

Freewill Offerings and Human Freedom

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA

<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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Against a statement like, "Nowhere does the Bible say that man has free will," there are people who answer by saying that the Bible mentions "freewill offerings" in a number of places, and from this observation they assert that the Bible therefore teaches free will or that man has free will. (In the NIV, see: Exodus 35:29, 36:3; Leviticus 7:16, 22:18, 21, 23, 23:38; Numbers 15:3, 29:39; Deuteronomy 12:6, 17, 16:10; 2 Chronicles 31:14; Ezra 1:4, 6, 2:68, 3:5, 7:16, 8:28; Psalms 54:6; Ezekiel 46:12; Amos 4:5.)

This is one of the strangest objections against the denial of free will, and although I have known about it for years, I have never given a written response to it. This is because it is so silly that I feel embarrassed to even mention it, and to take it seriously enough to write about it. Nevertheless, I am occasionally asked about this by Christians who do not know how best to answer the objection, and I have responded in private to them. And since I have been asked about it at least twice in recent months, I am guessing that more people have difficulty with this question than I thought, and so I have decided to share my answer here.

The objection seizes upon the common English term, but here ends the similarity between the topic (of divine sovereignty and human freedom) and the verses usually cited. The term is not always rendered "freewill offerings," but in places where the NIV and NASB offer such a translation, the KJV sometimes says "free offerings," "voluntary offerings," and "willing offerings."

Freedom is relative – you are free *from something*. We say that man has no free will because in discussing divine sovereignty and human freedom, we are discussing the metaphysical relationship between God and man. To be specific, the question is the manner and extent that God exercises control over man's thoughts and actions. Thus in such a context, when we ask whether man has free will, we are asking whether man is free *from God* or *from God's control* in any sense. Since the biblical teaching is that God exercises *constant* and *comprehensive* control over all of man's thoughts and actions, the necessary conclusion is that man has no free will. He has zero freedom relative to God.

Since God is the absolute reference point, to say that man has no freedom relative to God is also to say that man has no freedom in the absolute sense. Whether man possesses freedom in a relative sense, or freedom relative to persons and things other than God (people, objects, and forces, etc.), is another question, and one that does not necessarily have to be addressed in the discussion about divine sovereignty and human freedom. However, for the sake of completeness, we can affirm that man has some freedom relative to other creatures. No human being can control me in a way or to an extent that even comes close to God's absolute control over my thoughts and actions. But this does not mean that I have "free will," since again, in our context, we are talking about our relationship with God, and not with other creatures.

Here is where popular Calvinism confuses the issue. It affirms relative freedom from other creatures and from external forces, and then it connects this with our absolute

responsibility toward God. The truth is that if responsibility presupposes freedom, then our absolute responsibility toward God must presuppose an absolute freedom from God. But then, if our freedom from God is absolute, why are we responsible to him at all? But responsibility in fact does not presuppose freedom, and more than that, responsibility presupposes the opposite of freedom. We are responsible to God precisely because we are not free from God. This confusion, I suppose, is also one of the reasons why some Calvinists fail to discern the sophistry inherent in the objection that I am addressing here. They fail to see that freedom is a relative term, that relative to God we are not free, and that the verses cited by our opponents refer to a freedom that is not relative to God, but to something else.

The "freewill offering" is "free" because the Law does not require it as it does the other regular and occasional offerings, so the freedom is relative to the Law, and the freedom related to this offering exists only in this sense. The people are "free" to give or not give the offering from a *legal* or *ceremonial* perspective. These verses do not address the *metaphysical* perspective, so that they can neither establish nor refute metaphysical human freedom. But when referring to "free will" in the context of divine sovereignty and human freedom, we are talking about whether we are free *from God* – and this *is* about metaphysics. We are talking about whether God has complete control over man's thoughts, actions, and circumstances – he does, and therefore man has no free will, no freedom relative to God. In one instance, we are talking about man's relationship (of moral obligation) with the Law, in the other, about man's relationship (of cause and effect) with God. Only the English term happens to be the same, and not even all the time in the English versions, but they are in fact two different subjects of discussion.

There are passages that teach the same relative freedom but do not use the term. Here is one example: "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:4, KJV). When Peter says that the property was "thine own," and that the money was "in thine own power," he is referring to property ownership relative to *Peter himself* and *the other Christians* – that is, Ananias did not have to sell the property or give the money *to them*. But this relative ownership or freedom has nothing to do with divine determinism – they are two different subjects. Peter is not saying that Ananias had ownership of the property or money relative *to God*, but only that he had the right, or the freedom if you must, to withhold the property or the money from *other people*, and that from a legal or moral perspective, not a metaphysical one. Peter is certainly not saying that Ananias could have kept the property or money *from God* in a metaphysical sense! But metaphysics is what we are talking about when we discuss divine determinism.

Another verse sometimes cited is Philemon 1:14. In the NASB, it reads, "...but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will." Aha! Paul says that Philemon has free will! But this verse is even more obviously irrelevant than the others, since those involved are explicitly mentioned. Paul says that "I" (Paul) did not want to do anything without "your" (Philemon's) consent. He did not want Philemon to act out of "compulsion," but this

compulsion is relative to Paul, and thus also the so-called "free will." The freedom is relative to Paul. The verse refers to the *social* relationship between two creatures, *Paul* and *Philemon*, but it says nothing about the *metaphysical* relationship between *God* and *Philemon*.

Popular Calvinism fails to make a clean break with the unbiblical thinking of our opponents when it comes to this matter of human freedom. For this reason, it is unable to clearly demonstrate the difference and to avoid confusion. It teaches that divine sovereignty and human freedom are "compatible" because man always acts according to his strongest desire, that he is never forced, by God or anyone else, to think or act against his will. But if, as Scripture teaches, God's control over man is so immediate and exhaustive so that he directly controls man's will and desire, then man is not free from God even though his will is never forced against his desire. He is never forced not because he is free, but because he is so *not free*, so completely controlled by God, that even his will and desire are controlled by God, so that there is nothing left for God to force.

But I have said all of this before, so I will just end with my usual doxology: God is sovereign and man is not free. Blessed be the name of the Lord.