

Free Agency

by John Murray

John Murray's sermon on Free Agency explores the interplay between human volition, moral responsibility, and divine sovereignty in the context of Reformed theology.

Duration: 50:21

Scripture: Genesis 6:5, James 1:13

Topics: "Free Agency"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of natural liberty and human agency. He emphasizes that man is endowed with real agency, but God is the ultimate agent. Man acts dependently and excessively within the limits of this created realm. The preacher refers to Calvin's Institutes, specifically Book 2, chapters 3 and 5, to support his points. He highlights the importance of recognizing that the power of volition does not explain why individuals exercise that power in certain ways, leading to the diversity of actions among people.

Transcript

Our Lord and our God, we humble ourselves before Thee. Give us the grace of humility. Confess our own sins and the sins of our people.

Beseeking Thee to have mercy upon us individually. Your great name be our Savior. Glad to see you back, Mr. Kim.

I have a pre-agency. I believe that's the title, I believe. Reformed theology.

Tithing given to it in the Westminster Confession of Faith. God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty. See if nature determines to good or evil.

There are just two or three that I wish to mention for your study. Not necessarily prescribed for your reading. But they are particularly relevant when you wish to do wider reading.

And the first is in Calvin's Institutes, Calvin's Institutes, Book 2, Chapters 3 and 5 to one paragraph of Book 2. There is more history involved in that very brief paragraph. In most paragraphs, which you will find, 3, 5, see 3, 4, but 2, 2. And then I think that his Dogmatic Theology, Volume 2, Chapter 3, has one of the analytic and satisfactory treatments in all of Reformed theology. I think he excels Charles Hodge at this point in respect of clarity and analysis.

Shed, Volume 2, Chapter 3. Fairly long chapter, but nevertheless it is very valuable. And then by way of supplement to that, also in Shed, is Theological Essays, pages 230 through 242. Twelve pages.

230 through 242. And from the standpoint of history, in his History of Doctrine, Volume 2, pages 50 through 90. History of Doctrine, Volume 2, pages 50 through 90.

On the whole, Shed's History of Doctrine is rather superficial. I would not recommend it as a thoroughly trustworthy History of Doctrine for that reason. But that section is excellent on what is called the Anthropology of Augustine.

Anthropology of Augustine. Now, I'm going to discuss this topic right now, but the reality of human action. That man is endowed with real agency.

The ultimate agency. And consequently man always acts dependently, in that sense derivatively, yet within the limits of this created and dependent realm. This created and dependent realm.

His agency is not illusory. Free agency. Real agency.

Under that, of course, almost a platitude, as far as statement is concerned, is an all-important consideration when it comes to our practical thinking. All-important. Our practical thinking, and I'm not talking about practical in opposition to theoretical, but actual thinking.

Because so often our thought becomes so governed by the foreordination of God and by the all-pervasiveness of his providence that we are very liable, suppressed altogether, the thought. Human action. Human agency.

Well, second, the responsibility of human action. Second, the responsibility of human action. Again, this is a commonplace, it's almost a platitude, but nevertheless it must be stated that man's acts are worthy of blame or approval because he lives within the sphere of ought and ought not.

He belongs to a sphere which is that of ought or ought not. And the reason why this is true is that he is made in the image of God. He is made in the image of God.

And therefore he owes to God action that is consonant with the likeness that defines his identity. He owes to God, I say, action, consonant with the very likeness that defines man's identity. Remember that once you grant man's identity as created in the image of God, this is an ultimate action.

It's an action, and therefore an ultimate. The human thought could not be otherwise. It can't go back further.

And this, since likeness to God defines man's identity, he must, must render to God action that is consonant with that likeness that defines man's identity. Now the freedom, the freedom of human action, the freedom of responsibility rests upon the fact that the act or the action is the result of abolition. Man acts because he chooses to act or wills to act.

And if something occurs through his instrumentality, which he did not will, it occurs through his instrumentality and he did not will it, then it is an event which he is not responsible for. It's you, and you hit somebody else and then somebody else, a boy, and you didn't will it. That's victim.

You're the instrument. You think that the death of that little girl has absolutely no responsibility. Action is an event.

It's outside responsibility. Now we often use an expression in this event that I did something against my will. I did it against my will.

And that is not strictly true. That is from the standpoint of psychological analysis, it isn't strictly true. What we mean is that we did something reluctantly, that the action was distasteful to us.

But if we perform the action because we willed to do it, and we willed to do so, because we preferred to do what was distasteful to that which would have been pleasing. We must, a voluntary act on our part, a volition on our part, may have an entail of consequence which we did not will. An entail of consequence which we did not directly will.

But nevertheless, if that is the consequence arising from our volition, then we are responsible for the consequence, as well as for the action from which it emanates. Now, to sum up, the truth is simply this. I am saying simply this.

We are responsible for acts because they are the result of volition. They are our volition because we have chosen in that particular case. Now, fourth, we have the determinant, just determinant.

We will, of course, because we have the power to will. That is, we have the power of volition that belongs to our responsible agency. We have the power of volition.

That, of course, is really a platitude, but this is the way to lay it down as the premise for further analysis. The power of volition does not explain why we exercise that power in a certain way. We exercise this power out as we exercise this power in different ways at different times, and different people exercise this same power wholly divergent respects, wholly divergent ways.

So the mere possession of the power does nothing respecting the diversity among man in respect of the character, the quality of that. We see how it's important. All that we have, the power of volition, must belong to our very identity.

But, you see, these two things don't explain the diversity that exists. Sometimes I exercise that power for good. Another time I exercise it for what is bad.

Some men characteristically exercise that power in the promotion of what is good, in the doing of what is good. Some men characteristically use that power in the doing of what is evil. So the mere fact of power and volition doesn't explain anything.

So, you see, you have to include something here between man's metaphysical constitution and the acts which register his volition. You have to... And that is just saying that there is more in man than his metaphysical composition and the various acts by which his agency is registered. I repeat, there is much more in man than his metaphysical composition and the series of acts by which his agency is registered.

And what is that? What is that that's in between? Well, you can call it by a great variety of terms. You can explain it by a great variety of terms. You can call it the character.

Character is his characteristic disposition, his imminent disposition, his preponderant propensity. And I think in modern usage perhaps the best term to use is dispositional complex. Dispositional complex.

And what I mean by that is the complex of desires, of propensities, of inclinations, of motives, of tendencies, of desires, and so forth. All complex that may appropriately be called the dispositional complex. The dispositional complex.

And the Bible calls it what? The heart. And remember, when the Bible uses the word heart, it's in thinking of the emotional side of humans, the character of humans, of the human person. In heart there is the intellective, the emotive, and the bodative, according to the usage of Scripture.

We often use the word heart to designate what falls into the emotional field. But that's not the use of the word heart in Scripture. It has all three elements, intellective, emotive, and bodative.

But the Scripture calls this dispositional complex the heart. Out of the heart of the issues of life, you remember, out of the heart of our Lord that we had the other day, a good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is good, and the evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is evil. Of our Lord that we had the other day, a good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is good, and the evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is evil.

Out of the heart, again, Jesus said, out of the heart of man put the evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, uncleanness, all these things, he says, come from within. They come from within, and they defile the man. Well, that's the biblical term, heart.

And so, you see, the whole emphasis, Scripture from beginning to end, from early Genesis on to the end of the Scripture, the whole emphasis of Scripture, upon the heart of the determined, moral, religious character, witnesses to the truth, this person's analysis, that what determines volition, determines volition, is the imminent disposition, propension of the heart, and that's all I mean when I say that that is the term, power of course, determined, determines the direction in which that power is engaged. Now, this term from the word we call it, this inclusiveness of, pardon me, no, the self-determination of human action, I'm going a little too far ahead, the self-determination, the self-determinant action, yes, of self-determination. Now, you see, it might be argued that there is, after all, no liberty of volition, no freedom of volition, if volition itself is determined by the dispositional complex, such of course is here, because the dispositional complex which determines volition, the dispositional complex which is our goal, the dispositional goal, volition indeed is causally determined, determined of all exact self, and these determinations that arise from our dispositional complex are never extraneous to ourselves, they are never, as it were, imposed on, without, that applies all along the life, human action, all along the life, was created, he was holy, that holy disposition, that holiness of heart, and he, through his volition, received a moral character, when he fell, heart became depraved, depraved, depraved, because there was that inward dissection that he overtly, openly transgressed.

When man is renewed, after the image of God, he is given a new dispositional complex, a new heart, when his actions reflect, there is never any violation, any contravention of that sequence, that volition is part of the heart, the dispositional complex from which that volition proceeds. And here, all important, namely, nothing, nothing can make a man well, nothing can make a man well, when he inclines not to, nothing can make a man well, when he inclines not to, with ailing, preponderant, decisive inclination, is in the opposite direction, or in other words, when his dispositional complex is in the opposite direction, because this would involve a contradiction, namely, that he wills what he doesn't. You can't have the negative and the positive, both the positive and the negative, at the same time.

In fact, it would be a violation of the very nature of man, that volition be contrary, contrary to, and so no amount of temptation, no amount of temptation, can make a man well. A man can succumb to temptation, yes, a man can succumb to temptation, but he succumbs to temptation only when, which is proposed or suggested in the text, only when his dispositional complex aligns with it, no amount of compulsion, for what a man is compelled, you cannot have compulsion, and volition, and will, you cannot have compulsion, and volition, or will, a man is compelled, compelled, it is not the age of Scripture, and eloquence, in various passages, but James 1, 13 and 14, James 1, 13 and 14, Let no man say, I am tempted of God, for God cannot be tempted of evil, of evil things, God cannot be tempted of evil things, he is not tempted of evil things, but every man is neither tempted, he any man, but death, but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away, every man is tempted, that he succumbs to temptation, is seduced, meaning tempted, every man is seduced, succumbs to temptation, when he is drawn away of his own lust, he is baited, and the language there is very alcohol, adduce, tight to bait, and it is precisely this principle, that is denounced in that significant statement of the Westminster, quoted to you, that God hath endued the will of man, with that natural liberty, It is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to prove to our ego the God-offering content. That position has been overlooked.

The Augustinian and Reformed doctrine of free agency has been misrepresented. That's going to stupefy the children. The Augustinian Reformed theology has always been for this principle, that it is impossible, impossible for man to be tempted, impossible for any man responsibly determined in that self-determination to outperform the sovereignty of God.

But within the discussion, within the framework of the discussion now, he himself, and there is no denying it, but he is in self-disdain for whatever purpose is outside the realms. It is death, not an act of man. Well, to sum up, a man is responsible for his acts because they are due to his volitions.

He is responsible for his volitions of exercise without compulsion. That's what he is in the inner bent and mind. Free agency non-life.

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