

Conversion of the Will is the Effect of Divine Grace Inwardly Bestowed

by John Calvin

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6. Men's inability to do good manifests itself above all in the work of redemption, which God does quite alone.

On the other hand, it may be proper to consider what the remedy is which divine grace provides for the correction and cure of natural corruption. Since the Lord, in bringing assistance, supplies us with what is lacking, the nature of that assistance will immediately make manifest its converse, viz., our penury. When the Apostle says to the Philippians, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which has begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ," (Phil. 1: 6,) there cannot be a doubt, that by the good work thus begun, he means the very commencement of conversion in the will. God, therefore, begins the good work in us by exciting in our hearts a desire, a love, and a study of righteousness, or (to speak more correctly) by turning, training, and guiding our hearts unto righteousness; and he completes this good work by confirming us unto perseverance. But lest any one should cavil that the good work thus begun by the Lord consists in aiding the will, which is in itself weak, the Spirit elsewhere declares what the will, when left to itself, is able to do. His words are, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them," (Ezek. 36: 26, 27.) How can it be said that the weakness of the human will is aided so as to enable it to aspire effectually to the choice of good, when the fact is, that it must be wholly transformed and renovated? If there is any softness in a stone; if you can make it tender, and flexible into any shape, then it may be said, that the human heart may be shaped for rectitude, provided that which is imperfect in it is supplemented by divine grace. But if the Spirit, by the above similitude, meant to show that no good can ever be extracted from our heart until it is made altogether new, let us not attempt to share with Him what He claims for himself alone. If it is like turning a stone into flesh when God turns us to the study of rectitude, everything proper to our own will is abolished, and that which succeeds in its place is wholly of God. I say the will is abolished, but not in so far as it is will, for in conversion everything essential to our original nature remains: I also say, that it is created anew, not because the will then begins to exist, but because it is turned from evil to good.

This, I maintains is wholly the work of God, because, as the Apostle testifies, we are not "sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves," (2 Cor. 3: 5.) Accordingly, he elsewhere says, not merely that God assists the weak or corrects the depraved will, but

that he worketh in us to will, (Philip. 2: 13.) From this it is easily inferred, as I have said, that everything good in the will is entirely the result of grace. In the same sense, the Apostle elsewhere says, "It is the same God which worketh all in all," (I Cor. 12: 6.) For he is not there treating of universal government, but declaring that all the good qualities which believers possess are due to God. In using the term "all," he certainly makes God the author of spiritual life from its beginning to its end. This he had previously taught in different terms, when he said that there is "one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him," (1 Cor. 8: 6;) thus plainly extolling the new creation, by which everything of our common nature is destroyed. There is here a tacit antithesis between Adam and Christ, which he elsewhere explains more clearly when he says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them," (Eph. 2: 10.) His meaning is to show in this way that our salvation is gratuitous because the beginning of goodness is from the second creation which is obtained in Christ. If any, even the minutest, ability were in ourselves, there would also be some merit. But to show our utter destitution, he argues that we merit nothing, because we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has prepared; again intimating by these words, that all the fruits of good works are originally and immediately from God. Hence the Psalmist, after saying that the Lord "has made us," to deprive us of all share in the work, immediately adds, "not we ourselves." That he is speaking of regeneration, which is the commencement of the spiritual life, is obvious from the context, in which the next words are, "we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture," (Psalm 100: 3.) Not contented with simply giving God the praise of our salvation, he distinctly excludes us from all share in it, just as if he had said that not one particle remains to man as a ground of boasting. The whole is of God.

7. It is not a case of the believer's "cooperation" with grace; the will is first actuated through grace

But perhaps there will be some who, while they admit that the will is in its own nature averse to righteousness, and is converted solely by the power of God, will yet hold that, when once it is prepared, it performs a part in acting. This they found upon the words of Augustine, that grace precedes every good work; the will accompanying, not leading; a handmaid, and not a guide, (August. ad Bonifac. Ep. 106.) The words thus not improperly used by this holy writer, Lombard preposterously wrests to the above effect, (Lombard, lib. 2, Dist. 25.) But I maintain, that as well in the words of the Psalmist which I have quoted, as in other passages of Scripture, two things are clearly taught, viz., that the Lord both corrects, or rather destroys, our depraved will, and also substitutes a good will from himself. In as much as it is prevented by grace, I have no objection to your calling it a handmaid; but in as much as when formed again, it is the work of the Lord, it is erroneous to say, that it accompanies preventing grace as a voluntary attendant. Therefore, Chrysostom is inaccurate in saying, that grace cannot do any thing without will, nor will any thing without grace, (Serm. de Invent. Sanct. Crucis;) as if grace did not, in terms of the passage lately quoted from Paul, produce the very will itself. The intention of Augustine, in calling the human will the handmaid of grace, was not to assign it a kind of second place to grace in the performance of good works. His object merely was to refute the pestilential dogma of Pelagius, who made human merit the first

cause of salvation. As was sufficient for his purpose at the time, he contends that grace is prior to all merit, while, in the meantime, he says nothing of the other question as to the perpetual effect of grace, which, however, he handles admirably in other places. For in saying, as he often does, that the Lord prevents the unwilling in order to make him willing, and follows after the willing that he may not will in vain, he makes Him the sole author of good works. Indeed, his sentiments on this subject are too clear to need any lengthened illustration. "Men," says he, "labour to find in our will something that is our own, and not God's; how they can find it, I wot not," (August. de Remiss. Peccat., lib. 2 c. 18.) In his First Book against Pelagius and Celestius, expounding the saying of Christ, "Every man therefore that has heard, and has learned of the Father, cometh unto me," (John 6: 45,) he says, "The will is aided not only so as to know what is to be done, but also to do what it knows." And thus, when God teaches not by the letter of the Law, but by the grace of the Spirit, he so teaches, that every one who has learned, not only knowing, sees, but also willing, desires, and acting, performs.

8. Scripture imputes to God all that is for our benefit

Since we are now occupied with the chief point on which the controversy turns, let us give the reader the sum of the matter in a few, and those most unambiguous, passages of Scripture; thereafter, lest any one should charge us with distorting Scripture, let us show that the truth, which we maintain to be derived from Scripture, is not unsupported by the testimony of this holy man, (I mean Augustine.) I deem it unnecessary to bring forward every separate passage of Scripture in confirmation of my doctrine. A selection of the most choice passages will pave the way for the understanding of all those which lie scattered up and down in the sacred volume. On the other hand, I thought it not out of place to show my accordance with a man whose authority is justly of so much weight in the Christian world. It is certainly easy to prove that the commencement of good is only with God, and that none but the elect have a will inclined to good. But the cause of election must be sought out of man; and hence it follows that a right will is derived not from man himself, but from the same good pleasure by which we were chosen before the creation of the world. Another argument much akin to this may be added. The beginning of right will and action being of faith, we must see whence faith itself is. But since Scripture proclaims throughout that it is the free gift of God, it follows, that when men, who are with their whole soul naturally prone to evil, begin to have a good will, it is owing to mere grace. Therefore, when the Lord, in the conversion of his people, sets down these two things as requisite to be done, viz., to take away the heart of stone, and give a heart of flesh, he openly declares, that, in order to our conversion to righteousness, what is ours must be taken away, and that what is substituted in its place is of himself. Nor does he declare this in one passage only. For he says in Jeremiah "I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever;" and a little after he says, "I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me," (Jer. 32: 39, 40.) Again, in Ezekiel, "I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh," (Ezek. 11: 19.) He could not more clearly claim to himself, and deny to us, everything good and right in our will, than by declaring, that in our conversion there is the creation of a new spirit and a new heart. It always follows, both that nothing good can proceed from our will until it be

formed again, and that after it is formed again in so far as it is good, it is of God, and not of us.

9. The Prayers in Scripture Especially Show how the beginning, continuation, and end of our blessedness come from God alone.

With this view, likewise the prayers of the saints correspond. Thus Solomon prays that the Lord may "incline our hearts unto him, to walk in his ways, and keep his commandments" (1 Kings 8: 58;) intimating that our heart is perverse, and naturally indulges in rebellion against the Divine law, until it be turned. Again, it is said in the Psalms, "Incline my heart unto thy testimonies," (Ps. 119: 36.) For we should always note the antithesis between the rebellious movement of the heart, and the correction by which it is subdued to obedience. David feeling for the time that he was deprived of directing grace, prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me," (Ps. 51: 10.) Is not this an acknowledgement that all the parts of the heart are full of impurity, and that the soul has received a twist, which has turned it from straight to crooked? And then, in describing the cleansing, which he earnestly demands as a thing to be created by God, does he not ascribe the work entirely to Him? If it is objected, that the prayer itself is a symptom of a pious and holy affection, it is easy to reply, that although David had already in some measure repented, he was here contrasting the sad fall which he had experienced with his former state. Therefore, speaking in the person of a man alienated from God, he properly prays for the blessings which God bestows upon his elect in regeneration. Accordingly, like one dead, he desires to be created anew, so as to become, instead of a slave of Satan, an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Strange and monstrous are the longings of our pride. There is nothing which the Lord enjoins more strictly than the religious observance of his Sabbath, in other words resting from our works; but in nothing do we show greater reluctance than to renounce our own works, and give due place to the works of God. Did not arrogance stand in the way, we could not overlook the clear testimony which Christ has borne to the efficacy of his grace. "I," said he, "am the true vine, and my Father is the husband man." "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me," (John 15: 1, 4.) If we can no more bear fruit of ourselves than a vine can bud when rooted up and deprived of moisture, there is no longer any room to ask what the aptitude of our nature is for good. There is no ambiguity in the conclusion, "For without me ye can do nothing." He says not that we are too weak to suffice for ourselves; but, by reducing us to nothing, he excludes the idea of our possessing any, even the least ability. If, when engrafted into Christ, we bear fruit like the vine, which draws its vegetative power from the moisture of the ground, and the dew of heaven, and the fostering warmth of the sun, I see nothing in a good work, which we can call our own, without trenching upon what is due to God. It is vain to have recourse to the frivolous cavil, that the sap and the power of producing are already contained in the vine, and that, therefore, instead of deriving everything from the earth or the original root, it contributes something of its own. Our Saviour's words simply mean, that when separated from him, we are nothing but dry, useless wood, because, when so separated, we have no power to do good, as he elsewhere says, "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up," (Matth. 15: 13.) Accordingly, in the passage already quoted from the Apostle Paul, he attributes the whole

operation to God, "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure," (Philip. 2: 13.) The first part of a good work is the will, the second is vigorous effort in the doing of it. God is the author of both. It is, therefore, robbery from God to arrogate anything to ourselves, either in the will or the act. Were it said that God gives assistance to a weak will, something might be left us; but when it is said that he makes the will, every thing good in it is placed without us. Moreover, since even a good will is still weighed down by the burden of the flesh, and prevented from rising, it is added, that, to meet the difficulties of the contest, God supplies the persevering effort until the effect is obtained. Indeed, the Apostle could not otherwise have said, as he elsewhere does, that "it is the same God which worketh all in all," (1 Cor. 12: 6;) words comprehending, as we have already observed, (sec. 6,) the whole course of the spiritual life. For which reason, David, after praying, "Teach me thy way, O Lord, I will walk in thy truths" adds, "unite my heart to fear thy name," (Ps. 86: 11;) by these words intimating, that even those who are well-affected are liable to so many distractions that they easily become vain, and fall away, if not strengthened to persevere. And hence, in another passage, after praying, "Order my steps in thy word," he requests that strength also may be given him to carry on the war, "Let not any iniquity have dominion over me," (Ps. 119: 133.) In this way, the Lord both begins and perfects the good work in us, so that it is due to Him, first, that the will conceives a love of rectitude, is inclined to desire, is moved and stimulated to pursue it; secondly, that this choice, desire, and endeavour fail not, but are carried forward to effect; and, lastly, that we go on without interruption, and persevere even to the end.

10. God's Activity Does not Produce a Possibility That we Can Exhaust, but an Actuality to Which We Cannot Add

This movement of the will is not of that description which was for many ages taught and believed, viz., a movement which thereafter leaves us the choice to obey or resist it, but one which affects us efficaciously. We must, therefore, repudiate the oft-repeated sentiment of Chrysostom, "Whom he draws, he draws willingly;" insinuating that the Lord only stretches out his hand, and waits to see whether we will be pleased to take his aid. We grant that, as man was originally constituted, he could incline to either side, but since he has taught us by his example how miserable a thing free will is if God works not in us to will and to do, of what use to us were grace imparted in such scanty measure? Nay, by our own ingratitude, we obscure and impair divine grace. The Apostle's doctrine is not, that the grace of a good will is offered to us if we will accept of it, but that God himself is pleased so to work in us as to guide, turn, and govern our heart by his Spirit, and reign in it as his own possession. Ezekiel promises that a new spirit will be given to the elect, not merely that they may be able to walk in his precepts, but that they may really walk in them, (Ezek. 11: 19; 36: 27.) And the only meaning which can be given to our Saviour's words, "Every man, therefore, that has heard and learned of the Father, cometh unto me," (John 6: 45,) is, that the grace of God is effectual in itself. This Augustine maintains in his book *De Praedestinatione Sancta*. This grace is not bestowed on all promiscuously, according to the common brocard, (of Occam, if I mistake not,) that it is not denied to any one who does what in him lies. Men are indeed to be taught that the favour of God is offered, without exception, to all who ask it; but since those only begin to ask whom heaven by grace inspires, even this minute portion of praise must

not be withheld from him. It is the privilege of the elect to be regenerated by the Spirit of God, and then placed under his guidance and government. Wherefore Augustine justly derides some who arrogate to themselves a certain power of willing, as well as censures others who imagine that that which is a special evidence of gratuitous election is given to all, (August. de Verbis Apost. Sermon. 21.) He says, "Nature is common to all, but not grace;" and he calls it a showy acuteness "which shines by mere vanity, when that which God bestows, on whom he will is attributed generally to all." Elsewhere he says, "How came you? By believing. Fear, lest by arrogating to yourself the merit of finding the right way, you perish from the right way. I came, you say, by free choice, came by my own will. Why do you boast? Would you know that even this was given you? Hear Christ exclaiming, 'No man cometh unto me, except the Father which has sent me draw him.'" And from the words of John, (6: 44,) he infers it to be an incontrovertible fact, that the hearts of believers are so effectually governed from above, that they follow with undeviating affection. "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him" (I John 3: 9.) That intermediate movement which the sophists imagine, a movement which every one is free to obey or to reject, is obviously excluded by the doctrine of effectual perseverance.

11. Perseverance is Exclusively God's Work; It is Neither a Reward Nor a Compliment of our Individual Act

As to perseverance, it would undoubtedly have been regarded as the gratuitous gift of God, had not the very pernicious error prevailed, that it is bestowed in proportion to human merit, according to the reception which each individual gives to the first grace. This having given rise to the idea that it was entirely in our own power to receive or reject the offered grace of God, that idea is no sooner exploded than the error founded on it must fall. The error, indeed, is twofold. For, besides teaching that our gratitude for the first grace and our legitimate use of it is rewarded by subsequent supplies of grace, its abettors add that, after this, grace does not operate alone, but only co-operates with ourselves. As to the former, we must hold that the Lord, while he daily enriches his servants, and loads them with new gifts of his grace, because he approves of and takes pleasure in the work which he has begun, finds that in them which he may follow up with larger measures of grace. To this effect are the sentences, "To him that has shall be given." "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things," (Matth. 25: 21, 23, 29; Luke 19: 17, 26.) But here two precautions are necessary. It must not be said that the legitimate use of the first grace is rewarded by subsequent measures of grace, as if man rendered the grace of God effectual by his own industry, nor must it be thought that there is any such remuneration as to make it cease to be the gratuitous grace of God. I admit, then, that believers may expect as a blessing from God, that the better the use they make of previous, the larger the supplies they will receive of future grace; but I say that even this use is of the Lord, and that this remuneration is bestowed freely of mere good will. The trite distinction of operating and co-operating grace is employed no less sinistrously than unhappily. Augustine, indeed, used it, but softened it by a suitable definition, viz., that God, by co-operating, perfects what he begins by operating, - that both graces are the same, but obtain different names from the different manner in which they produce their effects.

Whence it follows, that he does not make an apportionment between God and man, as if a proper movement on the part of each produced a mutual concurrence. All he does is to mark a multiplication of grace. To this effect, accordingly, he elsewhere says, that in man good will precedes many gifts from God; but among these gifts is this good will itself. (August. Enchiridion ad Laurent. cap. 32.) Whence it follows, that nothing is left for the will to arrogate as its own. This Paul has expressly stated. For, after saying, "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do," he immediately adds, "of his good pleasure," (Philip. 2: 13;) indicating by this expression, that the blessing is gratuitous. As to the common saying, that after we have given admission to the first grace, our efforts co-operate with subsequent grace, this is my answer: - If it is meant that after we are once subdued by the power of the Lord to the obedience of righteousness, we proceed voluntarily, and are inclined to follow the movement of grace, I have nothing to object. For it is most certain, that where the grace of God reigns, there is also this readiness to obey. And whence this readiness, but just that the Spirit of God being everywhere consistent with himself, after first begetting a principle of obedience, cherishes and strengthens it for perseverance? If, again, it is meant that man is able of himself to be a fellow-labourer with the grace of God, I hold it to be a most pestilential delusion.

12. Man Cannot Ascribe to Himself Even One Single Good Work Apart From God's Grace

In support of this view, some make an ignorant and false application of the Apostle's words: "I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me," (1 Cor. 15: 10.) The meaning they give them is, that as Paul might have seemed to speak somewhat presumptuously in preferring himself to all the other apostles, he corrects the expression so far by referring the praise to the grace of God, but he, at the same time, calls himself a co-operator with grace. It is strange that this should have proved a stumbling-block to so many writers, otherwise respectable. The Apostle says not that the grace of God laboured with him so as to make him a co-partner in the labour. He rather transfers the whole merit of the labour to grace alone, by thus modifying his first expression, "It was not I," says he, "that laboured, but the grace of God that was present with me." Those who have adopted the erroneous interpretation have been misled by an ambiguity in the expression, or rather by a preposterous translation, in which the force of the Greek article is overlooked. For to take the words literally, the Apostle does not say that grace was a fellow-worker with him, but that the grace which was with him was sole worker. And this is taught not obscurely, though briefly, by Augustine when he says, "Good will in man precedes many gifts from God, but not all gifts, seeing that the will which precedes is itself among the number." He adds the reason, "for it is written, 'the God of my mercy shall prevent me,' (Ps. 59: 10,) and 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me,' (Ps. 23: 6;) it prevents him that is unwilling, and makes him willing; it follows him that is willing, that he may not will in vain." To this Bernard assents, introducing the Church as praying thus, "Draw me, who am in some measure unwilling, and make me willing; draw me, who am sluggishly lagging, and make me run," (Serm. 2 in Cantic.)

13. Augustine Also Recognizes No Independent Activity of the Human Will

Let us now hear Augustine in his own words, lest the Pelagians of our age, I mean the sophists of the Sorbonne, charge us after their wont with being opposed to all antiquity. In this indeed they imitate their father Pelagius, by whom of old a similar charge was brought against Augustine. In the second chapter of his Treatise De Correptione et Gratis, addressed to Valentinus, Augustine explains at length what I will state briefly, but in his own words, that to Adam was given the grace of persevering in goodness if he had the will; to us it is given to will, and by will overcome concupiscence: that Adam, therefore, had the power if he had the will, but did not will to have the power, whereas to us is given both the will and the power; that the original freedom of man was to be able not to sin, but that we have a much greater freedom, viz., not to be able to sin. And lest it should be supposed, as Lombard erroneously does, (lib. 2 Dist. 25,) that he is speaking of the perfection of the future state, he shortly after removes all doubt when he says, "For so much is the will of the saints inflamed by the Holy Spirit, that they are able, because they are willing; and willing, because God worketh in them so to will." For if, in such weakness, (in which, however, to suppress pride, "strength" must be made "perfect,") their own will is left to them, in such sense that, by the help of God, they are able, if they will, while at the same time God does not work in them so as to make them will; among so many temptations and infirmities the will itself would give way, and, consequently, they would not be able to persevere. Therefore, to meet the infirmity of the human will, and prevent it from failing, how weak soever it might be, divine grace was made to act on it inseparably and uninterruptedly. Augustine (ibid. cap. 14.) next entering fully into the question, how our hearts follow the movement when God affects them, necessarily says, indeed, that the Lord draws men by their own wills; wills, however, which he himself has produced. We have now an attestation by Augustine to the truth which we are specially desirous to maintain, viz., that the grace offered by the Lord is not merely one which every individual has full liberty of choosing to receive or reject, but a grace which produces in the heart both choice and will: so that all the good works which follow after are its fruit and effect; the only will which yields obedience being the will which grace itself has made. In another place, Augustine uses these words, "Every good work in us is performed only by grace," (August. Ep. 105.)

14. Augustine Does not Eliminate Man's Will, but Makes it Wholly Dependent on Grace.

In saying elsewhere that the will is not taken away by grace, but out of bad is changed into good, and after it is good is assisted, - he only means, that man is not drawn as if by an extraneous impulses without the movement of the heart, but is inwardly affected so as to obey from the heart. Declaring that grace is given specially and gratuitously to the elect, he writes in this way to Boniface: "We know that Divine grace is not given to all men, and that to those to whom it is given, it is not given either according to the merit of works, or according to the merit of the will, but by free grace: in regard to those to whom it is not given, we know that the not giving of it is a just judgement from God," (August. ad Bonifac. Ep. 106.) In the same epistle, he argues strongly against the opinion of those who hold that subsequent grace is given to human merit as a reward for not rejecting the first grace. For he presses Pelagius to confess that gratuitous grace is necessary to us for every action, and that merely from the fact of its being truly grace, it cannot be the

recompense of works. But the matter cannot be more briefly summed up than in the eighth chapter of his Treatise De Correptione et Gratia, where he shows, First, that human will does not by liberty obtain grace, but by grace obtains liberty. Secondly, that by means of the same grace, the heart being impressed with a feeling of delight, is trained to persevere, and strengthened with invincible fortitude. Thirdly, that while grace governs the will, it never falls; but when grace abandons it, it falls forthwith. Fourthly, that by the free mercy of God, the will is turned to good, and when turned, perseveres. Fifthly, that the direction of the will to good, and its constancy after being so directed, depend entirely on the will of God, and not on any human merit. Thus the will, (free will, if you choose to call it so,) which is left to man, is, as he in another place (Ep. 46) describes it, a will which can neither be turned to God, nor continue in God, unless by grace; a will which, whatever its ability may be, derives all that ability from grace.