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Theological Reflection on Free-Will and Salvific Agency

What is at stake theologically and salvifically, if humankind has no free will to choose God or reject God? As one church historian once said free-will, or free choice in relation to theological anthropology is the “power of the human will by which a person can apply themselves to things which lead to eternal salvation or turn away from them.” By this, we come to understand that each human being has voluntary liberty to decide to receive the grace of God, or reject the grace of God –which would result in rejecting God altogether by rejecting His good and perfect gift. Historically there were many individuals during the medieval period through the reformation period, who made various arguments for and against the concept of free-will. Some of these persons were Erasmus, Calvin, Luther and Zwingli who had differing perspectives leading to a plethora of ecclesial debates.

The underlining concern and vibe at that time, which brought some controversy was, the attempt to answer the question “how is humankind saved: Is it the work of God alone, or the work of man alone according to his free will”? One extreme point would be that God does everything for us, and even forces us to accept His work on Calvary’s cross. A just as extreme point, on the other side of the spectrum would be to say, we earn our own salvation –without God doing most of the heavy lifting. Or still, the more balanced perspective, that we cannot have salvific reality

apart from both the power of God, in redemption and our response to that said work of Christ on Calvary's cross.

The questions that follow this are: what happened to the will when Adam sinned in the garden, in other words, does man still obtain his free will? It must be noted that for Luther the answer is the will (or flesh) only serves and produces sin, whereas Erasmus would say that the will (which is born out of a man's reason) is obscured or affected but not extinguished. He further makes distinction from Luther by valuing both the free-will of humankind and the grace of God in salvation. Erasmus tries to show the two are not opposed to each other.

Explaining the relationship between grace and free-will, Erasmus says that the grace of God and the free-will of man, as two causes, come together in one action "in such a way, however, that grace is the principle cause and the will secondary, which can do nothing apart from the principle cause since the principle is sufficient in itself". Therefore, this means in regard to salvation, God and humankind work together in the sense that humans have free-will, but this will cannot attain salvation of itself. The will needs help from grace in order to merit eternal life. He means that in order for humankind to merit salvation, he cannot be completely carried by God, but he must have a free-will by which he chooses God voluntarily.

I was recently reading articles and volumes on the doctrine of salvation. What caught my attention was the relationship between personal freedom and choice in regards to salvific reality. Within the parameters of the essays by John Randolph Lucas, namely, *Freedom and Grace*, he argues that freedom is a prerequisite to moral responsibility, and this does not extinguish the role

of grace in salvific agency. In other words, if we have any freedoms (or liberties) we have the ability to choose God, or reject God, and this effects how we move towards salvation. This corroborates the argument at hand, that the concept of determinism does not fully work or fit rationally with the doctrine of free will.

That is to say that we have a choice to make in salvation. Similar to a door, God [is able to and] has opened the door to Salvation, but we have to walk through that door. We have to make a decision, and scripture supports this: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12, NIV). From the Old Testament to the New Testament, the scriptures affirm that we must make a salvific decision. More evidence in the former covenant sounds like the statement from Joshua: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the idols of your ancestors that you served beyond the Euphrates, or the idols of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). Concurrently, the latter covenant speaks in a plethora of places about salvific decisions, here is another case study: “He then brought them out and asked ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved –you and your household” (Acts 16:30-33).

The natural argument here highlights the concept of ‘cause’ and explores the complexity of ascribing multiple events to solely one outcome. It is complex because it will be difficult to find the true reason something happened, when in reality, there are several aspects that contribute to the variables and agents within a particular event. There is always a reason to judge why something

happened, especially when looking at what did not take place, and possibilities around the why. It is our choice through free-will, given by God, that we can reject or receive God's grace. Yet this power of choice that we have has been given by the grace of God, therefore, it is ultimately up to us to answer for denying, or receiving the grace of God, in the context of the salvific works in and by Christ as agent.

If we did not have the ability to choose, we wouldn't be able to make basic life choices. Thusly, God didn't force Pharaoh to believe in Him or let the people go, but he gave him opportunity to choose. You've most likely heard of the determination and determinism argument, the former has the ideal that you control all of what happens, while the latter claims the ideal that the powers greater than us makes all of the decisions for us (or at the very least tries to make our free-will, worthless), these can be the systems, environments, that are in place. However, in salvation, according to the directions in this dispensation, one cannot think that if they wait for salvation it will come to them by osmosis.

Salvation that comes from the God of Heaven is a call and response, it is the process by which God did the heavy lifting on Calvary and we respond back to God by our public baptism and journey through sanctification –becoming made into the divine image and likeness again. To attain salvation one must have faith, just like the scriptures reveal. To have an active faith is to follow Jesus (the embodiment of the divine word) and journey with Him even through trials. We must respond by choosing the will of God as encased in scripture, because God has already made salvation available by His redemptive plan.