

Theology

By Nick Hopman, Board of Theology and Ministry

The Augustana District takes its name from the Latin name of the Augsburg Confession (hereafter A. C.). It has this to say about the freedom and limits of the human will, or as people often say, “free will.

” Augsburg Confession, Article 18 “Free Will”

Our [Evangelical-Lutheran] churches [of the Augsburg Confession] teach that man’s will has some liberty for the attainment of civil righteousness and for the choice of things subject to reason. However, it does not have the power, without the Holy Spirit, to attain to the righteousness of God—that is, spiritual righteousness—because natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14); but this righteousness is created in the heart when the Holy Spirit is received through the Word. In Book III of his *Hypognosticon* Augustine said these things in so many words: “We concede that all men have a free will which enables them to make judgments according to reason. However, this does not enable them, without God, to begin or (much less) to accomplish anything in those things which pertain to God, for it is only in acts of this life that they have freedom to choose good or evil. By ‘good’ I mean those acts which spring from the good in nature, that is, to will to labor in the field, will to eat and drink, will to have a friend, will to clothe oneself, will to build a house, will to marry, will to keep cattle, will to learn various useful arts, or will to do whatever good pertains to this life. None of these exists without the providence of God; indeed, it is from and through him that all these things come into being and are. On the other hand, by ‘evil’ I mean such things as to worship an idol, will to commit murder,” etc.

Our churches condemn the Pelagians and other who teach that without the Holy Spirit, by the power of nature alone, we are able to love God above all things, and can also keep the commandments of God in so far as the substance of the acts is concerned. Although nature is able in some measure to perform the outward works (for it can keep the hands from theft and murder), yet it cannot produce the inward affections, such as fear of God, trust in God, patience, etc.

In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus explains that human beings are defiled by the evil coming out of our hearts through our mouths, rather than anything entering into us through our mouths. In my recent sermon on this reading, I preached that we should prevent inner evils from being expressed outwardly in thoughts and actions. I said that how successful we are at holding such things in has a great effect on the quality of our lives on earth and the quality of the lives of people around us. I said some people are more successful at holding their sins in than others. We try to pick our friends on the basis of who is pleasant and fun to be around. This means we try to pick friends who are good at restraining their sin and have a good deal of worldly righteousness. This is precisely what the A. C. is saying here. We have the ability to behave ourselves, despite the fact that we are all sinners.

This was a small section of my sermon, because Jesus Christ is always aiming much higher than getting us to behave ourselves 5% better than yesterday. He is aiming to raise us from the dead and give us life that never ends. To whom does Christ want to give this life? He wants to give it to sinners, namely us. Before Christ can cure us of our sin, he first has to convince us we are sick. So Christ’s apostle Paul wrote (Romans 3), “¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law [meaning God’s commandments] says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin... For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”

This is precisely what the A.C. is saying. We have the power to be righteous according to our outward visible acts. We can keep our hands from stealing; we can usually do good work in the field, garage, or house. This is as far as human beings and human law can judge us. However, we should also have pure hearts. We do not have pure hearts and we do not have the power to change our hearts and do what the commandments command, “so far as the substance of the acts is concerned.” What is the substance of the acts commanded by the commandments? The “substance” refers to the disposition of the heart of the person doing the acts. In other words: “it [our human nature] cannot produce the inward affections, such as fear of God, trust in God, patience, etc.”

What does God want to find in our hearts? He wants to find faith, namely faith in him, almighty God. Scripture says, (Romans 3:28) “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” John’s Gospel reads (6:28-29) “they said to [Jesus], ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” God wants faith in the heart. Out of the heart’s faith come all truly good works. Conversely, (Romans 14:23) “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” The A.C. is, of course, speaking of faith when it says, “it [human nature and ability] cannot produce the inward affections, such as fear of God, trust in God, patience, etc.”

This leads to the great question: where does faith come from? How is faith made? Who makes it? What role does the human will play in faith? I have spent a good deal of time trying to convince others that faith is God’s work and choice rather than ours. Perhaps the best scripture passage to quote is Ephesians 2:8-9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” The Small Catechism, which we all learned in confirmation, agrees. Explaining the meaning of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” the Catechism says, “I believe I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel...” In other words, I believe that I can’t make my own faith. I believe that true faith in Christ is a power beyond all my thoughts, decisions, works, choices, etc., but the Holy Spirit has made this faith.

However, I’ve come to think that the best way to explain how faith is made is to listen to what faith does and does not say. If faith does make us right with God, as scripture says over and over again, and faith is some sort of decision that we human beings have the power to make, then faith would be justified in saying:

“Well God, it was really nice of you to send Jesus to die on the cross, and it was really nice of you to send the preaching of this good news to me. But God you have to give me some credit too. If I, faith, hadn’t chosen to trust in Jesus instead of anything else, Jesus’ death wouldn’t be able to save me. God you created all things and placed the sin of the world on Christ on the cross, but you needed a little help from me. Without me, heaven would be empty. Actually God, I have the control. If I choose Jesus, then you have to give me eternal life. If I trust in something or someone other than Jesus, then I get to go to hell and even you and your Son’s blood and your Holy Spirit can’t do anything to stop that. So actually God, it looks like in the end it’s all up to me. My decision is more important than yours. You might have chosen to give up your Son unto death on the cross, but now my choice is more important than the death of Jesus Christ, at least when it comes to me and my eternal destiny.”

No, faith itself never speaks this way. Faith never boasts of itself and it never claims that God needs its help. Instead as Paul wrote: “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Faith does boast, but it boasts in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:21) and its boasting gives all glory to God. Faith says,

“Amen. I believe. Praise be to God. I am a sinner but Christ has saved me all by himself. He has forgiven my sin and promised me resurrection and eternal life in his Holy Word and Holy Baptism. God never breaks his promises. Let all men be liars, and God be true. Soli deo gloria (to God alone be the glory).”

This is how faith actually speaks. This is what the Apostles Creed actually says. Never does the faith confessed in the creed brag about itself or recount what we sinners have done. Instead, it confesses faith in what God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has done.

The human will is not free when it comes to God. As sinners, we are bound to reject God even by nailing him to the cross. However, through Christ's forgiveness and his promises given in his word and sacraments, the Holy Spirit works faith, "where and when he pleases (A.C. Article 5)." We in the Augustana District try to uphold this original (it comes to us from Martin Luther himself) Lutheran teaching because it is truly biblical. We give God's promises away for free in word and sacrament, trusting the Holy Spirit to make faith, because God has promised that his word will not return to him empty, but like the rain he sends down to earth resulting in the growth of the harvest, God's word will accomplish his purpose (Isaiah 55:10-11). This Evangelical-Lutheran understanding of the human will and faith gives all glory to God.