We Come Most Freely to Christ

On God's' Sovereign Grace and Man's Free Will

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The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), chapter 10, says the following about how God's sovereign regeneration enables us to come to Christ of our own free will:

> All those whom God has predestined to life, and those alone, He is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, to effectually call by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they **come most freely,** being made *willing* by his grace.

More than coming to Him freely, we are *responsible* to come to Him, and held accountable if we do not – not only because we reject Him,[1] but because without Him, we remain dead in our trespasses and sins.[2] That's our natural state at birth, unless we're born again by God's sovereign will.[3]

God, then is absolutely sovereign, and we are absolutely responsible — both for the sinful things we choose to do, and for the righteous things we choose not to do.

Martin Luther wrote a book on the necessity of regeneration, *because* of predestination and our inherent sinful nature. It is titled "Bondage of the Will." Here are his main points:

Point 1. W*e possess no free will in matters of salvation*. We are born entirely enslaved to sin and incapable of choosing God without divine intervention. As Paul explained it to the Galatians, we were natural-born children of the bond woman, Hagar. But we were born again of the freewoman, Sarah (see Gal 4.22-26) — "from the Jerusalem above," which is free.

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[1] Joh 16.8-9: "And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: "of sin, because they do not believe in Me;

[2] Eph 2.1: And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins,

[3] Joh 1.12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Joh 3.3=8: Jesus answered and said to him, "Most a ssuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he *cannot* see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water *and the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. "Do not marvel that I said to you,`You must be born again.' "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is **born of the Spirit**."

1Joh 5.1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is **born of God**, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.

Rom 9.15-16 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, **but of God** who shows mercy.

Point 2. *Monergism vs. Synergism*: Luther argued against Erasmus and the Roman Catholic view of synergism (human cooperation in salvation). He asserted instead, that salvation is solely the work of God's sovereign grace, which we call *monergism*.

Point 3. *Our total Inability:* Luther argued that original sin renders the human will bound to sin and Satan (hence the title of his book), meaning humans are spiritually dead and *cannot* initiate or contribute to their own redemption.

Point 4. *Divine Sovereignty*: He emphasized that God unilaterally determines salvation, ensuring that all glory belongs to God alone. Otherwise human free will would diminish God's omnipotence and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

These points became core to reformed theology. They correspond nicely to the well-known acronym TULIP. That was part of a defense of the *Belgic Confession*, given in response to the Arminian *Remonstrance Articles* of 1611. In brief, TULIP stands for mankind being **T**otally (or pervasively) depraved; God's election of some (but not all) to salvation is **U**nconditional, meaning God saves specific individuals, based solely on His sovereign will and good pleasure, without any conditions or foreseen merits in the people chosen; Christ's atonement is **L**imited to the elect (He did not die for all mankind, or else all mankind would be saved, and hell would be both empty, and an empty threat); God's unmerited grace is **I**rresistible by those who are being saved; and all those who are saved will **P**ersevere to the end, by God's sovereign decree. Having begun a good work in His people, He will see it on to completion (Phi 1.6).

Even so, this tension between God's sovereignty and our free will, is puzzling. It seems a contradiction in terms, rather than a spiritual reality. What exactly happens when we're regenerated by God? What changes in us? What do we receive that liberates us from our bondage to sin, and ends our inability to do anything pleasing to God? How does our inherent governing principle of sin and death, become a governing principle of life and righteousness? And how can that change lead to us *freely* and *voluntarily* choosing Christ? For Jesus said very clearly, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." (Joh 15.16) How can both those things be true at the same time? Are we mere automatons, or free?

In a series of manuscripts explaining the doctrine of regeneration, Stephen Charnock (mid-1600s) gave this helpful explanation of how we voluntarily come to Christ:

> "*The regenerative principle is voluntarily active.* There is a kind of natural necessity of motion, from life and habit. Yet it is also a voluntary choice; it is a power which constrains and inclines the will. The Apostle tells us that a necessity was laid upon him to preach the gospel, 1Cor 9.16 yet it was not a compulsion, but a voluntary act, after his will was changed. The new creature is not constrained from without, but flows freely; he is not forced. The chief work is upon the will; and the proper effect of any work upon the will is voluntariness. The Spirit works to make it willing; its motion then is not by compulsion. There is a sweet necessity of the new nature, and a gracious choice of will, which meet together, and kiss each other. How freely the soul, winged with grace, moves to and for God, like a bird in the air! With what a free and ready spirit the new creature goes to prayer, to reading, and to hearing! How freely it breathes in the air of heaven!

> "It is not spurred by outward interest, nor dragged by the threatenings of the law, nor chided to it by the clamours of conscience, but is gently moved to it, and upheld in it, by a soft, dovelike, and free spirit. How great is the difference between the flowing of a fountain, and the dripping of a sponge! One is free, the other squeezed. Between a statue drawn upon wheels, and a lively motion: one moves, the other is moved. Our Saviour, by washing us from our sins in his own blood, "has made us kings and priests unto God." Rev 1.6 First *kings* — putting into the creature a royal and magnanimous frame, as he did into Saul when he advanced him to the kingdom. And then *priests* — to offer sacrifices to God with this royal and generous spirit. So that it is as troublesome to a soul, having this royal spirit, to *omit* things proper to this frame, as it is for a legalist to *do* them.
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> "Therefore, where there are frequent omissions of duty, or a constant dulness in it, it shows the lack of this kingly frame, and consequently, that we are not washed from our sins in the blood of Christ. There is both such a nature and such a choice that, as the apostle says, "We can do nothing *against* the truth, but only *for* the truth," 2Cor 13.8. So the new creature cannot help but do the things which are holy, just, and good, so far as he is regenerate, even if there were no rule *without* to guide him, because he has a habit of holiness *within* him: a will set to the right point. His former state made him have an aversion to holy services; this state makes all spiritual duties connatural to him (inborn). So that it is as irksome for him to live *without* God in the world, as it was before to live *with* Him. He can as soon strip himself of his own soul, as to act from a renewed principle that is contrary to God and to righteousness." [4]

All of our faculties (mind, heart, will, understanding, etc.) were corrupted by sin, even from the womb, says David (Psa 51.5). He (and each of us) was "brought forth in iniquity;" his mother conceived him "in sin." That was a confession of original sin and of an inherent sinful nature inherited from Adam. But God does not leave His sheep there. He gave David (and us) new birth, a new life. He put a new heart and a new spirit within us (Eze 36.26), removing the heart of stone we were born with, and imparting a heart of flesh: rebirth, regeneration, being born again.

Our faculties are being increasingly restored, despite the old nature which we continue to "put off." [5] We see and understand more and more, and we overcome more and more — as the war rages within us between spirit and flesh, a war which Paul described in Rom 7.23, and Gal 5.17.

We come to Christ most freely, by God's grace; and we must now *live* in that freedom.

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[4] Stephen J. Charnock, *Doctrine of Regeneration* (Presby. Board of Pub., Phila. PA, 1840) Part II, ch. 3.

[5] Rom 8.13-14 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Col 3.5-10 Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him…