

The Augsburg Confession

Article 18

Article 2 (Of Sin) and Article 18 (Of Freedom of the Will) are very closely connected, because when a person comes to a faulty conclusion on one, he will usually have a faulty understanding of the other. The errors of Pelagius and Arminius which we studied under Article 2 are examples of this. Pelagius, in his desire to combat those church-goers who felt that their salvation gave them the liberty to sin, taught that human beings are morally indifferent and must choose between right and wrong - also in connection with their salvation. As a result, he also had to abandon the Scriptural teaching on Original Sin. The same was also true of Arminius. He taught that human beings can and must aid in their own conversion (synergism), and so our free will could only have been partially impaired by the fall.

On the other hand, if one understands and accepts the Scriptural teaching of Original sin, and confesses that since the fall we are all by nature hostile toward God and totally depraved of any spiritual powers, then we would have to condemn any thought of freedom of our human will in spiritual things.

Freedom of the Will in Outward Matters

The Lutheran reformers confessed: *“It is also taught among us that man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorably life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends.”* Human beings were not created by God as robots. They are not programmed to do everything that their Creator wants them to do. We were given the ability to reason and to be able to make rational choices. In the garden of Eden God gave them one command and Adam and Eve had a choice. Through the fall the image of God was lost and human beings are now at enmity with God by nature, but they have not lost their ability to reason, to make choices. But this freedom of our will is limited to outward matters only - to things having to do with this life.

In order to show that they are not teaching anything new they quote from Augustine: *“It is only in the outward acts of this life that they have freedom to choose good or evil. By good I mean what they are capable of by nature: whether or not to labor in the fields, whether or not to eat or drink or visit a friend...”*

These outward matters are what we call “civil righteousness”. Civil righteousness is present in all people because God has given us a natural (innate) understanding of right and wrong.

Paul describes this: ***“For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Romans 2:12-16).***

One problem is that many people confuse civil righteousness (obeying the law in outward matters) with spiritual righteousness (being acceptable before God). Many are inclined to agree with the Pelagians and their concept of moral indifference, because they view civil righteousness as an evidence of spiritual righteousness.

Consider the person who is a professing atheist but lives an outwardly noble life, helps out at a local shelter once a week, and gives large financial contributions to charitable organizations. It may seem that such a person is inclined to good, in spite of his unbelief in Christ. But Scripture says:

- ***“Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*** - Romans 8:7-8
- ***“Without faith it is impossible to please Him.”*** - Hebrews 11:6
- ***“For whatever is not from faith is sin.”*** - Romans 14:23
- ***“Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** - Matthew 7:17-19

The benefit of civil righteousness is that it makes life easier here on earth by keeping a certain amount of order. But we must always remember that civil righteousness cannot save us. The only righteousness that can deliver us from sin is the righteousness in Christ which declares us right before God. In connection with this righteousness, our free will has no part.

Again Paul writes: ***“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (Romans 3:21-31).***

Bondage of the Will in Spiritual Matters

Article 18 continues: *But without the grace, help, and activity of the Holy Spirit man is not capable of making himself acceptable to God, of fearing God and believing in God with his whole heart, or of expelling inborn evil lusts from his heart. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God, for Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:14, “Natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God.”*

While civil righteousness may be attributed to free will, spiritual righteousness can come only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Any co-operation of man with God in connection with salvation destroys the Scriptural teaching of Grace alone. Paul says: ***“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Romans 11:6).***

The Bible does call upon believers to continue in the faith. Peter writes: ***“Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10).*** There are also numerous conditional statements made in Scripture which seem to point to a work of the human

being: *“For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Hebrews 3:14)*. In such passages we must remember that *“it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13)*. Our salvation is brought about completely through the working of God, and not through any free will on our part which aids God in His saving us. Instead, these passages are a reminder that faith can be lost and demonstrate that the cause of our damnation is not God, but ourselves. To go further than this is to fall into one of two common errors:

- An over-emphasis on freedom of the will leads to the Arminian teaching of synergism which attributes part of man’s salvation to the co-operation of man with God. Both salvation and damnation lie on the shoulders of the individual sinner, according to their choice.
- An over-emphasis on bondage of the will leads to the Calvinist teaching of double predestination which attributes man’s damnation to the eternal decree of God. Both salvation and damnation lie on the shoulders of God, according to His choice.

Scripture teaches that God has saved us, not because of anything in us, but through His grace - we cannot contribute to our salvation in any way. Also, Scripture nowhere teaches that God has predestined anyone to eternal damnation - rather, He desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).