

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Exposition of Romans
Number: 106
Text: Romans 8:7, 8; John 8:34
Date: March 9, 2008(am)

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EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part V)

Maurice Baldwin, in a thought-provoking little book, made this observation regarding human nature, “The idea to which (people) most tenaciously cling is, that if they can only *do* those things which are pleasing in God’s sight, then God will grant them life. But in spiritual matters, as in physical, life is *first*, activity afterwards. You meet a man anxiously pressing toward the cemetery, and, stopping him, ask the cause. ‘I have just obtained,’ he says, ‘a large contract, and want men to enable me to fulfill it.’ ‘But why go, of all places, to the cemetery?’ you again ask, ‘only the dead are there.’ ‘The very reason why I *do* go,’ he replies, ‘unemployed hands there, sir! Unemployed hands! I have something for them to do.’ ‘The man’s mad,’ you say. No doubt he is, but not more so, in a spiritual sense, than he who addresses a whole congregation, dead in trespasses and sins, as if they were living members of Jesus Christ.”¹ The Biblical doctrine of original sin deals with humanity’s fallenness and depravity. Our *inability* deals with the fact that our individual depravity is, humanly speaking, irremediable. Thus we are *totally* or *pervasively* depraved and as such are unable to change our own natures or act in a way that is different from that nature.

Review: Last week we sought to examine the central points that surround a proper understanding of what is meant by human inability. Negatively, it is not: 1.) Metaphysical; it is not due to the loss or absence of any component element of our own being, nor to any incompatibility between the component elements in our being, nor to any limitation belonging to our being as creatures. 2.) It did not belong to man originally. We must distinguish between what man is unable to be, become, or do because of his finitude, and the moral inability arising from sin. In his original state man had plenary ability to fulfil all of God’s demands. To maintain otherwise would mean that sin was a necessity of the condition in which he was created. For all failure to meet the full demands of God is sin. 3.) Inability does not mean the loss of natural liberty. This refers to free agency, namely, that man exercise volition according to his character. Inability presupposes liberty. 4.) Inability does not deny the possibility of *justitia civilis*, that is natural and social virtue. Positively, inability means that in sin man is not only indisposed and made opposite to all good but that he is totally unable to be otherwise. It is inability to discern, love, or choose the things that are well pleasing to God. He cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned; he cannot love them because his mind is enmity against God; he cannot choose them because those in the flesh cannot please God. It is the *ou dunatai* (cannot) of the natural man (1 Cor. 2:15).² In the context of Romans 8, the Apostle makes one of the clearest statements possible regarding the helplessness of fallen humanity and whether or not we actually possess the power or ability to, in any way change our condition.

I. THE CONTROL OF THE INWARD INCLINATION (Rom. 8:5). In the fifth verse of the chapter, the apostle gives the first of the reasons why believers walk after the Spirit. In other words, the “for” of the verse is connected with the last clause of the preceding verse. Men walk according to the inward inclination, bent, or disposition that they have. Thus, those who have at their inmost center the lusts of the flesh will walk after the flesh, while the opposite is true

of those who walk according to the Spirit. To “be” after the flesh is to exist only for the flesh, and the clause, then, refers to the unbeliever. They mind the things of the flesh; that is, they think and will according to the desires of the flesh. Their conduct follows accordingly. On the other hand, they that “are” after the Spirit think and will according to inclinations implanted by Him in the inmost being of the believer. They are inclined to holiness, just as the unbelievers are inclined to unholiness. The renewed nature of the believer, upheld by the Spirit, determines the bent of the life.

II. THE ISSUES OF THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT (Rom. 8:6-8). Another reason that believers walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh is that the walk after the flesh issues in death. On the other hand, the inclination of the Spirit (the word here may be a reference to the human spirit in its inclination) is life and peace, realities associated with the life of holiness, and the effects of the justification and sanctification that coexist in the believer. In the remaining verses of this section (vv. 7-8), the apostle argues the last point, giving the reason (“because”) why the mind of the flesh is death. It is hostile to God, the only source of human blessedness. Shedd comments on the clause, *the mind of the flesh is enmity against God*, in this way, “This is one of the tersest definitions of sin.”³ The following “for” explains why the mind of the flesh is enmity against God. It is not subject to the Law of God. Refusing to submit to the Law is the evidence of enmity towards the One who gave the Law. On the other hand, the fulfilling of the Law by the Spirit is the evidence that the Law’s demands are being met. The fulfillment of the Law’s righteousness is evidence of submission to the Lawgiver, of love for His word. But the apostle not only says that the mind of the flesh is not subject to the Law of God, he says it cannot be subject to it. There is no power in the mind, or inclination, of the flesh to submit to the Lord. Shedd comments, “Satan cannot cast out Satan. Compare Mat. 7:18; 12:26; John 6:44,65; 8:34; 15:5; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:5.”⁴ Shedd continues, “Self-will, by the very ideas and definition of it, cannot obey *another’s* will. So long as such a NOMOS, or actuation principle, as the ‘carnal mind,’ remains in the voluntary faculty, it is impossible that this faculty should submissively obey the moral law. If it be then asked, if the will as a *faculty* can free itself from this NOMOS, or inclination, the answer is in the negative, both from Scripture and the consciousness of man. The expulsion of the sinful inclination, and the origination of the holy inclination, in the human will, is a revolution in the faculty, which is accomplished only in its regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Self-recovery is not possible to the human will, though self-ruin is (Hosea 13:9).”⁵ Further, Paul says that the man cannot be subject to the Law of God. In fact, in the eighth verse he says the same thing again in a more concrete form. He is the man who cannot please God. His sphere of life is in the flesh (cf. v.5). The verse is a clear statement of the inability of man. The eighth verse is one of the clearest texts teaching that an unbelieving man cannot please God until a work of the Spirit has been performed on his inner man. In fact, it is a verse that plainly teaches that regeneration must precede faith. The reason is clear. Faith pleases God (cf. Heb. 11:6), but they that are in the flesh, the unsaved individuals, cannot please God. Thus, they cannot exercise faith as long as they are in the flesh. They exercise faith only after the Holy Spirit in efficacious grace takes them out of the flesh and puts them in the Spirit by giving them new life. The first activity of the new life is to believe (cf. 1 John 5:1). The man dead in sins is given new life, which manifests itself in saving trust through the gospel. Could anything be plainer. To affirm that the unsaved man can believe is to deny the biblical teaching on total depravity and human inability; it is to lapse into Arminian error. Dabney summarizes the distinctive features of Arminianism this way, “Virtually it denied that the fallen Adam had brought man’s heart into an entire and decisive alienation from God; it asserted that his election of grace was not sovereign, but founded in his own foresight of the faith, repentance and perseverance of such as would choose to embrace the gospel. That grace in effectual calling is not efficacious and invincible, but resistible, so that all actual conversions are the joint result of this grace and the sinner’s will working abreast.”⁶

III. The Declaration of Our Lord: The Truth Shall Set You Free (John 8:34).

First, Jesus, again and again in John's Gospel, uses an expression that has been variously rendered *verily, verily* (KJV) or *truly, truly* (ESV). The NIV, writes Carson, "adapts the entire construction 'Amen, amen, I say to you,' making it 'I tell you the truth.' The original Hebrew word for 'amen' comes from a root denoting certainty, steadfastness. It was sometimes appended to the end of prayers (e.g. Ps. 41:13) to voice hearty agreement and solemn wish that the prayer be fulfilled; Jesus uses it before an utterance to confirm and emphasize its trustworthiness and importance. In the Synoptics the expression always occurs singly; in John, always doubled."⁷

Second, the translation *commits* (ESV) or *committeth* (KJV) or *who sins* (NIV) all fail to capture accurately the sense of the Greek word ΠΟΙΩΝ (a present active participle that stresses a continuous pattern). The same form is found in John 3:20 in reference to one who constantly practices the truth. Thus an individual act of transgression is not what Jesus has in mind, but the regular or habitual course of living in sin (cf. I John 3:8, 9).

Third, the nature of this slavery is seen in the light of the kind of freedom with which it is contrasted. Contrary to the claims of Arminians,⁸ this condition renders the individual hopelessly in bondage to a vicious slavemaster. Does the unregenerate sinner possess the power of self-determination? Is the sinner *free* in that sense? No, fallen mankind possesses no such freedom. The great Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell long ago pointed out the difference between *original* and *penal* inability. *Original inability* has to do with our status as creatures with all the limitations that belong to man's constitution. *Penal inability* is altogether different. "It is that which man has superinduced by his own voluntary transgression. He was naturally able—that is, created with all the habitudes and dispositions which were involved in the loving choice of the good. Rectitude was infused into his nature; it entered into the idea of his being; he was fully competent for every exaction of the law. He chooses sin, and by that very act of choice impregnates his nature with contrary habits and dispositions. His moral agency continues unimpaired through all his subsequent existence. He becomes a slave to sin, but his impotence, hopeless and ruinous as it is, results from his own free choice. In the loss of habits he loses all real power for good; he becomes competent for nothing but sin; but he is held responsible for the nature which God gave him, and the law which constitutes its eternal norm according to the divine idea and the spontaneous dictates of his own reason can never cease to be the standard of his being and life. All his descendants were in him when he sinned and fell. His act was legally theirs, and that depravity which he infused into his own nature in the place of original righteousness has become their inheritance. They stand, therefore, from the first moment of their being in the same relation to the law which he occupied at his fall. Their impotence is properly their own. Here is not the place to show how this can be. I am only showing that there is a marked distinction between the inability which begins with the nature of a being and the inability which it brings upon itself by sin; that in the one case responsibility is measured by the extent of the actual power possessed, in the other, by the extent of the power originally imparted. No subject by becoming a traitor can forfeit the obligation to allegiance; no man can escape from the law by voluntary opposition to law. The more helpless a creature becomes in this aspect of the case, the more wicked; the more he recedes from the divine idea, from the true norm of his being, the more guilty and the more miserable. To creatures in a state of apostasy actual ability is not, therefore, the measure of obligation. They cannot excuse themselves under the plea of impotency when that very impotence is the thing charged upon them."⁹

CONCLUSION: Paul declares that sin has affected fallen man in *four* important ways: (1.) In regards to his *thinking*: he has his mind set on those things that exclude God (8:5). (2.) In regard to his *state* he is in a state of *death* (8:6). (3.) In regards to his *religion*: he is hostile to God and refuses

to submit to God's Law (8:7). (4.) In regards to his *present condition*: he cannot please God in any way, shape, form or fashion. Could anything be clearer than this? Then why do Christian people run around proclaiming the decidedly unbiblical notion that fallen humanity possesses the ability (free will) to please God? "A sinner is overwhelmed, therefore, by virtue of the imputed guilt of Adam and by the violent attack of spiritual death at the moment of his conception. He is, accordingly, dead in sins and trespasses whether he be old or young, rich or poor, formally honest or dishonest. Out of that death he must first be translated unto life in order to participate in life. As long as he remains captured in that death, he is *powerless*. He *cannot* even *see* the kingdom of God. He does not *want* to believe in Jesus, because he *cannot* come to him, and he does not lay hold of the mercy of God, because as a natural man he *does not even understand* the things of the Spirit of God. After all, the sinner is by that death so alienated from the life of God that even his understanding has been darkened, and he can stand right next to Jesus, see Jesus, yes, he can even hear Jesus' own voice without ever suspecting or guessing that it is, indeed, Jesus. We are told in the Bible by him who tries us and who examines us even to the depths of our hearts that a sinner is 'dead' and consequently has retained no power, no strength, no ability, or capacity to do the greatest and most dreadful thing to which a sinner is called: to cast away his own 'I' and take Jesus in the place of his 'I.' 'Dead' means not to be half or in part alive, but it is the failure, the lacking, the absence of all life. Life can be restored to him again only by the one who alone does wonders. This is in complete agreement with what the Bible teaches us in regard to the sinner's deliverance."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ M. Baldwin, Life in a Look (Revell, 1953), p. 12.

² For extended discussion see John Murray's excellent article "Inability" in the Collected Writings of John Murray II (Banner of Truth, 1977).

³ W.G.T. Shedd, A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 235.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. p. 236.

⁶ R.L. Dabney, The Five Points of Calvinism (rpt. Sprinkle, 1992), p.5.

⁷ D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Eerdmans, 1991) p. 162.

⁸ Norman Geisler contends that it is only a matter of choice and that the sinner could easily choose not to sin. It's a simple matter of making the right choice! cf. his Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election (Bethany House, 1999) p. 62. Another Arminian, Dave Hunt is even more explicit in asserting that what is in view in texts like John 8:34, is not inability but only unwillingness. In fact, Hunt boldly declares that the Bible nowhere teaches that the people who are unregenerate cannot exercise faith and *activate* the grace of God unto salvation! Let us remember that the kind of person Hunt is speaking of, the Bible declares needs to be converted, and that they are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1); he is enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17; John 8:34); "the god of this world has blinded" his mind that he might not see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4); his heart is hardened against God (Eph. 4:18), so that he is hostile to God and in rebellion against God's will (Rom. 8:7). (cf. his debate with James White in Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views (Multnomah Publishers, 2004, p. 79).

⁹ The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell I (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974) p. 397.

¹⁰ A. Kuyper, Particular Grace: A Defense of God's Sovereignty in Salvation (Reformed Free Pub. Assoc. 2001) p. 71.