of fallen men as being in bondage to sin. Those who are in bondage have lost some dimension of moral liberty. They still make choices and they still have a free will, but that will is now inclined toward evil and disinclined toward righteousness. There is none who does good. There is none righteous. There is none who seeks after God, no not one (Rom. 3:10–12). That indicates something has happened to us on the inside.

Jesus says that the fruit of the tree comes from the nature of the tree (Matt. 7:17–20). Fig trees don't produce oranges. You don't get a corrupt fruit from a righteous tree. There is something wrong inside of us where our desires and our inclinations reside—it is in bondage. But even that fallenness does not eliminate the faculty of choosing.

There is really no difference between Augustine and Edwards on this. What Augustine is saying when he says, “We still have free will, but not liberty,” is the same distinction that Edwards is making between moral ability and natural ability.

Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)- Chapter 9: On Free Will (**The 1689 London Baptist Confession is essentially identical**)

1. God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that is neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil. (Deut 30:19; Mat 17:12; James 1:14)
2. Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and well-pleasing to God, but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it. (Gen 1:26; Eccl 7:29. Gen 2:16-17; 3:6.)
3. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, 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. (John 15:5; Rom 5:6; 8:7. • b. Rom 3:10, 12. • c. Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13. • d. John 6:44, 65; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:2-5; Titus 3:3-5.)
4. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so as that, 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. (John 8:34, 36; Col 1:13. Rom 6:18, 22; Phil 2:13. Rom 7:15, 18-19, 21, 23; Gal 5:17.)
5. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only. (Eph 4:13; Heb 12:23; 1 John 3:2; Jude 1:24.)

Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647):

Q. 29. How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ? A. We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit.

Q. 30. How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ? A. The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.

Q. 31. What is effectual calling? A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

Q. 33. What is justification? A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ? A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

Q. 87. What is repentance unto life? A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Westminster Larger Catechism (1647):

Q. 25. Wherein consisteth the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell? A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions.

Q. 58. How do we come to be made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured? A. We are made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured, by the application of them unto us, which is the work especially of God the Holy Ghost.

Q. 59. Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ? A. Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel.

Q. 72. What is justifying faith? A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

Human Nature in Its Fourfold State (Thomas Boston, 1676-1732)

- These four states, which are derived from the Scripture, correspond to the four states of man in relation to sin enumerated by Augustine of Hippo:
 - 1) **able to sin, able not to sin (posse peccare, posse non peccare)** → **Before the Fall (Innocence)**
 - 2) **not able not to sin (non posse non peccare)** → **After the Fall (Sin)**
 - 3) **able not to sin (posse non peccare)** → **Regeneration/Conversion**
 - 4) **unable to sin (non posse peccare)** → **Glorified State**
- It must be noted that in all four states, man is free to choose what to do or not to do according to his will. His will is free because it is not forced or compelled from without. However, his will is determined by his own moral inclinations. This means that while the glorified man will always choose to do good because his heart's inclination is always to glorify God; the natural fallen man will always do what is evil (in God's eyes), because his motives are never pure, and never to glorify God.
- Before the Fall, man was able to choose to do either good or evil, his heart, and so his inclination and disposition, being innocent and not tainted by sin. But Adam's state was mutable and when Satan tempted Eve, and then through Eve, tempted him, he chose to sin against God by eating the forbidden fruit and so fell from the estate of innocence.

What About John 3:16? (John Samson)

John 3:16 οὕτως γὰρ (so for) ἡγάπησεν (he loved) ὁ θεός (the God) τὸν κόσμον (the world) ὃστε (that) τὸν νιὸν (the son) τὸν μονογενῆ (the begotten one of him) ἔδωκεν (he gave) **ἵνα** (in order that) πᾶς (all) ὁ πιστεύων (the believing ones) εἰς αὐτὸν (into him) μὴ ἀπόληται (shall not to perish) ἀλλ' (but) ἔχει (shall have/posess) ζωὴν (life) αἰώνιον (eternal)

The question usually posed here is something like this: How can you reconcile belief in Divine election with John 3:16? Most assume it is not possible. Actually, if we carefully take a look at the text and not just assume its meaning, John 3:16 is a wonderful scripture that in no way undermines the truth of Divine election.

It is certainly the most famous verse in the entire Bible. Here Jesus says: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* When hearing the biblical teaching on the subject of Divine election, some seek immediate refuge in a traditional, and may I say unbiblical, understanding of this verse.

They say this: “God can’t elect certain ones to salvation because John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that gave His Son so that WHOEVER believes in Christ would have eternal life. Therefore, God has done His part in offering the gift of salvation in His Son and just leaves it up to us to receive the gift through faith. Amen. Case closed!”

Though this is a very common tradition, and one I held to myself for many a year, it needs to be pointed out that in spite of the emphasis made by many people on the word “whoever,” the text does not actually discuss who does or does not have the ability to believe.

Someone might just as well be quoting John 3:16 to suggest that all churches need to have red carpets in their sanctuaries! Why? Because that also is not a topic addressed in the text. The verse is often quoted, but actually it has no relevance to the subject.

For the understanding of a text in the New Testament, we need to check the original language in which it was written, namely *Koine* Greek. It may come as a big surprise to learn that in the original Greek of John 3:16, there is no word corresponding to our English word “whoever.” The word “whoever” is expressing a phrase in Greek which is difficult to express smoothly in English.

Literally, the text reads *“in order that every the one believing in Him, not to perish, but have everlasting life.”*

It says “every” or “all the ones believing...” That’s hard to express in English. But in essence, it is saying “all the believing ones.” That’s what is being communicated. It is saying that there is no such thing as a believing one who does not receive eternal life, but who perishes. Though our English translation says “whoever believes,” the literal rendering is accurately translated as “every believing one” and the emphasis is NOT AT ALL on the “whosoever,” but on the belief. The ones BELIEVING will not have one consequence, but will have another. They will not perish but will have everlasting life.

Why? Because of the main verb – God GAVE His Son. God gave His Son for the purpose (Greek: *hina*) that every believing one should not perish, but that every believing one should have everlasting life.

John 3:16 actually speaks of a limitation -- of a particular, rather than a universal, redemption. For clearly, not everyone will be saved. Only those who believe in Christ are saved. The Father loved the world in this way: He gave His

Son for the purpose of saving those who believe. The Son is given so that the believing ones will not perish, but by contrast, have eternal life. That is the purpose of the giving.

So, what John 3:16 teaches is: *ALL who do A (believe in Him), will not B (perish), but will have C (everlasting life)*

What does this text tell us about who will believe or who can believe? The answer is: ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! The text does not address the issue of who will believe or who can believe.

However, if you do want to know John's view on who can exercise faith, he does deal with that question – just not in this text. If you go back a few verses in the chapter to John 3:3, John quotes Jesus as saying "*unless a man is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" That's clear, isn't it?

Jesus said that a prerequisite, a necessary condition that must be met before someone can enter the kingdom of God, is that they are born again. We enter the kingdom of God through faith. But in order to enter the kingdom, we must first be born again, or made spiritually alive. If we are not FIRST born again, we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

This same issue is certainly addressed by Jesus, 3 chapters further on, in John 6:44, when He said, "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*" It should be noted that the one drawn by the Father to the Son is also raised up on the last day to eternal life. (John 6:39, 40)

In John 6:65, Jesus said, "*This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*"

Of course, all who exercise true faith will certainly be saved. John 3:16 clearly teaches that. Anyone believing in Christ will not perish but have everlasting life. But what we need to ask is, "Who will have faith?"

The Reformed, and biblical, view is that only the elect will be brought to faith. No one can come to Christ unless God does something to enable that person to come. So why do people miss what John 3:16 teaches or read into it (eisegesis) what is not actually in the text?

That's easy. It is because of how they have heard John 3:16 used over and over and over again. They have an ingrained, preconceived notion of what the verse says, and fail to question that assumption and read the text for what it actually says. It's a tradition. And if you dare question it, you might be accused of questioning the very word of God, rather than their traditional interpretation of the word of God. And that can create a whole lot of emotion.

This text, of course, is just one example of many that could be quoted, but it does show us how powerful our traditions can be. We need to continuously expose our traditions to the light of God's Word. If they can be confirmed by detailed study of the text of Scripture, we can be sure that the traditions are valid. If not, then we need to dispense with them.

Charles Spurgeon Quotes (on free will)

- *Free will carried many a soul to hell, but never a soul to heaven.*
- *And I will go as far as Martin Luther, in that strong assertion of his, where he says, "If any man ascribes any of salvation, even the very least, to the free-will of man, he knows nothing of grace, and he has not learned Jesus Christ aright."*
- *Free-will doctrine-what does it? It magnifies man into God. It declares God's purposes a nullity, since they cannot be carried out unless men are willing. It makes God's will a waiting servant to the will of man, and the whole*

covenant of grace dependent on human action. Denying election on the ground of injustice, it holds God to be a debtor to sinners.

- *Free will I have often heard of, but I have never seen it. I have always met with will, and plenty of it, but it has either been led captive by sin or held in the blessed bonds of grace.*
- *His will cannot be neutral or 'free' to act contrary to his nature.*

Martin Luther (The Bondage of the Will)

The following quotes come from, what Luther saw as his most important work, "The Bondage of the Will". "De Servo Arbitrio" is the classic statement of the religion of faith. It is solidly rooted in Scripture. If Luther is correct in his thesis, then all religions predicated on human ability are woefully mistaken.

For context, Luther, is responding to some of Erasmus' assertions in support of man's natural moral ability to obey the gospel. Erasmus presupposed that all of God's commands to obey proved that we had the "free-will" or moral ability to do so. Erasmus would often ask, "if we can do nothing, what is the purpose of all the laws, precepts, threats and promises in the Bible? All these precepts are useless if nothing is attributed to the human will. If it is not in the power of every man to keep what is commanded, all the exhortations of Scripture are of necessity useless," In response, Luther, with great wit and irony exposes why Erasmus position on free will is an erroneous, unscriptural doctrine which, ultimately, undermines the gospel itself.

The following quotes hit the crux of the issue: whether Christ alone saves or whether salvation is synergistic cooperation of man and God. This is still extremely relevant for today's Christian, for many of us carry the unbiblical assumption that Erasmus held, which wrongly concludes any command from God to believe or obey the gospel, must somehow imply the moral ability to do so. Large numbers of evangelicals today make this same jump in unaided logic and build a whole theology on it but as Dr. Luther said to Erasmus, "when you are finished with all your commands and exhortations ... I'll write Ro.3:20 over the top of it all" ("...through the law comes knowledge of sin."). In other words, the commands exist to reveal not our ability but rather our inability, and this moral impotency does not take away our responsibility to obey.

Among the commands is God's summons to all men everywhere to repent and believe the gospel; an impossible act of will apart from a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. For it is beyond man's innate ability to believe when left to his own native resources. As Jesus himself says of Peter's confession of Him as the Christ, "...flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." i.e. Only the quickening grace of Jesus Christ applied by the Spirit can illumine God's word in such a way (to open blind eyes and deaf ears) wherein we are able to see and know the truth, beauty and excellency of Jesus Christ. Those who are unregenerate cannot see Christ's excellency and thus have no capacity to love what is spiritual, and so are not partly, but wholly dependent on God to translate them from darkness to light.

The following are some quotes from Dr. Luther to this end:

- *"For if man has lost his freedom, and is forced to serve sin, and cannot will good, what conclusion can more justly be drawn concerning him, than that he sins and wills evil necessarily?" Martin Luther BW pg. 149*
- *"... 'if thou art willing' is a verb in the subjunctive mood, which asserts nothing...a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively." "if thou art willing", "if thou bear", "if thou do" declare, not man's ability, but his duty. pg 157*
- *"the commandments are not given inappropriately or pointlessly; but in order that through them the proud, blind man may learn the plague of his impotence, should he try to do as he is commanded." pg. 160*

- Speaking to Erasmus, "Throughout your treatment you forget that you said that 'free-will' can do nothing without grace, and you prove that 'free-will' can do all things without grace! Your inferences and analogies 'For if man has lost his freedom, and is forced to serve sin, and cannot will good, what conclusion can more justly be drawn concerning him, than that he sins and wills evil necessarily?' Martin Luther BW pg. 149
- "Even grammarians and schoolboys on street corners know that nothing more is signified by verbs in the imperative mood than what ought to be done, and that what is done or can be done should be expressed by words in the indicative. How is it that you theologians are twice as stupid as schoolboys, in that as soon as you get hold of a single imperative verb you infer an indicative meaning, as though the moment a thing is commanded it is done, or can be done? pg 159
- "The passages of Scripture you cite are imperative; and they prove and establish nothing about the ability of man, but only lay down what is and what not to be done." pg 161
- "Does it follow from: 'turn ye' that therefore you can turn? Does it follow from "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart' (Deut 6.5) that therefore you can love with all your heart? What do arguments of this kind prove, but the 'free-will' does not need the grace of God, but can do all things by its own power...But it does not follow from this that man is converted by his own power, nor do the words say so; they simply say: "if thou wilt turn, telling man what he should do. When he knows it, and sees that he cannot do it, he will ask whence he may find ability to do it..." 164
- "By the law is the knowledge of sin' [Rom 3:20], so the word of grace comes only to those who are distressed by a sense of sin and tempted to despair." pg. 168
- As to why some are touched by the law and others not, so that some receive and others scorn the offer of grace...[this is the] hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered." pg. 169
- The "imperative or hypothetical passages, or wishes, by which is signified, not what we can do, or do do...but what we ought to do, and what is required of us, so that our impotence may be made known to us and the knowledge of sin may be given to us." 174
- God Incarnate says; 'I would, and thou wouldst not.' God Incarnate, I repeat, was sent for this purpose, to will, say, do, suffer and offer to all me, all that is necessary for salvation; albeit He offends many who, being abandoned or hardened by God's secret will of Majesty, do not receive Him thus willing, speaking, doing, and offering. As John says: "The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness com comprehendeth it not' (John 1.5)
- And again: "He came unto his own, and His own received Him not. (v. 11)"The law indicates the impotence of man and the saving power of God... "if any man will come after me': 'he that wills to save his life'; 'if ye love me'; 'if ye shall continue'. In sum, as I have said-let every occurrence of the conjunction 'if', and all imperative verbs, be collected together (so we may help the Diatribe...) [indicating that all commands to believe or follow Christ are conditional, not stating man's ability]
- Let all the 'free-will' in the world do all it can with all its strength; it will never give rise to a single instance of ability to avoid being hardened if God does not give the Spirit, or of meriting mercy if it is left to its own strength." p. 202
- "omnipotence and foreknowledge of God, I repeat, utterly destroy the doctrine of 'free-will'...doubtless it gives the greatest possible offense to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. it seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been such a stumbling block to so many great men down through the ages. And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man. (That was before I knew how health-giving that despair was, and how close to grace.)" Luther BW pg. 217

- "...it was not of the merits of Jacob or Esau, 'but of Him that calleth that it was said of Sara: the elder shall serve the younger' Paul is discussing whether they attained to what was spoken of them by the power or merits of 'free-will'; and he proves they they did not, but that Jacob attained what Esau did not solely by the grace of "Him that calleth" 224
- Now, since on God's own testimony, men are 'flesh', they can savour of nothing but the flesh; therefore 'free-will can avail only to sin. And if, while the Spirit of God is calling and teaching among them, they go from bad to worse, what could they do when left to themselves, without the Spirit of God? Your [Erasmus] observation that Moses is speaking of the men of that age is not to the point at all. The same is true of all men, for all are 'flesh'; as Christ says, 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh' (john 3:6) How grave a defect this is, He Himself there teaches, when he says: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (v. 5)...I call a man ungodly if he is without the Spirit of God; for Scripture says that the Spirit is given to justify the ungodly. As Christ distinguished the Spirit from the flesh, saying: "that which is born of the flesh is flesh", and adds that which is born of the flesh cannot enter the kingdom of God', it obviously follows that whatever is flesh is ungodly, under God's wrath, and a stranger to His kingdom. And if it is a stranger to God's kingdom and Spirit, it follows of necessity that it is under the kingdom and spirit of Satan. For there is no middle kingdom between the kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan, which are ever at war with each other. 241, 253
- "I say that man without the grace of God nonetheless remains the general omnipotence of God who effects, and moves and impels all things in a necessary, infallible course; but the effect of man's being carried along is nothing--that is, avails nothing in God's sight, nor is reckoned to be anything but sin." 265
- "the Baptist's word means that man can receive nothing unless given him from above; so that free-will is nothing!" I say that man, before he is renewed into the new creation of the Spirit's kingdom, does and endeavours nothing to prepare himself for that new creation and kingdom, and when he is re-created has does and endeavors nothing towards his perseverance in that kingdom; but the Spirit alone works both blessings in us, regenerating us, and preserving us when regenerate, without ourselves..." 268
- "All the passages in the Holy Scriptures that mention assistance are they that do away with "free-will", and these are countless...For grace is needed, and the help of grace is given, because "free-will" can do nothing." 270
- "I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want "free-will" to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground; but because even were there no dangers. I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success! But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favour promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God."