

OF FREE-WILL

CCLIX.

The very name, Free-will, was odious to all the Fathers. I, for my part, admit that God gave to mankind a free will, but the question is, whether this same freedom be in our power and strength, or no? We may very fitly call it a subverted, perverse, fickle, and wavering will, for it is only God that works in us, and we must suffer and be subject to his pleasure. Even as a potter out of his clay makes a pot or vessel, s he wills, so it is for our free will, to suffer and not to work. It stands not in our strength; for we are not able to do anything that is good in divine matters.

CCLX.

I have often been resolved to live uprightly, and to lead a true godly life, and to set everything aside that would hinder this, but it was far from being put in execution; even as it was with Peter, when he swore he would lay down his life for Christ.

I will not lie or dissemble before my God, but will freely confess, I am not able to effect that good which I intend, but await the happy hour when God shall be pleased to meet me with his grace.

The will of mankind is either presumptuous or despairing. No human creature can satisfy the law. For the law of God discourses with me, as it were, after this manner: Here is a great, a high, and a steep mountain, and thou must go over it; whereupon my flesh and free-will say, I will go over it; but my conscience says, Thou canst not go over it; then comes despair, and says, If I cannot, then I must forbear. In this sort does the law work in mankind either presumption or despair; yet the law must be preached and taught, for if we preach not the law, then people grow rude and confident, whereas if we preach it, we make them afraid.

CCLXI.

Saint Augustine writes, that free-will, without God's grace and the Holy Ghost, can do nothing but sin; which sentence sorely troubles the school-divines. They say, Augustine spoke *hyperbolice*, and too much; for they understand that part of the Scripture to be spoken only of those people who lived before the deluge, which says: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," etc.; whereas he speaks in a general way, which these poor

school-divines do not see any more than what the Holy Ghost says, soon after the deluge, in almost the same words: "And the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

Hence, we conclude in general, that man, without the Holy Ghost and God's grace, can do nothing but sin; he proceeds therein without intermission, and from one sin falls into another. Now, if man will not suffer wholesome doctrine, but condemns the all-saving Word, and resists the Holy Ghost, then through the effects and strength of his free-will he becomes God's enemy; he blasphemes the Holy Ghost, and follows the lusts and desires of his own heart, as examples in all times clearly show.

But we must diligently weigh the words which the Holy Ghost speaks through Moses: "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil continually:" so that when a man is able to conceive with his thoughts, with his understanding and free-will, by highest diligence, is evil, and not once or twice, but evil continually; without the Holy Ghost, man's reason, will, and understanding, are without the knowledge of God; and to be without the knowledge of God, is nothing else than to be ungodly, to walk in darkness, and to hold that for best which is direct worst.

I speak only of that which is good in divine things, and according to the holy Scripture; for we must make a difference between that which is temporal, and that which is spiritual, between politics and divinity; for God also allows of the government of the ungodly, and rewards their virtues, yet only so far as belongs to this temporal life; for man's will and understanding conceive that to be good which is external and temporal - nay, take it to be, not only good, but the chief good.

But when we divines speak of free-will, we ask what man's free-will is able to accomplish in divine and spiritual matters, not in outward and temporal affairs; and we conclude that man, without the Holy Ghost, is altogether wicked before God, although he were decked up and trimmed with all the virtues of the heathen, and had all their works.

For, indeed, there are fair and glorious examples in heathendom, of many virtues, where men were temperate, chaste, bountiful; loved their country, parents, wives, and children; were men of courage, and behaved themselves magnanimously and generously.

But the ideas of mankind concerning God, the true worship of God, and God's will, are altogether stark blindness and darkness. For the light of human wisdom, reason, and understanding, which alone is given to man, comprehends only what is good and profitable outwardly. And although we see that the heathen philosophers now and then discoursed touching God and his wisdom very pertinently, so that some have made prophets of Socrates, of Xenophon, of Plato, etc., yet, because they knew not that God sent his Son Christ to save sinners, such fair, glorious, and wise-seeming speeches and disputations are nothing but mere blindness and ignorance.

CCLXII.

Ah, Lord God! why should he boast of our free-will, as if it were able to do anything ever so small, in divine and spiritual matters? when we consider what horrible miseries the devil has brought upon us through sin, we might shame ourselves to death.

For, first, free-will led us into original sin, and brought death upon us: afterwards, upon sin followed not only death, but all manner of mischiefs, as we daily find in the world, murder, lying, deceiving, stealing, and other evils, so that no man is safe the twinkling of an eye, in body or goods, but always stands in danger.

And, besides these evils, is afflicted with yet a greater, as is noted in the gospel - namely, that he is possessed of the devil, who makes him mad and raging.

We know not rightly what we become after the fall of our first parents; what from our mothers we have brought with us. For we have altogether, a confounded, corrupt, and poisoned nature, both in body and soul; throughout the whole of man is nothing that is good.

This is my absolute opinion: he that will maintain that man's free-will is able to do or work anything in spiritual cases be they never so small, denies Christ. This I have maintained in my writings, especially in those against Erasmus, one of the most-learned men in the whole world, and thereby will I remain, for I know it to be the truth, though all the world should be against it; yea, the decree of Divine Majesty must stand fast against the gates of hell.

I confess that mankind has a free-will, but it is to milk cows, to build houses, etc., and no further; for so long as a man is at ease and in safety, and is in no want, so long he thinks he has a free-will, which is able to do something; but when want and need appear, so that there is neither meat, drink, nor money, where is then free-will? It is utterly lost, and cannot stand when it comes to the pinch. Faith only stands fast and sure, and seeks Christ. Therefore faith is far another thing than free-will: nay, free-will is nothing at all, but faith is all in all. Art thou bold and stout, and canst thou carry it lustily with thy free-will when plague, wars, and times of dearth and famine are at hand? No: in time of plague, thou knowest not what to do for fear; thou wishest thyself a hundred miles off. In time of dearth thou thinkest: Where shall I find to eat; Thy will cannot so much as give thy heart the smallest comfort in these times of need, but the longer thou strivest, the more it makes thy heart faint and feeble, insomuch that it is affrighted even at the rushing and shaking of a leaf. These are the valiant acts our free-will can achieve.

CCLXIII.

Some few divines allege, that the Holy Ghost works not in those that resist him, but only in such as are willing and give consent thereto, whence it would appear that free-will is only a cause and helper of faith, and that consequently faith alone justifies not, and that the Holy Ghost does not alone work through the Word, but that our will does something therein.

But I say it is not so; the will of mankind works nothing at all in his conversion and justification; *Non est efficiens causa justificationis sed materialis tantum*. It is the matter on which the Holy Ghost works (as a potter makes a pot out of clay), equally in those that resist

and are averse, as in St Paul. But after the Holy Ghost has wrought in the wills of such resistants, then he also manages that the will be consenting thereunto.

They say and allege further, That the example of St Paul's conversion is a particular and special work of God, and therefore cannot be brought in for a general rule. I answer: even like as St Paul was converted, just so are all others converted; for we all resist God, but the Holy Ghost draws the will of mankind, when he pleases, through preaching.

Even as no man may lawfully have children, except in a state of matrimony, though many married people have no children, so the Holy Ghost works not always through the Word but when it pleases him, so that free-will does nothing inwardly in our conversion and justification before God, neither does it work with our strength - no, not in the least, unless we be prepared and made fit by the Holy Ghost.

The sentences in Holy Scripture touching predestination, as, "No man can come to me except the Father draweth him," seem to terrify and affright us; yet they but show that we can do nothing of our own strength and will that is good before God, and put the godly also in mind to pray. When people do this, they may conclude they are predestinated.

Ah! why should we boast that our free-will can do aught in man's conversion? We see the reverse in those poor people, who are corporally possessed of the devil, how he rends, and tears, and spitefully deals with them, and with what difficulty he is driven out. Truly, the Holy Ghost alone must drive him out, as Christ says: "If I, with the finger of God, do drive out devils, then no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you." As much as to say, If the kingdom of God shall come upon you, then the devil must first be driven out, for his kingdom is opposed to God's kingdom, as ye yourselves confess. Now the devil will not be driven out through God's finger, then the kingdom of the devil subsists there; and where the devil's kingdom is, there is not God's kingdom.

And again, so long as the Holy Ghost comes not into us, we are not only unable to do anything good, but we are, so long, in the kingdom of the devil, and do what is pleasing unto him.

What could St Paul have done to be freed from the devil, though all the people on earth had been present to help him? Truly, nothing at all; he was forced to do and suffer that which the devil, his lord and master, pleased, until our blessed Saviour Christ came, with divine power.

Now, if he could not be quit of the devil, corporally from his body, how should he be quit of him spiritually from his soul, through his own will, strength, and power? For the soul was the cause why the body was possessed, which also was a punishment for sin. It is a matter more difficult to be delivered from sin than from the punishment; the soul is always heavier possessed than the body; the devil leaves to the body its natural strength and activity; but the soul he bereaves of understanding, reason, and power, as we see in possessed people.

Let us mark how Christ pictures forth the devil. He names him a strong giant that keeps a castle; that is, the devil has not only the world in possession, as his own kingdom, but he fortifies it in such a way that no human creature can take it from him, and he keeps it also in

such subordination that he does even what he wills to have done. Now, as much as a castle is able to defend itself against the tyrant which is therein, even so much is free-will and human strength able to defend itself against the devil; that is, no way able at all. And even as the castle must first be overcome by a stronger giant, to be won from the tyrant, even so mankind must be delivered and regained from the devil through Christ. Hereby, we see plainly that our doings and righteousness can help nothing towards our deliverance, but only by God's grace and power.

O! how excellent and comfortable a gospel is that, in which our Saviour Christ shows what a loving heart he bears towards us poor sinners, who are able to do nothing at all for ourselves to our salvation.

For as a silly sheep cannot take heed to itself, that it err not, nor go astray, unless the shepherd always leads it; yea, and when it has erred, gone astray, and is lost, cannot find the right way, nor come to the shepherd, but the shepherd must go after it, and seek until he find it, and when he has found it, must carry it, to the end it be not scared from him again, go astray, or be torn by the wolf: so neither can we help ourselves, nor attain a peaceful conscience, nor outrun the devil, death and hell, unless Christ himself seek and call us through his Word; and when we are come unto him, and possess the true faith, yet we of ourselves are not able to keep ourselves therein, nor to stand, unless he always holds us up through the Word and spirit, seeing that the devil everywhere lies lurking for us, like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us.

I fain would know how he who knows nothing of God, should know how to govern himself; how he, who is conceived and born in sin, as we all are, and is by nature a child of wrath, and God's enemy, should know how to find the right way and to remain therein, when, as Isaiah says: "We can do nothing else but go astray." How is it possible we should defend ourselves against the devil, who is a Prince of this world, and we his prisoners, when, with all our strength, we are not able so much as to hinder a leaf or a fly from doing us hurt? I say, how may we poor miserable wretches presume to boast of comfort, help, and counsel against God's judgment, his wrath and everlasting death, when we cannot tell which way to seek help, or comfort, or counsel, no, not in the least of our corporal necessities, as daily experience teaches us, either for ourselves or others?

Therefore, thou mayest boldly conclude, that as little as a sheep can help itself, but must needs wait for all assistance from the shepherd, so little, yea, much less, can a human creature find comfort, help, and advice of himself, in cases pertaining to salvation, but must expect and wait for these only from God, his shepherd, who is a thousand times more willing to do every good thing for his sheep than any temporal shepherd for his.

Now, seeing that human nature, through original sin, is wholly spoiled and perverted, outwardly and inwardly, in body and soul, where is then free-will and human strength? Where human traditions, and the preachers of works, who teach that we must make use of our own abilities, and by our own works obtain God's grace, and so, as they say, be children of salvation? O! foolish, false doctrine! - for we are altogether unprepared with our abilities, with our strength and works, when it comes to the combat, to stand or hold out. How can that man be reconciled to God, whom he cannot endure to hear, but flies from to a human creature,

expecting more love and favour from one that is a sinner, than he does from God. Is not this a fine free-will for reconciliation and atonement?

The children of Israel on Mount Sinai, when God gave them the Ten commandments, showed plainly that human nature and free-will can do nothing, or subsist before God; for they feared that God would suddenly strike among them, holding him merely for a devil, a hangman, and a tormentor, who did nothing but fret and fume.

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