

CONCERNING FREE WILL¹

A large part of our “identity” here at Trinity Presbyterian Church is contained in the word “Reformed.” Presbyterian churches are Reformed churches; “Presbyterian” describes our church government (rule by elders), while “Reformed” describes our doctrines, so when someone asks “what is a Presbyterian church?” they usually really mean “what does your church believe?”

In this section here and in upcoming newsletters I will attempt to address different aspects of the answer we would give to that question.

There is much, of course, that Presbyterian / Reformed, Baptist, and many Evangelical non-denominational churches have in common, but there are certain doctrines that stand out in stark contrast to non-Reformed views. This time, I’ll discuss one of those, the doctrine of free will. The Reformed / Biblical understanding of free will is often misunderstood and/or misstated by those who argue against it so let me try to put in simple terms what Reformed churches have historically believed the Bible teaches concerning whether man has a free will or not; and that is, yes and no. Ok, maybe that is stating it too simply. Let me explain. If by free will we mean that man has the ability to choose between, say, potatoes or stuffing, then we would say that all men do have free will. By doing so we would simply be saying that he has the ability to choose what he desires, according to his nature; he is a “free moral agent” and has the wiring and the moral freedom to choose according to his desires and his nature. But therein lay the difficulty. The problem is with man’s nature and with what he therefore desires! He is fallen, and his will was as affected by the fall as the other aspects of his nature. He is utterly incapable of desiring what is truly good, and of desiring God when left to his own. Scripture uses the analogy that man is dead in his sin, and goes so far as to say that there is none who even seek God, so if “free will” means true neutrality, and the ability to do true good and to choose God on his own, then we maintain, along with the teaching of the Scripture that man does not have a free will, but rather his will is in bondage. His faculty of deciding what is good and what is bad is all mixed up. He doesn’t accept the things that come from the Spirit because they he views them as foolish (1 Cor 2:14). The unregenerate person will never choose God because he views Him as his enemy and wants nothing to do with a God who demands absolute loyalty. He will never come to Christ of his own free will because he is utterly indisposed, and therefore incapable of doing so.

¹ These articles are taken from our Newsletter, TPC Voices.

Now it is also important to consider the other side of the issue. The fact of man's inability to choose God or do good does not in the least take away from man's responsibility to do so. The scripture is abundantly clear that we must repent, turn to Christ, and believe on him.

Since we are responsible to come to God, but are incapable of doing so in our present state then, as they say, "somethin's gotta change," and what has to change is our heart. The Bible teaches that change is something that God effects when he regenerates us (Ezek 36:25 – 26), when we are given birth from above (John 3:3, 5). The fact that we cannot do so on our own does not remove the responsibility laid upon us to do what it commands, but it does take the *initial* step of man's salvation, and thus the credit for it, away from man and gives it to God. But this is only what we should expect since "salvation is of the Lord," "we were dead . . . but God . . . made us alive" (Eph 2:1,4, 5). Your salvation from start to finish is a gift of God. Do we willingly come to God? Yes, but not by merely being persuaded by any outward enticement that is the right or prudent thing to do. Because of our condition, our nature, we won't see it, we don't have the capacity to see it that way on our own, but do so only when and only because God takes the initiative, and first *makes* us willing by changing our wills and our minds by the work of the Holy Spirit, freeing our bound wills to rejoice in Christ and embrace him in faith. Apart from God no one will come to him, but when God works in the heart of a sinner, converting him or her, that person will then freely, of his own free will, come to God through Jesus Christ and be saved.