Catechism Question for Week of July 3- July 9, 2016

Question 8 (Part 4): But are we so depraved, that we are wholly unapt to any good and prone to all evil?
Answer: Yes; unless we are born again by the Spirit of God.

The Holy Scriptures teach that no work acceptable and pleasing to God can be undertaken, and performed by any one, without regeneration and the Special Grace of the Holy Spirit; neither can there be any more or less "good" in the counsels and actions of any man, than God of His Own free Grace chooses to produce in them; nor can the will of any creature be inclined in any other direction than that which seems good to the eternal and gracious Counsel of God. And yet all the actions of the created will, both good and bad, are performed freely.

That this may be the better understood, let us inquire:

1. What is freedom of will, or free power of choice?
2. What is the distinction which exists between the liberty which is in God, and that which is in his rational creatures, angels and men?
3. Is there any freedom of the human will?
4. What kind of freedom of will is there in man; or how many degrees of free-will are there in man, according to his fourfold state?

4. WHAT KIND OF LIBERTY OF WILL HAS MAN; OR HOW MANY DEGREES OF FREE-WILL ARE THERE, ACCORDING TO MAN'S FOUR-FOLD STATE? It is still further to be inquired, in the discussion of this subject, (and this is also necessary, in order that we may arrive at a proper knowledge of ourselves)

- ✓ What, and how great, was the liberty of "will" which Man possessed *before* the Fall?
- ✓ Whether there be any, or none at all, since the Fall?
- ✓ And if any, what is it?
- ✓ Whether it be restored in us; in what manner, and how far?

Wherefore it is evident that the degrees of "free-will" may be considered, and distinguished most correctly, according to the fourfold state of Man

1. As not yet fallen into sin
2. As fallen
3. As regenerated
4. As glorified

… that is, what kind, and how great, was the freedom of the "human will" *before* the Fall? What is this freedom *since* the Fall, and *before* Regeneration? What is it in

those who are regenerated? And what will it be in the life to come, in a state of glorification?

The first degree of liberty is that which belonged to Man *before* the Fall. This consisted in a mind enlightened with the perfect knowledge of God, and a "will" yielding entire obedience to God by its own voluntary act and inclination; and yet not so confirmed in this knowledge and obedience, but that it might fall by its own free exercise, if the appearance of any good were presented for the purpose of deceiving, and effecting a Fall;—that is, the "will" of Man was "free" to choose Good and Evil, or it might freely choose the Good, but in such a manner that it might also choose the Evil: it might continue to stand in the Good, being preserved by God, and it might also incline and fall over to the Evil, if forsaken of God.

The former is confirmed by a consideration of the perfection of the Image of God in which Man was created. The latter is evident from the Event itself, and from the following testimonies of Scripture: **"God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions." "God has concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all." (Eccl. 7:29; Rom. 11:32)**

In the last Passage just quoted, Paul testifies that God, with profound Wisdom, did not place the first Man beyond the reach of a Fall; nor did He give him such a measure of Grace, that he might not be seduced by the temptation of the devil, and be persuaded to sin; but He permitted him to be seduced, and to fall into Sin and Death, that all those who would be saved from this general Ruin might be saved by God's Mercy alone.

It is also proven by this plain argument: that if nothing can be done without the eternal and most wise Counsel of God, then surely the Fall of our first Parents, least of all, could be excluded therefrom, inasmuch as God had fully determined, from the very beginning, what He would have done, as regards the human race—the most important part of the work of Creation. Those things which the wisdom of Man is accustomed to bring forward against what has here been advanced, may be found in Ursinus vol. I. p. 242, etc. (This is a writing that the author of the Heidelberg Catechism compiled)

The second degree of free power of choice is that which belongs to Man as a fallen being, born of corrupt parents, and unregenerated. In this State the "will" does indeed act freely, but it is disposed and inclined only to that which is Evil, and can do nothing but sin. And the reason is, because the Fall was followed by a privation of the Knowledge of God, and of all inclinations to obedience; and because this has been succeeded by an ignorance of, and an aversion to God, from which Man *cannot* be delivered unless he be regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

In short, there is in Man, since the Fall, in his unregenerate State, a proneness to choose only that which is Evil. In view of this ignorance and corruption of human nature since the Fall, it is said: "**Every thought of man's heart is evil continually." "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, and the leopard his spots," etc. "We were dead in trespasses and in sins; and were by nature the children of wrath." "A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit." "We are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves." (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 13:23; Eph. 2:1, 3; Matt. 7:18; 2 Cor. 3:6)** With these explicit testimonies, gathered from the Word of God, every Man's experience fully

harmonizes: as may also be said to be true of the sense of conscience, which declares that we have no liberty and inclination of "will" to do that which is Good; but in the place of this, a great proneness to do that which is Evil, so long as we are not regenerated; as it is said: **"Turn me, and I shall be turned." (Jer. 31:18)**

It is, therefore, clearly evident that the Love of God is in no one by nature; and hence no one, in this State, has a propensity or inclination to serve God.

Objection 1: There is nothing easier (said Erasmus to Luther) than to restrain the hand from theft. And still further: Socrates, Aristides, and many others, performed many excellent things, and were adorned with many virtues; therefore there was in them, before regeneration, a power of choice that was free to do that which was good.

Answer: This is an imperfect definition of free power of choice, and of what constitutes a good work; or of liberty to do that which is good, which is the power of rendering such obedience as is acceptable to God. This the unregenerate have not. And although they may refrain from theft, as far as the external act is concerned, yet they are guilty of it as it respects the desires and tendencies of the heart. And not only so, but this external propriety itself, of which so much account is made, is to be attributed to God, Who by His Providence controls the hearts even of the wicked, and restrains them from those outbreaks of sin to which they are naturally inclined. Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that it is easy for them to commence that true internal obedience which is pleasing to God. Such obedience can only be rendered by those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Objection 2: The works which are prescribed and enjoined by the Law are Good. The heathen perform many of these works. Therefore, their works are Good, although they have not been regenerated; and, as a matter of consequence, they must possess liberty to choose the good.

Answer: We reply to this objection by making the following distinction: the works prescribed and enjoined by the Law are Good, considered in themselves; but they become Evil, by an accident, when they are done by those who are not regenerated; because they are not done in the manner, nor with the design which God requires.

Objection 3: What God desires us to do, we have the power of doing. God desires us to do that which contributes to our wellbeing. Therefore, we have the ability, of ourselves, to do that which is Good, and consequently do not need the Grace and influence of the Holy Spirit.

Answer: There is in this syllogism, an incorrect chain of reasoning, arising from the ambiguity of the word "desire". In the major, it is used in its ordinary and proper sense. But in the minor, it is used improperly; for God is here said to desire, through a figure of speech, by which He is represented as being affected after the manner of men. Hence, there is a different kind of affirmation in the major from what there is in the minor. God "desires" in two respects:

1. In respect to His Commandments and Invitations
2. In respect to the Love which He cherishes towards His creatures, and the torments of those that perish, but *not* in respect to the execution of His Justice

Objection 4: He who invites others to do that which is Good, and rejoices in their well-doing, declares that it is in their power to do this, and *not* in the power of Him who invites. But God invites us to do that which is Good, and approves of our conduct when we thus act. Therefore, it is in our power to do the Good.
Answer: We deny the minor proposition; because it is not sufficient for God to invite. It is also necessary that our "wills" *consent* to do the Good, which they will *not* do unless God incline them.

Objection 5: If we can do nothing but sin before our regeneration, God seems to punish us unjustly.
Answer: He who sins of necessity is punished unjustly, unless he has brought this necessity of sinning upon himself. We are, therefore, justly punished, because we have brought this necessity of sinning upon ourselves, in our first parents, and follow their example by doing the same things.

Other objections, which are ordinarily brought forward by the advocates of free-will, may be seen in Ursinus vol. I. page 245.