

## **Free will and the Protestant Reformers**

A leading feature in the teaching of the **Reformers** of the sixteenth century, especially in the case of **Luther** and **Calvin**, was the denial of free will.

Luther's appointment in 1515 as the district vicar made him the official representative of the vicar of Saxony and Thuringia. His duties were many and his life very busy.

- He lectured on St. Paul and the Psalms,
- managed the monastery,
- was vicar of the order and superintendent of studies.
- Little time was left for intellectual pursuits.

The solemn obligation of praying the Liturgy of Hours was neglected to allow more time for study, with the result that the Breviary was abandoned for weeks. Then in remorse Luther would lock himself into his room and try by one retroactive act make up for all he neglected; he would abstain from food, drink and sleep in this effort.

Like every victim of Scrupulosity, he saw nothing in him but wickedness and corruption. He felt as though the anger of God pursued him like his shadow and that he needed to earn God's love and acceptance "by his own righteousness". This led to hopelessness and despair.

Such a neurotic condition demanded a reaction and, as frequently occurs, it went to the diametric extreme.

The undue importance he had placed on his own strength in the spiritual process of salvation, he now completely rejected.

He convinced himself that man, as a consequence of original sin, was totally depraved, destitute of free will, that all works, even though directed towards the good, were nothing more than a fruit of his corrupted will, and in the eyes of God, in reality, mortal sins.

Man can be saved by faith alone.

Our faith in Christ makes his merits our possession, envelops us in the garb of righteousness, covering our guilt and sinfulness.

"Be a sinner and sin on bravely, but have stronger faith and rejoice in Christ, who is the victor of sin, death, and the world. Do not for a moment imagine that this life is the abiding place of justice: sin must be committed. To you it ought to be sufficient that you acknowledge the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world, the sin cannot tear you away from him, even though you commit adultery a hundred times a day and commit as many murders." (Enders, "Briefwechsel," III, 208)

**Because of Original Sin human nature is totally corrupt**

- Freedom of the will is destroyed
- The natural mode of knowing (the intellect through reason) is unreliable
- Only the supernatural mode of knowing truth (revelation and faith) is acceptable.
- Revelation and faith alone give guidance for truth
- Luther lays the foundation for a conflict between faith and reason which sets the table for the Enlightenment reaction against faith.

Picking out from the [Scriptures](#), and particularly from [St. Paul](#), the texts which emphasized the importance and efficacy of grace, the all-ruling [providence of God](#), His [decrees](#) of election or [predestination](#), and the feebleness of [man](#), they drew the conclusion that the human will, instead of being master of its own acts, is rigidly predetermined in all its choices throughout life.

As a consequence, [man](#) is [predestined](#) before his birth to [eternal](#) punishment or reward in such fashion that he never can have had any real free-power over his own [fate](#).

In his controversy with [Erasmus](#), who defended free will, [Luther](#) frankly stated that free will is a fiction, a name which covers no reality, for it is not in [man's](#) power to think well or ill, since all events occur by [necessity](#).

In reply to [Erasmus's](#) "The Free Choice of the Will", he published his own work, "The Bondage of the Will", emphasizing [man's](#) helplessness and [slavery](#). The [predestination](#) of all future [human acts](#) by [God](#) is interpreted as to shut out any possibility of freedom. An inflexible internal [necessity](#) turns [man's](#) will wherever [God](#) preordains.

If original sin has radically perverted man and destroyed his freedom

- Then man cannot cooperate with God's grace either for his salvation or to resist grace if he chooses

As a consequence, [man](#) is [predestined](#) before his birth to [eternal](#) punishment or reward in such fashion that he never can have had any real free-power over his own [fate](#).

If man cannot cooperate with God's grace then all good that is done is accomplished by God alone.

This led Luther to his "five solas"

- We are saved by God alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone and Scripture alone.

God alone, faith alone and grace alone:

- Justification is through faith alone, as entirely the work of God's grace without any role being played by the cooperation of human freedom.

Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone

- Since man cannot cooperate with God, the Scriptures were written in such a way that the Holy Spirit made the human author write what the Holy Spirit wanted like

you or I would use a pen. Therefore only the Bible can be trusted. The Pope and the Bishops, as men without freedom, cannot cooperate with God to teach or interpret Scripture with authority.

- Further – unless a doctrine is explicitly taught in the Bible, it may not be accepted as truth.

Christ alone

- Christ alone is the mediator between God and humanity.
- Therefore, to attribute mediation and intercession (cooperation) to Mary and the saints in glory appears to render superfluous the unique mediation of Christ, the sole Redeemer of all.

According to Calvin, man can perform no good act unless necessitated by God's grace which it is impossible for him to resist. It is absurd to speak of the human will "co-operating" with God's grace, for this would imply that man could resist the grace of God. The will of God is the very necessity of things.

This idea is the origin of Calvin's TULIP

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited atonement (Christ died only for those predestined for heaven.)

Irresistible grace

Perseverance in grace

As a result of this fundamental principle of the Reformation the Catholic doctrines of:

- Mary, the saints, the teaching authority of the Church, the Mass, the priesthood, the sacraments as something more than mere ritual, purgatory and others were eventually thrown out
- For if man cannot cooperate with God's grace then all of these are useless and even harmful.

The Church needed reform – not a new form of religion.

In condemnation of these views, the Council of Trent declared that the free will of man, moved and excited by God, can by its consent co-operate with God, Who excites and invites its action; and that it can thereby dispose and prepare itself to obtain the grace of justification. The will can resist grace if it chooses. It is not like a lifeless thing, which remains purely passive. Weakened and diminished by Adam's fall, free will is yet not destroyed in the race (Council of Trent Sess. VI, cap. i and v).

The root of the Protestant difficulty with Mary

1. They deny human freedom which led them to deny that supported by God's grace, humans can cooperate in the work of salvation.
2. Devotion to Mary is not explicitly stated or explained, nor can it be logically deduced from the Bible alone.

## Analogy of Being

Human cooperation with God must be founded upon some similarity with God.

- Genesis 1:28

Catholicism affirms that there are some characteristics which humanity has in common with God (e.g., being, goodness, intelligence, freedom, personality, love, etc...).

- This doctrine of the similarity between Creator and creatures is called "the analogy of being."

Protestantism in general does not accept that fact that on some level, there is a likeness between Creator and Creature.

Karl Barth (+1968) a Swiss theologian of the Reformed Calvinist tradition

- Protestantism cannot allow human cooperation in God's revelation and reconciliation since these are exclusively God's work.

Barth claims that this principle is "a system embracing God and creature," and that "this act precisely is the ground, the basic outlook of the entire Roman Catholic system down to its every detail. This act is the basic act of its doctrine of grace, of the Sacraments, of the Church, of Scripture and tradition, of the Roman primacy and the infallibility of the Pope, and above all of its Marian doctrine."

Barth states:

- "Precisely in the doctrine and cult of Mary there resides par excellence the heresy of the Roman Catholic Church...the human creature collaborates in his salvation, on the basis of a prevenient grace, consequently Mary constitutes also very exactly the principle, the prototype and sum of the Church itself.

Every objection to the Role of Mary finds its root and starting point here.

Reformation Theology denies that supported by God's grace, humans can cooperate in God's work of Revelation and Reconciliation.

Protestant view of salvation:

Since human nature is depraved, lost its freedom, human nature cannot cooperate with or resist God's grace in the work of salvation.

- God looks down on fallen humanity with mercy
- Covers us with his saving grace
- But – because we have no free will
- Those who are saved were predestined to glory
- Those who do not believe were predestined to damnation

Classical Lutheranism and Calvinism taught that salvation happens according to an “admirable exchange”

- God has taken upon himself our weakness and sinfulness in order to give us His justice.

For Luther, the way God saves us is not a mutual cooperation between God and man, but a transaction in which God takes the place of man, God substituting for man.

In this exchange, man is entirely passive, he does not and cannot cooperate with God in the work of God’s revelation or reconciliation.

In this exchange our human nature is not healed, elevated and perfected.

- It is rather like “snow on the dung heap.”
- The Catholic teaching has always been that God doesn’t just make us look good – He makes us good – His grace transforms us
- See Ephesians 1:6 “transforming grace”

### **Incorrect understanding of the Incarnation**

According to Luther:

When Christ assumed human nature in the Incarnation – His human nature contributed nothing to redemption – Christ took upon himself our weakness and sinfulness in order to give to us his justice. But in this exchange human nature was not healed, elevated or perfected.

In his commentary of 1535 on Galatians Luther places before his audience three things: Justification, God’s kingdom and creation – then he states that these are the work of God alone, without any cooperation from the humanity of Christ.

Early on Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were devoted to Mary

But as this guiding Reformation principle of the destruction of human freedom took hold –

The consequence of this error was to then minimize to the point of extinction human cooperation in the work of salvation by the Church, by Mary, the saints, the priesthood, sacraments, etc, - anything connected with human freedom and cooperation.

- Since they denied that human nature can cooperate with divine action.

They fell into an error about Christ that badly affected their entire theology and interpretation of the Bible.

### **Correct Doctrine of Christ**

If we begin with a correct understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ then we will reach a correct view of the Church, Mary, saints, sacraments, etc.

### **Council of Chalcedon 451**

Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body: consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity: “like us in all things but sin.”

(see also Hebrews 4:15)

### **Constantinople III 681**

Christ possessed two wills. They are not opposed to each other but cooperate in such a way that the Word made flesh willed humanly in obedience to His Father all that He had decided divinely with the Father and the Holy Spirit for our salvation

This truth is clearly manifested in the Agony of the Garden:

- Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me, yet not my will but your will be done
- The human will of Christ cooperating with the divine will

**Constantinople III** simply affirmed Chalcedon in that Christ had a full human nature with a human intellect and will as well as a divine intellect and will united in the one Person, Jesus Christ.

The human will of Christ was not passive or inactive in relation to His divine will.

In fact, the humanity of Christ cooperated freely with His divinity for our salvation.

This is the foundation of our Catholic faith concerning the Church, Mary, saints, priesthood, sacraments, etc...

Jesus assumed our common human nature to Himself in the Incarnation

Philippians 2: 6        “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to exploit, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.”

Hebrews 4:15 For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.

GES 22 He who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His Incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choices and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.

One might argue that Christ did not assume a fallen human nature, His human nature was immaculate – free from sin; therefore His human will could cooperate with His divine will.

Yes, Christ did have an immaculate human nature free from sin.

- Where did He receive this immaculate nature?
- From whom in not from Mary – the Immaculate Conception herself.

Jesus assumed our common human nature

- And in this process He elevated, healed and perfected our human nature when He assumed it.
- If He assumed a nature that was different from ours – then you and I are not saved.
- Because He had to die and rise as one of us, sharing our nature
- Otherwise the price (consequence) of sin, death, has not been paid

If we acknowledge this truth about Christ

- That in Him our human cooperated with the divine nature for our salvation
- Then we have a sure foundation for all human cooperation with God in the work of Revelation and Reconciliation.

By taking on our nature and because He is the one mediator between God and man – His mediation makes it possible for us to share in His work.

By His Incarnation Jesus raised up our human nature to a participation in the work of salvation

[Protestantism holds that human involvement contributes nothing to God’s saving plan.](#)

But in fact, we see that the human nature of Christ was a critical factor in God's saving plan.

--- after all, if Christ's humanity contributes to salvation, why not our humanity?

God has ordained that all humanity is to be involved in the working out of His saving plan.

- Though He does not need our human cooperation
- God wants our cooperation because we are His children

In fact, God rests his whole plan on human involvement

- The Annunciation and Mary's "Yes"
- First in Mary
- Now in us

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Without this ability to cooperate with God human life is meaningless

- b/c nothing we do or suffer matters
- it would have no value
- God will do what He will do without any consideration of human involvement

Col. 1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in the Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the Church..."

Romans 8:17 "We are heirs with Christ provided we suffer with him" (which implies we might choose not to suffer with Christ.)

To deny this one would have to deny that the human nature of Christ cooperated with the divine

- This is the heresy of Monothelism – a heresy of the 7<sup>th</sup> century which had its roots in the error of Monophysitism which sought to suppress or deny the full human nature of Christ.

## **Part II Devotion to Mary is not explicitly stated or explained, nor can it be logically deduced from the Bible alone.**

The belief in *sola scriptura* and the consequent belief that there is no need for Tradition or the teaching authority of the Church is a common obstacle to devotion to Mary. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Sacred Scripture is profitable for these four ends and the Catholic Church teaches that the study of Scripture should be the very soul

of sacred theology.<sup>1</sup> Still Paul insists on the importance of tradition and that his followers hold to the traditions he has taught them. He exhorts the Thessalonians, “So then brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us either by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thess. 2:15).” And in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul commends the Christians “because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.” Paul clearly declares in these texts that Scripture and Tradition must remain together to give the full teaching of Christ.

St. John the Evangelist gives another reason why Scripture cannot be the sole rule of faith. Not everything Christ did is written down in Scripture: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”<sup>2</sup> Hence the necessity of Christ establishing an authoritative body of teachers that would pass on his teaching from generation to generation until the end of time.<sup>3</sup>

The question of the apparent silence in Scripture concerning Mary is valid. Why don't we find those things the Catholic Church believes and teaches concerning Mary stated explicitly in Scripture? The real issue with regard to Mary, or any doctrine for that matter, is that Christ never intended the Bible alone to teach, interpret and defend everything He wanted us to believe. The Bible is not a textbook of dogmas concerning Mary, nor is it a textbook of dogmas concerning the Trinity or Christ. It is true Catholic beliefs about Mary have deepened and developed through the centuries, yet Mariology was not the only doctrine to undergo such developments. In fact, it would be almost impossible to identify any doctrine that has not been articulated with greater depth and complexity as the Church matured in her understanding of the teachings of Christ. For example, nowhere does the Bible give an explicit formula explaining the dogma of the Trinity as the mystery of one God in three distinct yet equal Persons, or of Christ as one divine Person with two natures, human and divine. Yet, the majority of Christians, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant embrace these dogmas that are at the very root of Christianity.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not an explicit teaching of Scripture. Throughout the centuries the Church grew in its understanding of God's revelation concerning the Trinity through the life and worship, contemplation and study, theological research and controversy, and the authoritative teaching of the Magisterium.<sup>4</sup> Just as today, many contradictory opinions concerning the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit arose in the first centuries of Christianity, each with some passage of Scripture to back it up. Arius (d. 336) was one such individual. He was not able to reconcile Scripture passages such as the prologue of the Gospel of John which states, "And the Word was God," with those of the same Gospel which had Jesus say of Himself, "My Father is greater than I," so he denied the divinity of Jesus.

The Church responded to Arius by articulating more fully the doctrine of the Trinity based on the great commission of Christ to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican Council II document, *Dei Verbum* 24.

<sup>2</sup> John 21:25

<sup>3</sup> Vatican Council II document, *Dei Verbum* 8.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican Council II document *Dei Verbum* 8

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Following the apostolic tradition, the Church confessed at the council of Nicaea (325) that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, that is, one only God with him.<sup>5</sup> The Greek word the Church used to explain that the Son is God equal with the Father was "homoousios," or "one in being." Though the word homoousios is a non-biblical term and the teaching is not found explicitly in the Bible, the majority of Christians today accept this teaching.

In this same century a group known as the pneumatomachians, or fighters against the Holy Spirit, rose up in denial of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Against them the first council at Constantinople (381), following the Apostolic faith, taught concerning the divinity of the Holy Spirit, "With the Father and the Son, he is worshipped and glorified." Nowhere in Scripture are these words of the council to be found, yet almost all Christians accept the teaching that the Holy Spirit is one of the divine Persons of the Trinity, equal to the Father and the Son. Since the Bible did not give a word to adequately describe this union of three in one, Tertullian, an early third century writer, offered the Latin word "Trinitas" as a meaningful way to articulate the concept of three Persons in one Godhead. Again, most Christians today accept this nonbiblical term.

If we are willing to accept doctrinal developments and the use of nonbiblical terms in regard to the Trinity or to Christology, then it follows that we cannot reject legitimate developments of doctrine concerning Mary as being nonbiblical and consequently untrue. As Jaroslav Pelikan stated the question so well:

"If the Protestant churches acknowledged the validity of the development of doctrine when it moved from the great commission of the Gospel of Matthew to produce the Nicene Creed, as all of the mainline Protestant Churches did and do, on what grounds could they reject development as it had moved from other lapidary passages of the Bible to lead to other doctrines? ... To reject this development of doctrine on the argument that it was a development and that development was in itself unacceptable made it difficult for the biblical exegesis of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods to contend with those on the left wing of the Reformation who, sharing the insistence of the 'magisterial Reformers' on the sole authority of Scripture, rejected the reliance on the trinitarian doctrine of Nicaea as a necessary presupposition and method for reading biblical texts."<sup>6</sup>

If we rely on the Trinitarian doctrine of Nicaea to understand Scripture correctly, we are relying on the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. We cannot then reject that same teaching authority when it comes to Mary and her maternal mediation and intercession. Though Scripture does not explicitly use the words "Mary's intercession" and "mediation" or the phrase "to Jesus through Mary," the truth concerning her maternal intercession and mediation is implicitly stated. It all depends on who is interpreting the text. The Bible cannot interpret or explain itself. At this point one could go through all the texts that have been seen by the Catholic Church to teach Mary's intercession and

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<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 242.

<sup>6</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, Yale Univ. Press, 1996, p. 10.

mediation to prove that this teaching is found in Scripture. Even then the objection could be raised, “The Catholic Church sees this but the Protestant denominations do not. Therefore the Catholic Church is wrong.” The deeper issue is not whether one can find these truths concerning Mary in the Bible or not. The issue is, did Jesus set up a body of teachers who would teach in His name and interpret and guard that teaching with His authority until the end of time? Just as the Magisterium began with Christ’s Great Commissioning of the Apostles in Matthew 28 as the Scriptural basis to form its doctrine of the Trinity, so the Magisterium begins with Scripture to form its doctrine concerning the maternal mediation of Mary.<sup>7</sup> The Church sees in John 19:26-28 a firm basis for the maternal cooperation of Mary in the life of the Church. If “the disciple whom Jesus loved” can be identified with all the disciples whom Jesus loved in all periods of history, then it may be said of Mary to all those disciples past and present, “Behold your mother.” And if as Paul says, “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me,” then it is true that, in the Church, Mary beholds her son. This is exactly how that same teaching authority that gives us the confession of Nicaea based on Matthew 28 interprets John 19 when it states: Jesus is Mary’s only son, but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom indeed he came to save: The Son whom she brought forth is he whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, that is, the faithful in whose generation and formulation she cooperates with a mother’s love.<sup>8</sup>

For the definition and explanation of dogma Jesus entrusted the Church with a body of teaching and authoritative teachers, not a written text. Jesus did not entrust Sacred Scripture to the Apostles, Jesus entrusted His teaching and His teaching authority to the Apostles and their successors, and then He commissioned them to go out and teach all nations until the end of time.

Since this teaching authority of the Church includes the authoritative interpretation of Scripture it may be helpful to include here a brief summation of the principles necessary to interpret Scripture correctly. The Second Vatican Council in its document on the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*) gave the key principles for the Catholic way of interpreting the Bible. To interpret Scripture correctly the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.<sup>9</sup> In order to discover the intention of the human author we must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating in use at that time.<sup>10</sup> Since the principal author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.”<sup>11</sup> Vatican Council II went on in the same document to give three criteria for interpreting Scripture according to the Holy Spirit. We must be attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture.”<sup>12</sup> Though Scripture is comprised of many stories it is principally one story, that of God’s plan to save all mankind in Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Vatican Council II document *Dei Verbum* 24.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican Council II document *Lumen Gentium* 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12.

Consequently, we must interpret each individual story or passage in light of the unity of God's plan.

We must be attentive to the coherence of the truths of the faith among themselves and within the whole of God's plan.<sup>13</sup> All of the truths of Christianity are related in some way to the very central truths of our faith. These are related in such a way that the truths of the Trinity and the Incarnation enlighten all of the other doctrines. According to this principle a teaching concerning one aspect of our faith cannot contradict a principle of a more central truth. We have seen this clearly in the relationship between the doctrine of the Incarnation expressed at the Council of Chalcedon and the role of Mary in the work of Christ and the Church. We must interpret Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church,"<sup>14</sup> Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God entrusted to the Apostles by Christ and then handed down to their successors, the Pope and the bishops in union with him.<sup>15</sup>

By entrusting His teaching authority to the Apostles and to their successors, Christ entrusted the authoritative interpretation of His teaching found in Scripture to them as well. The Second Vatican Council stated it in this way, "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup> Very simply stated, we must interpret Scripture in light of the constant teaching of Christ that has been handed down from the Apostles to our day by the Church.

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<sup>13</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Dei Verbum* 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Dei Verbum* 10.