

# TO BE FREE, OR NOT TO BE FREE?

## AN ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF FRANCIS TURRETIN'S DOCTRINE OF FREE WILL

by Carl F. Gobelman

### Introduction

*“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.”<sup>1</sup>*

THE ABOVE STATEMENT from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* gives us a clear statement on the Reformed doctrine of human free will in a state of sin. This doctrine can be clearly supported from the Scriptures in passages such as: John 6:44, 65; Romans 3:9-10, 12, 23; 8:7-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13. Yet despite such clear support from the text of Scripture and from the Confession, there are those who wish to deny the doctrine of original sin and its effects on human freedom; or if not outright deny the doctrine, they dilute it to make it more palatable to their notion of freedom.

However, this debate is not new. In fact, it's nearly as old as the church itself. The first two great champions in this debate were the British monk, Pelagius (354–420), and the great “doctor of the church,” Augustine of Hippo (354–430). After the teachings of Pelagius were condemned at the Council of Carthage (418), there developed a mediating doctrine between that of Pelagius and Augustine that eventually came to be termed *Semi-Pelagianism*. Charles Hodge gives a brief overview of the three systems of thought:

There have been three general views as to the ability of fallen man, which have prevailed in the Church. The first, the Pelagian doctrine, which asserts the plenary ability of sinners to do all that God requires of them. The second is the Semi-Pelagian doctrine ... which admits the powers of man to have been weakened by the fall of the race, but denies that he lost all ability to perform what is spiritually good. And thirdly, the Augustinian or Protestant doctrine which teaches that such is the nature of inherent, hereditary depravity that men since the fall are utterly unable to turn themselves to God, or to do anything truly good in his sight.<sup>2</sup>

The central focus of this debate is over the nature of free will. Oftentimes participants in this debate are using the phrase “free will” equivocally. For example, the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian view of free will maintains that the

---

1. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 9, section 3.

2. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), II, 257.

will itself is free, or undetermined. A. A. Hodge writes on this position: “That the will of man in every volition may decide in opposition, not only to all outside inducements, but equally to all inward judgments, desires, and to the whole coexistent inward state of the man himself.”<sup>3</sup> This notion of free will, proponents assert, is necessary for humans to be responsible for their actions before God and for the offer of the gospel to have any meaning. However, the Augustinian (Reformed) view of free will doesn’t place self-determination in the faculty of the will, but in the person as a whole. The will acts—or is determined—by the strongest desire or inclination in the person at any given moment. So it is more proper to speak of persons being free to will or choose whatever they desire than it is to say that their will is undetermined or indifferent. The Pelagian/Semi-Pelagian notion of free will requires that the will be in a state of indifference or equilibrium prior to it (the will) determining a course of action. But it is apparent that if this is actually the case, no one will ever choose one action over its opposite. The will must be inclined toward one option or the other, and this inclination does not come from the will itself, but from an individual’s rational understanding.

As can be seen, the topic under discussion holds a vital importance for Christian life and practice. Where one stands in this debate will largely determine how one preaches and presents the gospel, how one evangelizes, and whether one sees humans as inherently good or inherently sinful. One’s view of this doctrine will also color how one sees the role of God and the role of humans in salvation. Does God act alone—or *monergistically*—in salvation and receive all the glory, or does God work together (i.e., *synergistically*) with humans; God providing the means of salvation and humans making the all-important decision to exercise their faith and make salvation a reality?

To aid us in our examination, we will engage the work of Protestant theologian, Francis Turretin (1623–1687), whose three-volume work, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*,<sup>4</sup> is an invaluable resource in this debate. Turretin’s work, which is polemical in nature, not only lays out the classic Reformed view on this topic, but also deals with the opposing views (in his day, these would be the Socinians, Arminians, and the Papists<sup>5</sup>) in light of the Reformed doctrine. Our first order of business will be to examine Turretin’s treatment of humans before the fall. This will give us the proper framework from which to consider human freedom after the fall—what was retained and what was lost as a result of the fall. Once we have examined what Turretin has to say on this subject, we will provide some analysis and concluding remarks as it pertains to our topic.

### The State of Humans before the Fall

Before we can consider human freedom and its relationship to human depravity, we need to consider human freedom in a state of innocence. The Reformed confessions attest to the *fourfold* state of man: (1) Man in his state of innocence; (2) Man in his state of sin; (3) Man in his state of grace; (4) Man

3. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 292.

4. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992).

5. According to A. A. Hodge, *Socinianism* is really a more developed form of *Pelagianism*, and *Arminianism* follows in the *Semi-Pelagian* strain. By the time of the Reformation and following, Roman Catholicism (the *Papists*) developed a *Semi-Pelagian* outlook thanks to philosophers such as Luis Molina and others (Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 94-111).

in his state of glorification.<sup>6</sup> Turretin, in his *Institutes*, also argues for a fourfold state of man, but uses the terminology of the institution of nature (*insti-tuto*), the destitution of sin (*destituto*), the restored of grace (*restituto*), and the appointed of glory (*praestituto*).<sup>7</sup> Human freedom is different in each of these four states. Turretin defines what he means by the “state of innocence,” namely “the first condition of man created after the image of God in internal goodness and external happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, in his state of innocence, Adam (man) possessed liberty, but liberty can be spoken of in different ways. Just as the state of man can be described as fourfold, Turretin also delineates a fourfold concept of liberty. The first aspect of liberty is that of independence. Of this, Turretin says, “The liberty of independence ... belongs to God as the first being; this is opposed to the necessity of dependence which belongs to all creatures.”<sup>9</sup> Next is the liberty from coercion “by which man acts spontaneously and with freedom.”<sup>10</sup> The third aspect of liberty is what Turretin calls “rational liberty from brute and physical necessity.”<sup>11</sup> This would be the aspect of liberty that differentiates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Human beings being made in the image of God make rational choices as opposed to other animals that act by brute instinct. The fourth and final mode of liberty is that “liberty from slavery by which man is subject to the yoke of no slavery, either of sin or of misery.”<sup>12</sup>

Another thing that needs to be considered is whether or not necessity is compatible with liberty. As will become clearer once we get into the subject of the free will of man in a state of sin, necessity is not inherently incompatible with human liberty (as the opponents of the Reformed position want to argue). Clearly some forms of necessity destroy liberty, but others actually make liberty possible. Turretin makes a distinction between extrinsic necessity (that which comes from the outside) and intrinsic necessity (that which comes from the inside), and in both cases (extrinsic and intrinsic) there is a necessity that impedes liberty and a necessity that enhances liberty. The necessity of coercion<sup>13</sup> (which is extrinsic) and the necessity of instinct<sup>14</sup> (which is intrinsic) are both incompatible with human liberty. In the former case, the action is not flowing freely and spontaneously, and in the latter case, the action is not flowing from rational understanding. However, the “hypothetical necessity” that arises from God’s eternal decree or from the “existence of the thing” is a type of extrinsic necessity that, in either form it arises, is consistent with liberty; in fact, these hypothetical necessities make human liberty possible—there can be no freedom if God hadn’t decreed the existence of all things to begin with. Similarly, the intrinsic necessity of the determination of the will by the intellect is also compatible with liberty, and furthermore also makes liberty a possibility.

6. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 9, sections 2 – 5; *Belgic Confession*, article 14 (this article only mentions the first two states).

7. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.1).

8. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.2).

9. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.4).

10. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.4).

11. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.4).

12. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 569 (8.1.4).

13. “Coaction” essentially means coercion.

14. By “instinct,” I am referring to what Turretin calls the necessity of “physical and brute determination” (*Institutes*, p. 570).

After giving us clear and concise definitions of liberty and necessity, Turretin goes on to define what kind of liberty Adam possessed in his state of innocence. Because of the Creator/creature distinction that is essential to classic Christian theism, the first type of liberty—that of independence—is not constitutive of Adam’s liberty. Neither can it be considered in any one of the four states of human beings. The liberty of independence is unique to God as Creator, and is, in a sense, incommunicable to the creature. As Turretin writes, “The liberty of Adam was not the liberty of independence because he ought always to be in subjection (as a creature to his Creator, as a second cause to the first and to depend upon his will).”<sup>15</sup> But Adam possessed the other three forms of liberty—from coercion, from physical necessity and from slavery—prior to the fall. The first two (liberty from coercion and liberty from physical necessity) make up what Turretin calls man’s *essential liberty*. As he puts it, “It belongs to man in whatever state constituted and has two characteristics: preference and will, so that what is done may be done by a previous judgment of the reason and spontaneously.”<sup>16</sup> The third form of freedom that Adam possessed—namely, the freedom from slavery—Turretin says was “accidental.” In other words, it was not part of Adam’s essential makeup, but was added on and can be removed (or lost). This becomes clearer when Turretin says, “Although [Adam] was free from slavery of sin (because created just and upright) still he was not free from mutability.”<sup>17</sup> Adam was created “just and upright” (i.e., without sin), but Adam was able to sin because his freedom from slavery (to sin) was mutable—i.e., subject to change.

Therefore, because Adam’s liberty from slavery was mutable, one can argue that there was indifference within Adam. This is not to be understood in the sense of an indifference of the will—i.e., the will could be simultaneously “carried to good and to evil.” Rather, as Turretin says, “this indifference must be understood in the first act, as to simultaneity of power, because the power or faculty of Adam was so disposed through the mutable condition in which he had been created that it could be determined to evil no less than to good.”<sup>18</sup>

So while man’s essential liberty (freedom from coercion and freedom from physical necessity) exists in all four states, this liberty from slavery (that which Turretin calls “accidental”) differs in each of the four states. Employing the classic terminology used by Augustine, Turretin lays out how liberty differs in the accidentals among the four states of man. In his state of glorification, man is “not able to sin” (*non posse peccare*). In his state of grace, man is “able to sin and not to sin” (*posse peccare et non peccare*). In his state of innocence (i.e., Adam’s liberty), man was “able not to sin” (*posse non peccare*). Finally, in his state of sin (our particular interest in this discussion), man is “not able not to sin” (*non posse non peccare*).

At first blush, it might seem that man in his state of sin (*non posse non peccare*) has no liberty. If man is “not able not to sin,” how can he be free? In order to answer this question, we next turn to Turretin’s treatment of man in his state of sin—i.e., after the fall. In what way can we say that man is free in a state of sin?

---

15. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 570 (8.1.6).

16. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 570 (8.1.6).

17. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 570 (8.1.7).

18. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 571 (8.1.8).

## The Free Will of Man in a State Of Sin

In the tenth topic of Turretin's *Institutes*, he addresses the subject of man's free will in a state of sin, and he does so through asking five questions: (1) Whether or not the term "free will" should even be retained in Christian teaching; (2) Whether or not every form of necessity is "repugnant" to freedom of the will; (3) Whether free will consists in indifference or in "rational spontaneity;" (4) Whether in a state of sin man is so enslaved to sin that he can do nothing but sin, or whether there is enough power to incline not only to outward moral good, but inward, spiritual good as well; (5) How to look at the good works of the "heathen" (i.e., unbeliever). We will address these questions in the order Turretin provides them.

### First Question: May We Properly Speak of "Free Will"?

The burden of the first question is to determine whether or not "free will" can even be properly spoken of in a state of sin. As we closed the last section, if humans in a state of sin are, as Augustine says, "not able not to sin," it would appear that humans are not free not to sin. As such, they are not free to respond to the gospel of grace. This presents us with the situation of God requiring something of fallen persons (namely, repentance from sin and faith in Christ) in which they are unable to respond. If humans cannot respond to the offer of the gospel, then humans cannot be free (so say the opponents of the Reformed position). At this point, one can see the temptation to modify the effects of sin on human beings. In the case of those who follow in the footsteps of Pelagius, they wish to assert that humans are wholly capable of responding to God and performing the good God requires. The effects of Adam's fall were limited only to him. Every other person is born in the same state as Adam *prior to the fall*. On the other hand, those who follow the mediating position of Semi-Pelagianism will not deny the effects of the fall of Adam to his posterity. They will teach that God's grace is necessary to overcome the effects of sin so that humans can make a legitimate choice to obey or disobey. In either case, the results are the same; namely, the power to respond or not to respond lies in human beings. Persons make the final call as to their eternal fate. This must be so in order for them to be responsible for their choices and for God's judgment of unrepentant sinners to be just.

Turretin's response is essentially this: We cannot sacrifice the effects of the fall and the complete and total depravity of man on the altar of human free will. He writes:

Who is ignorant of the gigantic attempts of the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians on this subject [effects of sin and the fall]! They deny either wholly the impurity of nature or extenuate it most astonishingly to extol the strength of free will.... Nor do the Jesuits, the Socinians, and Remonstrants of our day labor for anything else than on this subject ... to bring back (either openly or secretly and by burrowing) Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism and to place the idol of free will in the citadel.... It is of great importance, therefore, that the disciples of true and genuine grace should oppose themselves strenuously to these deadly errors and so build up the misery of man and the necessity of grace that the entire cause of destruction should be ascribed to man and the whole glory of salvation to God alone.<sup>19</sup>

---

19. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 659 (10.1.1).

Here is the crux of the matter in this debate. If humans can, by their free will, respond to the offer of the gospel, then they have something of which to boast and some of the glory of salvation will be theirs. This stands against the testimony of Scripture, which says that we are saved by grace through faith, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, God emphatically says he will “not give his glory to another.”<sup>21</sup> Turretin is absolutely correct in that we should always strive to acknowledge the deadness of humans in sin and the absolute glory and sovereignty of God in salvation.

In addition to the abuses of the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians in elevating free will beyond its proper due, Turretin goes on to consider whether or not free will is even biblical. As he says, “The word ‘free will’ (as also ‘self-determining power’ [*autexousioul*] used by the Greek fathers) does not occur in Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Turretin asserts that “free will” is a Platonic notion that was brought into the Christian schools through the influence of many of the Church fathers who were former Platonists. This goes back to the earlier discussion of freedom in which Turretin denotes four ways in which freedom can be defined. This concept of “self-determining power” falls into Turretin’s first notion of freedom, namely the freedom of independence. Let’s call this “autonomous free will.” Only God is autonomous; that is Turretin’s point. Humans, as creature, cannot be autonomous for then they would be able to exercise their will outside of the parameters of God’s sovereignty. Since humans are dependent upon God for their very existence (to which no serious student of Scripture would deny), so also must their volition be dependent on God.

However, human dependence upon God does not remove our responsibility before God. Because of this, “free will” still has a place in Christian doctrine; but it must be understood properly: “Still because it has now been received in the church by a long usage, we do not think [free will] should be dismissed to the philosophers from whom it seems to have been derived, but should be usefully retained, if its right sense is taught and its abuse avoided.”<sup>23</sup> The goal of this endeavor is to properly understand human freedom in a state of sin and how that fits together with God’s sovereignty.

In the second part of the first question, Turretin asks, “To what faculty of the soul does [free will] properly belong—the intellect or the will?” This is crucial to the concept of free will that is advanced by Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians. The advocates of those systems would insist that the freedom resides in the faculty of the will; hence, freedom of the *will*. Turretin notes, though, that freedom cannot be said to reside in either the will or the intellect separately considered. Rather, the proper way to view this is to see freedom residing in both, seeing that both the intellect and the will are faculties of an individual soul: “The subject of free will is neither the intellect, nor the will separately, but both faculties conjointly. As it belongs to the intellect with regard to the decision of choice; so it belongs to the will with regard to freedom.”<sup>24</sup> Freedom resides in the individual, not in one faculty of the soul or the other. The intellect is free in the sense of determining whether or not something is good. The will is free in that once a determination is made, it moves to desire that which is good and avoid that which is bad.

20. Ephesians 2:9 (ESV).

21. Isaiah 48:11 (ESV).

22. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 660 (10.1.2).

23. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 660 (10.1.3).

24. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 660 (10.1.4).

Second Question: Is Every Sort of Necessity  
Repugnant to Free Will?

In the second question, Turretin wishes to consider the relationship between necessity and free will. The opponents of Reformed Theology wish to claim that necessity of every kind is incompatible with liberty. On the surface, this seems like a logical statement as the terms “necessity” and “liberty” seem to be antonyms of one another. However, once necessity is examined more closely, it will be seen that not all forms of necessity are incompatible with liberty.

Turretin identifies six forms of necessity: (1) “Necessity of coercion arising from an external agent;” (2) “Physical and brute necessity occurring in inanimates and brutes who act from a blind impulse of nature or a brute instinct and innate appetite;” (3) “The necessity of the creature’s dependence on God;” (4) “Rational necessity of the determination to one thing by a judgment of the practical intellect;” (5) “Moral necessity or of slavery arising from good or bad habits;” (6) “The necessity of the existence of the thing or of the event, in virtue of which, when a thing is, it cannot but be.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Turretin also distinguishes between two characteristics of free will in which, he says, “its formal nature consists.” The first he calls *choice*, which denotes that when something is done it is done “by a previous judgment of reason.” The second is called *willingness*, which says that what is done is done “voluntarily and without compulsion.” Choice, says Turretin, rightly belongs to the intellect, whereas willingness belongs to the will.

Given all of that, it can be seen which forms of necessity contend against freedom of the will and which conform to it. The “necessity of coercion” contends against liberty in that what is done is not done *willingly*. Similarly, “physical and brute necessity” is not compatible with liberty in that what is done is not done *by choice*. But as Turretin says, “If these two species of necessity mentioned by us contend against free will, it is not so with the others which can exist with it and by which it is not so much destroyed as preserved and perfected.”<sup>26</sup>

First to be considered is the “necessity of the creature’s dependence on God.” As Turretin says, “Free will does not exclude, but supposes it.” It supposes it in two senses: First, in the sense of dependence on God’s providence; second in the sense of dependence on God’s foreknowledge and decree. Providence not only maintains the existence of all things, but it also governs all things to God’s desired end. God’s foreknowledge and decree ensure the certainty of future volitional acts, so that they are dependent upon them (though in no way caused by them). In these two ways, creaturely freedom is preserved and knowable to God. Second is “rational necessity.” This form of necessity is also compatible with free will because it simply asserts that a moral act necessarily follows from the judgment of the intellect.<sup>27</sup> Third is “moral necessity arising from good or bad habits.” Necessity in this sense is also compatible with liberty, though it may not seem so at first glance. It can rightly be said that we are slaves to our habits. A habit, or strong inclination, can appear to make liberty null and void, but “this servitude by no means

25. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 662 (10.2.4).

26. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 662 (10.2.6).

27. Recall the earlier discussion in which we saw that freedom resides in both the intellect *and* the will. The intellect determines the goodness or badness of something and the will either desires or avoids what the intellect previously determined.

overthrows the true essential nature of liberty.”<sup>28</sup> In our slavery to sin, we are not sinning by a necessity of coercion (no one is making us sin), nor are we sinning by a physical or brute necessity (as if we are acting purely on instinct). Moral necessity is neither of those other two forms of necessity, which have previously been determined to be incompatible with liberty. Therefore, as Turretin says, “Although the sinner is so enslaved by evil that he cannot but sin, still he does not cease to sin most freely and with the highest liberty.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, there is the “necessity of the event.” This form of necessity is simply the fact that once a thing comes into existence, it cannot not be; it is certain and necessarily so regardless if it came to be freely or contingently.

From the foregoing analysis, we see that there are forms of necessity that are completely compatible with human liberty insofar as they do not limit our ability to choose, nor do they limit our willingness to act. Therefore, to say that all forms of necessity are “repugnant” to human liberty is not to consider the matter carefully. However, one can still argue that our complete dependence on God—through the decree and through providence—seems to be incompatible with human liberty. This brings us back to our earlier discussion about the “self-determining power.”<sup>30</sup> Can human liberty be determined by God? The opponents of the Reformed position will wish to argue that this cannot be; that the human will must be autonomous. But that clearly cannot be the case for the simple fact that human beings are completely dependent upon God for everything. The Scriptures say, “In him we live and move and have our being.”<sup>31</sup> We cannot be completely dependent upon God and be autonomous at the same time. Furthermore, if we are completely dependent upon God, then this must include our volitional actions as well. So as Turretin will say, “Although the will is free, this does not prevent its being determined by God and being always under subjection to him. This is so because liberty is not absolute, independent and uncontrolled ... but limited and dependent.”<sup>32</sup> God alone is “absolute, independent and uncontrolled,” and since we are not God, we must be limited and dependent upon him.

From here, Turretin goes on to discuss the relation of the will to both God’s eternal decree and his acts of concurrence,<sup>33</sup> and to our own intellect. Here is where Turretin can seem to be contradicting himself. As to the first relationship (our will in relation to God’s eternal decree and concurrence), he says, “[The will] is rightly said to be so determined by God as also to determine itself.”<sup>34</sup> This tension can be resolved by considering the fact that God’s decree not only determines the ends, but the means used to achieve those ends.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is accurate to say that in relation to the decree and

28. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 663 (10.2.8). The “true essential nature of liberty” was discussed in 10.2.5 to consist in *choice* and *willingness*.

29. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 663 (10.2.9).

30. Turretin discussed this back in 10.1.2 and 10.1.3 (p. 660).

31. Acts 17:28 (ESV).

32. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 664 (10.2.11).

33. By concurrence, I mean that aspect of God’s providence by which he “co-operates” with secondary causes, sustaining them and directing them to his appointed ends.

34. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 664 (10.2.13).

35. “God so concurs with second causes that although he previously moves and determines them by a motion not general only but also special, still he moves them according to their own nature and does not take away from them their own proper mode of operating. The reason is because as the decree of God is occupied not only about the determination of things which ought to be done, but also of the means according to which they are to be done relative to the nature and condition of each, thus actual providence...secures not only the infallible futuration of the thing decreed, but also its taking place in the very manner decreed” (Turretin, p. 513; 6.6.6).

God's acts of concurrence, the will "determines" itself. It does so because God ordains all that comes to pass and he ordains that they come to pass in the manner he so decreed, in this instance through the acts of human volition. In this sense, human liberty is far from curtailed; rather, it is established (as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states in 3.1).

What about the relationship between the will and our intellect? In this sense, the will cannot be said to determine itself; rather, it is determined by "by the intellect whose last judgment of practical intellect it must follow."<sup>36</sup> What is in view here is the internal deliberations that we all make—whether consciously or unconsciously. The intellect weighs the pros and cons of a given choice, and once that choice is made the will acts upon it. Therefore, the will is rightly determined by the judgment of the intellect, while at the same time we are choosing and acting freely and without constraint.

### Third Question: Does the Formal Sense of Free Will Consist in Indifference or in Rational Spontaneity?

In the third question, Turretin tackles the issue of whether or not the formal sense of free will consists in indifference or in rational spontaneity. By "formal sense," Turretin means free will as to its essence, i.e., "as belonging to a rational being in every state."<sup>37</sup> This Turretin calls "free will in the genus of being." In the next question, Turretin will discuss free will in the "genus of morals" as it pertains to human beings in various states (e.g., in sin or in righteousness). The question then becomes: What is the essence of free will? Is the essence of free will found in indifference or in what Turretin called "rational spontaneity" (or willingness). Those who opposed Turretin in his day—the Jesuits, Socinians and the Remonstrants—held to the former: that the essence of free will lies in indifference. Turretin will argue for the latter.

At this point, it might be helpful to come to a clearer understanding as to what Turretin means by "indifference." Using the very words of his opponents, Turretin defines indifference as: "The faculty by which all things requisite for acting being posited, the will can act or not act."<sup>38</sup> In other words, indifference is the ability to choose the contrary. When presented with a choice of any kind, for true liberty to exist one must be able to choose indifferently from either option. Before tackling this question, Turretin provides some clarifying comments regarding indifference. He makes a distinction between "indifference in the first act or in a divided sense" and "indifference in the second act and in a compound sense." The first distinction is called "passive and objective" and the second is called "active and subjective." Perhaps a mundane example will help illustrate what Turretin means by this distinction. Suppose one were to enter into a cafeteria and is presented with all of the various choices for lunch. In the first act, all the person knows is that he is hungry; what he wants to eat is still up in the air. Therefore, at this point in time, the will is indifferent—the person can opt for a sandwich or for Mexican or for a hamburger or for any of the other myriad choices available. However, in the second act, as the person begins to weigh his options, indifference begins to disappear. The intellect is engaged and the will begins to lean one way or the other based on the understanding of the intellect. Given this

---

36. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 664 (10.2.13).

37. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 665 (10.3.1).

38. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 665 (10.3.3).

distinction, Turretin will affirm indifference in the first act, but deny it in the second.

Turretin provides four reasons why liberty does not consist in indifference (considered in the “second act”). The first reason he provides is “such an indifference to opposites is found in no free agent, whether created or uncreated.”<sup>39</sup> This type of indifference is certainly not found in God, who is the supreme Free Agent and who alone possesses autonomy. God is free, but necessarily and immutably so. He always and necessarily acts freely according to his nature, and his nature is unchanging. Neither can we say that indifference was found in Christ, who by his very nature could not sin and always obeyed God (doing so most freely). The same is true regarding the angels—whether elect or reprobate. The former are necessarily determined to good and the latter are necessarily determined to evil; yet in all cases they do good or evil freely.

Turretin considers some objections to this first reason. First, in regards to God himself: Given the Creator/creature distinction, if God is perfectly and immutably free (and is so without indifference), then indifference cannot be considered an essential element of liberty. Secondly, some may wish to contend that Christ was able to sin (although he, in fact, did not sin). Turretin blasts this notion for the blasphemy that it is: “Far be it from us either to think or say any such thing concerning the immaculate Son of God whom we know to have been holy, undefiled, separate from sinners; who not only had no intercourse with sin, but could not have both because he was the Son of God and because he was our Redeemer.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, the angels and saints in heaven are not able to sin (*non posse peccare*). Are we to say that saints on earth have more freedom through indifference than the saints in heaven? Hence for this first reason (no indifference found in any free agents), indifference cannot be said to be of the essence of liberty.

The second reason Turretin gives is this: “The will can never be without determination as well extrinsic from the providence of God, as intrinsic from the judgment of the intellect.”<sup>41</sup> This has been demonstrated all throughout Turretin’s overall argument. We have seen earlier that the decree of God makes future human volitional acts certain, and his providence is that by which God carries out his eternal decree, so God will “cooperate” with human freedom to execute his divine plan. Furthermore, we have seen that the will acts on the last judgment of the intellect. This second reason leaves little room for argument.

The third reason argues, “The volition of the highest good and of the ultimate end cannot be without the highest willingness.”<sup>42</sup> Turretin argues masterfully that in the writings of his opponents and of the philosophers of the age it is consented that human beings seek the highest good (as they perceive it) because no one wishes misery upon himself. If this is the case (and it is), then how can liberty consist in indifference? In order to seek and pursue the highest good, the will must be active and engaged—freely and necessarily—in choosing the end and the means.

In Turretin’s fourth reason why liberty cannot consist in indifference, he argues by way of negation. He assumes the position of indifference and gives us four reasons why this position is absurd. First, assuming indifference,

---

39. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 666 (10.3.5).

40. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 666 (10.3.6).

41. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 666 (10.3.7).

42. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 667 (10.3.8).

prayers and exhortations are meaningless because in doing so, we are asking God to work in the heart and soul of another person to move them out of a state of indifference. These prayers and exhortations would be in vain since God cannot move someone out of a state of indifference. Secondly, if indifference is assumed, the promises of God become vain as it pertains to holiness and the efficacy of grace, again because it would require someone to be moved from a state of indifference, which cannot be done. Thirdly, if indifference is assumed, God essentially becomes impotent. No matter how he acts in the lives of people, there is no guarantee that he would be effective because our indifference leaves us in a state of equilibrium. Fourth and finally, if indifference is assumed, God ceases to be God because he would no longer be sovereign.

Turretin now moves to argue the positive case, namely, that liberty must be placed in willingness, not indifference. Willingness is defined as, “Man does what he pleases by a previous judgment of reason.”<sup>43</sup> Turretin begins by reiterating what he said in 10.2.5—namely, free will consists in two things: (1) Choice and (2) Willingness. Choice removes physical or brute necessity and willingness removes the necessity of coercion. This is the necessary conclusion given Turretin’s reasoning thus far. It almost seems absurd to deny this conclusion—that free will consists in man doing as he pleases. There is no need to invoke indifference to counteract the stigma of necessity. Freedom and necessity are compatible; in fact, they are *necessarily* so:

Thus there is no free agent (either created or uncreated) in which these two characteristics are not found; nor for a time only, but always, so that this rational willingness being posited, liberty is posited; removed it is taken away. Hence it follows that it is an inseparable adjunct of the rational agent, attending him in every state so that he cannot be rational without on that very account being free; nor can he be deprived of liberty without being despoiled also of reason.<sup>44</sup>

This consideration of free will in its formal cause, or its “genus of being,” is the possession of man in all four of his states. Whether we are speaking of man in his state of innocence, man in his state of sin, man in his state of grace or man in his state of glorification, free will always and only consists in a man choosing willingly according to the dictates of his rational understanding. However, since man in the state of sin is the subject of our inquiry, this must be considered more closely. If there is anything that was lost in the fall of man, it was not free will. In other words, human inability to choose and will the good as it pertains to God and salvation is not due to a deformity in the essence of the will—i.e., in the ability to willingly choose in accordance with human reason. Rather it is, as Turretin calls, in the “genus of morals” that man’s deformity must be found. To that we now turn in Turretin’s fourth question.

#### Fourth Question: Does Free Will in a State of Sin Consist in Bondage to Sin?

In his fourth question, Turretin turns to discuss free will in a state of sin. Everything up to this point has been setting the stage for this discussion. It

---

43. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 667 (10.3.10).

44. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 667 (10.3.11).

may be laborious work to get to this point, but these have been necessary excursions to lay the groundwork for answering this question. Turretin formally states the question: “Therefore the question returns to this—whether unregenerate man still has such strength of free will as to be indifferent to good and evil and is able not to sin without the grace of regeneration. The adversaries affirm; we deny.”<sup>45</sup>

Turretin gives a survey of the various views of his opponents in 10.4.6, 10.4.7, and 10.4.8, which all amount to affirming that humans in the state of sin still possess, to some degree, the requisite strength of will to choose the good without the efficacious grace of God. This is usually done by disarming human depravity or weakening God’s holiness and hatred of sin. As for Turretin’s view: “the orthodox, although maintaining that the free will of man always remains as to the essentials, still think that no power to good survives in it.”<sup>46</sup>

Turretin expounds six reasons to support the orthodox position of free will. Free will is impotent because: (1) Man is a slave to sin; (2) man is dead in sin; (3) man is spiritually blind and hardened in heart; (4) the Bible describes man as powerless to change his state; (5) from 1 Corinthians 4:7; and (6) because God’s grace results in a new creation. We will deal with these reasons individually.

Scripture uses the language of slavery to denote our state of misery in sin. Our Lord Jesus, in John 8:34, says we are “slaves to sin.” The Apostle Paul, in Romans 6:12, 14, warns Christians not to let sin reign in their bodies or not to let sin have dominion over them. Conversely, for the unbeliever sin reigns in them and has dominion over them. The Apostle Peter, in 2 Peter 2:19 referring to false teachers, says that they are “slaves of corruption.” It is difficult to imagine how much freedom a slave possesses. In fact, the imagery of slavery is poignant precisely because it evinces the idea of a complete lack of freedom.

As if slavery to sin were not enough, the Bible also uses the imagery of death to describe our sinful state in Adam. Again, the Apostle Paul writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.”<sup>47</sup> The imagery of death needs no further explanation. A spiritually dead man cannot respond to the call of the gospel. As Turretin writes, “The same impotence therefore in the dead man to restore himself to life must be said to be in the sinner as to obtaining good or spiritual life.”<sup>48</sup> Third is the language in the Bible that speaks of spiritual blindness or hardness of heart. The Apostle Paul speaks of the unregenerate man as “darkened in his understanding” (Ephesians 4:18), and of believers as being “at one time ... darkness” (Ephesians 5:8). The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the unregenerate as having a “heart of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26). The metaphor of blindness speaks about the unbeliever being unable to see spiritual truth. Likewise, the metaphor of a stony heart denotes human insensitivity toward spiritual matters. In both cases, humans in a state of sin are unable to perform that which is considered spiritually good.

Fourthly, Turretin argues that Scripture attributes to sinners an inability to do any good. To wit: Genesis 6:5, John 15:5, Romans 8:7, 1 Corinthians 2:14, and others are just a sampling of biblical texts that explicitly state man’s inability to freely respond to the call of the gospel and turn from his

---

45. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 669 (10.4.5).

46. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 671 (10.4.8).

47. Ephesians 2:1 (ESV).

48. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 672 (10.4.11).

wicked ways. Perhaps one of the most pointed passages in this regard is John 6:44, which reads, “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 is clear not only from this verse alone but from the context in which this verse is found that no man can receive Jesus or place their faith and trust in him unless the Father does something in them first. One cannot help but feel the force of the overall witness of Scripture on this subject. All of these passages so clearly and explicitly speak of human impotence. Turretin sums this up when he says, “Now why should the Holy Spirit so often insist upon that impotence except to take away from man all power to good and ascribe to grace alone the entire work of regeneration and salvation?”<sup>49</sup>

The fifth reason Turretin puts forward is drawn from 1 Corinthians 4:7, which reads, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” From this, Turretin summarizes: “Man cannot separate himself from another and possesses nothing good which he has not received from another source.”<sup>50</sup> The point Turretin is seeking to make here is that in a state of sin, all humans share the same inability to save themselves. If fallen humans possess free will in the sense the opponents to Reformed theology wish to assert, then it is possible for individuals to remove themselves from this state of sin and misery and separate themselves from the rest of humanity. Turretin’s response is that Scripture says otherwise. Humans cannot separate themselves from their peers, and any ability to do so comes not from within, but from without—namely, from God.

Sixth, and arguably the most potent reason, is that salvation is a work of grace as evidenced by such terms as “regeneration,” “resurrection,” “new creation,” etc. These are terms not simply of a wooing or persuading of God toward persons, but of a great, efficacious work being performed. Only God can regenerate the unregenerate. Only God can resurrect the spiritually dead. Only God can perform the work of new creation.

After providing some corollary arguments,<sup>51</sup> which help clarify his point (but don’t add anything new of substance to the present discussion), Turretin concludes the fourth question by offering some final remarks on human inability. The inability of the sinner should not be spoken of as simply moral or simply natural, but rather as both moral and natural in different ways:

Moral (1) objectively because it is conversant with moral duties; (2) originally because it is induced, arising from moral corruption and voluntarily brought on by the sin of man; (3) formally because it is voluntary and culpable, reflected upon the habit of a corrupt will. Natural also (1) originally because it is born with us and from nature; not created by God, but corrupted by man... (2) Subjectively because it taints our whole nature and implies a privation of that faculty of doing well. (3) Eventually because it is unconquerable and insuperable, no less than the purely natural inability of the blind man to see and of the dead man to rise.<sup>52</sup>

---

49. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 674 (10.4.17).

50. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 675 (10.4.20).

51. These arguments can be found on pp. 677-81 (10.4.22 through 10.4.38). They are very helpful and aid in counting the objections of Turretin’s opponents, but space does not allow us to elaborate on them.

52. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 682 (10.4.39).

The obvious question that arises at this point is as follows: If man is so completely and utterly unable to perform any good whatsoever, “not only civil and externally moral, but internal and spiritual,” then how does one explain the good works of the unbeliever? Turretin answers that in the fifth and final question of the tenth topic.

Fifth Question: Can We Rightly Infer Free Will from the  
Virtues of the Heathen?

If humankind is enslaved to sin, dead in sin, and impotent because of sin; if the human race is, as we hear in Genesis 6:5, capable of “only evil continually,” whence comes the good we see from those who would be considered unbelievers and unregenerate? The pagan can love his spouse and family, the atheist can tell the truth, the heathen can help the unfortunate; in short, bad people can do good things. How does Reformed theology respond to this challenge given its position of the depravity and moral inability of humans in their fallenness?

Roman Catholicism denies the complete and total depravity of humans; that’s how they respond to the above conundrum. According to the Council of Trent (from which Turretin quotes), “Whoever says that all works done before justification, in whatever way done, are truly sins, or deserve the hatred of God, or that the more earnestly one strives to dispose himself to grace, so much the more seriously he sins, let him be anathema.”<sup>53</sup> This is a “shot across the bow” to the Protestant Reformation, which stood firm on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The opponents of Reformed orthodoxy stand united on the front that unregenerate persons can perform meritorious works (or if not strictly meritorious, then they can make salvation a reality through the exercise of their own free will). The only way the opponents can assert this is based on empirical evidence—by the good works they observe from unregenerate persons. How does one reconcile the Scriptures with the empirical evidence without abandoning the total depravity of human beings?

Turretin tackles this problem in the final question of the tenth topic. First we must acknowledge, as does Turretin, that there is some good to be found in the “virtues of the heathen.” As noted above, the pagan can tell the truth, love his spouse, and care for the poor. These are good acts in and of themselves; but, as Turretin says, “we deny that they can be called properly and univocally good works as to the truth of the thing and mode of operation.”<sup>54</sup> Secondly, we must attribute any good performed to the providence of God.

Turretin reaches the obvious and only Scriptural conclusion based on the evidence at hand. Given man’s total and complete inability, “it is evident that no works truly good can be performed by the unrenewed man.”<sup>55</sup> The key phrase in this assessment is “truly good.” Unregenerate persons can perform works that may be considered good after a fashion; but (as will be seen) there is some deformity in the works performed which prevent them from being *truly good*. In 10.5.4, Turretin provides three conditions for a work to be *truly good*: (1) The work must proceed from a heart renewed by faith; (2) the work must be done according to God’s law, not only in the externals, but

---

53. *The Council of Trent*; session 6, canon 7.

54. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 683 (10.5.2).

55. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 683 (10.5.3).

the internals too (i.e., it must be the right action done with the right motives); and (3) the ultimate end of any good work must be the glory of God. All three conditions must be met for a work to be considered *truly good*. Any deficiency in any of the conditions renders the entire act deficient: “Now a good work is from an entire cause, but an evil work from even a single defect.”<sup>56</sup>

Turretin amends this statement a bit in 10.5.6. Good works done by unbelievers are not evil in themselves. Any act that outwardly conforms to God’s law is a good act and should be encouraged. The sins performed in the good works of the heathen are what Turretin calls “accidental”; i.e., they are sin due to some deficiency in the performance of the act, not in the act itself. Thus rather than avoid the performance of good works in order to avoid sinning, good works that are deficient from being truly good should be corrected, not omitted.

Turretin wraps up the fifth question by observing that any good the heathen do is a product of God’s providence and restraining grace. It is apparent that among human beings there are those who excel in various endeavors. Some persons are more just than others. Some are more kind, more honest, etc. This is not due to a greater or lesser measure of strength and freedom of the will, but to God’s providence. He gives grace<sup>57</sup> to some and restrains it from others. Turretin writes: “The cause, therefore, of this difference is to be sought only in the providence of God. While it permits some to sink with impunity into every enormity, it restrains and represses others as with a bit that they may not rush into the same unbridled license with others.”<sup>58</sup>

### Assessment and Conclusion

After considering the argument of Francis Turretin on the subject of human free will in a state of sin, it is clear that Turretin stands in the best of the Reformed tradition. His examination of the subject is both confessional and (more importantly) biblical. The subject under consideration is not an easy one. It is fraught with perils and pitfalls. There is every temptation within us (as sinful human beings) to soften the Reformed position. That is precisely what the Remonstrants did in following the teachings of their founder, Jacob Arminius. However, whenever we attempt to compromise on this doctrine in favor of human liberty and free will, we do what Turretin criticized back in 10.1.1: we make an idol of free will. Whenever the argument is made that the Reformed position is unbiblical in light of passages that stress the role of human choice in the process of salvation, it must be pointed out that it is the opponents of Reformed theology who are mistaken and guilty of importing an alien philosophy into Scripture. The passages that stress the role of human choice must be seen in light of the stronger passages that stress our inability to willingly choose the gospel and walk in obedience apart from God’s prior regenerating operations of grace (see Canons of Dort, III/IV:10-17).

Francis Turretin helps us to navigate these dangerous theological waters. His analysis on necessity, for example, sheds much important light on the nature of freedom and necessity. It is vitally important to demonstrate the compatibility of human liberty with certain forms of necessity. The opponents

---

56. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 683 (10.5.4).

57. By “grace” I am referring to common grace, not saving, or efficacious, grace.

58. Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 685 (10.5.9).

of Reformed theology often mount shallow arguments against the Reformed position from this foundation, and Turretin disarms their arguments while at the same time showing how freedom and necessity are not at odds with one another.

Another area where Turretin's efforts are greatly appreciated is his discussion on the essence of human liberty resting in spontaneity rather than indifference. Indifference, or the ability to choose the contrary, is a cornerstone of Arminian thinking on the topic of free will. Turretin's treatment of this issue proves especially helpful in recognizing that there is an element of necessity in every choice we make—primary necessity being found in God's decree and concurrence, and secondary necessity residing in the will being moved to choose by the deliberations of the understanding.

Finally, in Turretin's analysis of the good works of unbelievers, he provides many helpful insights to assist us in countering the claims of those opposed to the Reformed position of total depravity. There are works that are considered *truly good* and those that are inherently good in and of themselves but deficient in their execution.

The Reformed position regarding humans in a state of sin is often caricatured and misunderstood. It is very easy to misstate an opponent's position and then defeat the mischaracterization. Francis Turretin shows us how nuanced this subject is. To treat it at the surface level only betrays a lack of critical thinking on such deep theological subjects. In an age when many Christians—Reformed or otherwise—have either abandoned or forgotten the theology of the Protestant Reformers, Francis Turretin shows us what a thoroughly biblical and confessional defense of the classic Reformed faith looks like. His is a voice all Christians should seriously heed in these theologically confusing times.