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"Cross-Examination: Foreordination and Moral Accountability"

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Each month the "Cross-Examination" column presents a summary statement of a Reformed and Reconstructionist conviction in theology or ethics, and then offers brief answers to common questions, objections or confusions which people have about that belief. Send issues or questions you would like addressed by Dr. Bahnsen to the editor.

We Believe

As he was originally created by God, man was able to do good or evil; he had a free will (morally, as well as metaphysically, speaking). However, since mankind's fall into sin at the rebellion of our first parents, men are now enslaved to sin and have lost this (moral) free will. We read in Ecclesiastes 7:29, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." Speaking of man's nature prior to conversion, the Apostle Paul wrote: "when you were slaves of sin, you were carefree regarding righteousness" (Romans 6:20).

The Bible tells us that man in his natural condition at birth has a sinful internal character which is unable to do what is pleasing to God. "The mind of the flesh [man's natural condition in sin] is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be; and they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8). The mindset of those who are unregenerate is one of hostility to the character and holiness of God. The last thing which men naturally wish to do is be in submission to their Creator and obedient to His demands. They are rebels who wish to run their own lives and determine for themselves the standards of right and wrong. This remark is not simply a general tendency among human beings or a kind of statistical average. Paul declares that fallen human nature *cannot* subject itself to God's law or please God. It is morally incapacitated. It is in bondage: "Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin," as Jesus taught (John 8:34).

Accordingly, Scripture says that sinners do not have the moral ability in themselves to accept the claims of Christ or submit to the truth of the gospel. Paul wrote that "the natural man does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them because they are Spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Jesus plainly asserted that "no man can come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

There is within the natural, fallen, unregenerate man no desire or ability to respond to the claims and promises of the Savior. For that reason, unless somebody is born again, he cannot even see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Jesus explained that nobody can come unto him for salvation, therefore, unless the Father in heaven grants the ability to do so (John 6:65). When someone becomes a believer and thereby a child of God, the Apostle John instructs us that this person was *not* born "by the will of the flesh or by the will of man, but rather by God" (John 1:12-13).

Examination

Question: If man is morally unable to do what God requires, then how can God hold man accountable for whatever he does?

Answer: God holds men accountable for their actions because those actions arise from the voluntary decisions they make. Nobody and no external force compels them to sin against their will; they are not unwitting puppets, nor are they pushed into doing things which they do not desire to do. The unregenerate man freely chooses to mow his lawn or to attend a concert, but in neither case will he do so in order to glorify God. His choice will genuinely be his choice, even though in either case he will sin by falling short of the glory of God. His fallen nature, however, does not determine whether he will mow the lawn or go to the concert. In that respect he is free and held accountable for whatever he does.

Question: Yes, but he is not free - not morally able - to make any choice for the glory of God, so how can he be considered responsible for his sinful motives or character?

Answer: It is a well known principle of ethics - one readily countenanced throughout our legal system even - that people are morally responsible not only for their deliberate and voluntary actions, but also for whatever incapacitation or corrupt character they have assumed. For instance, a man who is in a drunken condition and falls asleep behind the wheel of an automobile does not deliberately choose to ram into another car full of children and kill them. Yet he is held responsible for choosing to put himself in that drunken condition and then driving home. By the time he left the bar he had forfeited the ability or freedom to drive a car safely. But he is culpable for the accident because he freely forfeited the necessary ability by drinking so much. Similarly, someone who abuses hard drugs in such a continual and habitual fashion that he can no longer do the minimal things necessary to hold a job (like go to work on time and think clearly) is responsible for losing his job because he voluntarily assumed the corrupted character which led to his termination.

The Bible teaches us that men have taken on or inherited a corrupt moral character which leaves them incapacitated to do what is necessary to please God. Their motives, purposes, or conduct will in some way prove to be displeasing to the Lord. Paul says that "we also all once lived in the lusts of our flesh [the natural sinful condition of man], doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest... who being past feeling, gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness" (Ephesians 2:3; 4:19).

The unregenerate man's sinful desires and motives are not contrary to his own character but arise from it, and thus God holds him accountable for being sinful and displeasing to him. Sinners freely "give themselves over" to their sinful appetites and aims.

Question: But men have not chosen to have a sinful character at birth; they inherit this corrupt nature because of the rebellious choice made by our first parents. How is that fair?

Answer: Again, it will be helpful to consider, first, an example from ordinary life. When we stop to reflect upon it, even in human affairs it is readily acceptable to impute responsibility to one group of people for the voluntary actions of their acknowledged *representatives* (as well as for the results of those decisions). When only a handful of players or coaches from a university's football team are guilty of infractions against the NCAA's rules, the penalty which is handed down (like exclusion from post-season bowl games) is applied not simply to the specific individuals who did the foul deed, but to the entire team - indeed, to the entire student body of the university. Another fifty students could not form a "new" team from the university to appear in post-season bowl games. The entire university is held responsible because players from the original team were the acknowledged representatives of the school. There is nothing morally unacceptable about this.

Scripture teaches us that God is His perfect wisdom and according to His sovereign prerogative determined to treat the human race in a similarly representative fashion. Adam, the first man, was placed in the position of a "federal head" who acted for, and on behalf of, all his posterity. All men are thus properly held responsible for Adam's rebellion against the command of God. "Through one trespass judgment came upon all men unto condemnation.... Through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Romans 5:18-19). Because God operates on this kind of representative principle, in His sovereign grace God can also save sinner according to the obedience and redemptive work of a second "federal head" - the "second Adam" - Jesus Christ.