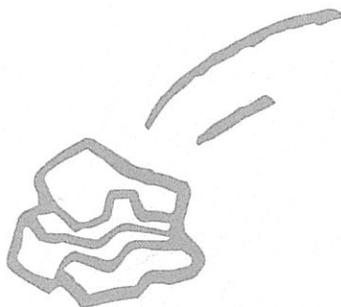


*Assurance
of Salvation
for Evangelicals
(& Other Sinners)*



DITCHING THE CHECKLIST

Mark
Mattes

The Free Will Illusion

Undoubtedly, "free will" is as American as apple pie. If there is one value that all Americans affirm, it is freedom. Americans assume that to be free is to exercise their will. (They seem to x-out the view that freedom is also liberation, such as liberation from sin, death, and the devil.) We can decide what to wear or what political party to align with. But, with respect to God, there is no such thing as free will. As mentioned above, God is not like a president, nor is faith at home in a buffet line of spiritual options. Instead, God provides even better *gifts* for our ongoing existence. To claim otherwise is an illusion, a fantasy.

Regarding ultimate matters, people are captivated by something or someone that they find desirable and life-affirming. That means that the will conforms to what it desires. And desires are not chosen. Similar to a romantic crush, they are, instead, suffered. Whatever you choose, you choose it to achieve your desire. No one forces you to choose anything regarding your perception of your ultimate good, to what's most important to you. But you find that those things that grab your heart are not things that you choose. Instead, strange as it sounds, they choose you. Stranger still, they possess you. X

Describing how Martin Luther wrestled with his religious contemporaries who advocated that you could

choose to live a better life and so earn God's grace, Professor Ken Sundet Jones shows the spiritual mischief that belief in "free will" brings. Many of Luther's religious contemporaries claimed that we could choose to love God if we tried hard enough. In so doing, we earn some merit with God, sufficient for God to grant us his grace. On the face of things, that medieval belief may come across as different from today's revivalists. But, to the degree that revivalism hooks into some exercise of the will, advancing human agency with respect to God, the two perspectives, medieval works-righteousness, and contemporary "born-againism," are similar. Jones writes:

It all hinges on the assumption that you have free will. The Scholastic theology Luther was taught said that you have a spark of goodness left in your fallen, sinful self. The only thing needed is a little oomph from God's grace to fan it into flame. Then, you could exert your free will and decide to become the person God made you to be. You could freely opt for God's will, fulfill God's commands, and merit what Christ had done on the cross. The catchphrase of the theology was *facere quod in se est*, or "do what is within you to do." Choose to do your best, and God will do the rest. There were plenty of options for what you could choose: pilgrimages, visiting relics, entering a monastery, or donating cash to the church's latest fundraiser. The problem for Luther was that the focus remains on you; it all devolves into some moral system where God becomes a divine CPA, and Jesus is left out of the equation.¹

¹ Ken Sundet Jones, *A Lutheran Toolkit* (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2021), 18.

Evangelicals might not take much stock in pilgrimages or fasting. But they might invest a lot of their emotional energy in sexual chastity symbolized by a purity ring. No doubt, on the face of things, sexual purity is a good thing. It is worth maintaining. But, if it is ever used to justify oneself before God, some kind of "add-on" to Jesus, then it is misused. To be sure, purity culture is only one of many ways Christians seek to "add-on" to Jesus and his completed work. Likewise, any purity used to look down upon the impure is misused. Christ alone, not our behavior, is our purity through and through.

Christ Alone

If we are going to be true to Paul, we need to ask, what if the assurance of salvation doesn't come down to looking for something within ourselves to confirm it? What if assurance of salvation wholly depended on Christ, completely separate from our feelings, decisions, or behaviors? This question isn't asked to devalue our emotions, decisions, and behavior but instead ground the basis of the assurance of our salvation.

On the face of things, it makes sense that assurance of salvation would wholly depend upon Christ since our salvation is due solely to Christ's atoning work. In addition to the scriptures, important early Christian thinkers were in tune with the truth that the assurance of our salvation rests in Jesus Christ alone. For instance, the anonymous author of the Epistle to Diognetus (second century AD) wrote:

But when our unrighteousness was fulfilled, and it had been made perfectly clear that its wages—punishment and death—were to be expected, then the season arrived, during which God had decided to reveal at last his goodness and power (oh, the surpassing kindness and love of God!). He did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead, he was patient and

forbearing; in his mercy, he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, “the just for the unjust,” the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!¹

This ancient author is a true gospel preacher! He lifts the burden of salvation from our shoulders. True enough, he understands that God holds us accountable for sin. But that said, we are completely unable to un-incurvate ourselves. We cannot change the condition of our hearts as disordered, curved in upon themselves. Only God can bring about a new creation and give sinners a new status before him: children, as opposed to either servants or hirelings and give them new, clean hearts. The author does not have us look to our behavior, feelings, or decisions to affirm our salvation. Instead, he draws our attention to Christ alone. Christ is not only necessary to save us from sin, death, and the devil, but he is also sufficient. *Jesus Christ is enough*. There is nothing in ourselves that must be added-on to Jesus.

Indeed, to add *anything* to the cross is to insult our Lord. His agonizing death and his glorious resurrection

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 29.

are enough. We should not look at ourselves and judge if our inner state or outward behavior matches some checklist. Instead, we are to look *outside* ourselves to Christ. Better said, we are to listen to Christ and the promises he makes us. *Our faith is never in our faith*. Our faith is always outside us, resting in Christ, trusting in his promises.

What are those promises? Here are some you shouldn't miss.

- 1 John 1:8-9: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
- Ephesians 1:7-8: “In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will. . . .”
- Isaiah 43:25: “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”
- Psalm 103:12: “. . . as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgression from us.”
- Psalm 32:1: “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”
- Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

God doesn't merely overlook our sins. He takes them on in Jesus Christ, specifically in Jesus' death. The great medieval theologian Bernard of Clairvaux emphasized that because Jesus was our substitute and

took on all our sins, he has a twofold right to heaven. Luther loved this imagery as well.² Christ's first right to heaven is because he is God and, as God, has a right to heaven. His second right is grounded in the fact that Christ fulfilled God's law and paid the penalty for sin on the cross. He can give this right to whomever he chooses (John 1:12). God's heart is merciful. And God wants to claim sinners as his own. Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32), which means Christ ultimately has a place for you in his heavenly mansion and right now as his disciple, no matter how imperfect you may be. Christ shares his right to a place next to God in heaven with you (Isa 57:15).

The fact that assurance of salvation is grounded in Christ alone, just like salvation itself is grounded in Christ alone, doesn't mean Christians should slack from doing good. Instead, it allows those works to be truly good since we would no longer be doing them to secure the assurance of our salvation. In other words, we would avoid ulterior motives. We wouldn't be doing good works to prove something about our status with God and use them to leapfrog over others in their need. We could care about people in need and not merely see our doing good to them as a transaction between ourselves and God.

An important way that Christians have addressed the question of human salvation is through the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. God's grace or mercy, his "favor," awakens faith in those

² Sermons on the Gospel of John (1537-40), in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), vol. 22:269.

whom the Spirit pleases so that they grasp Jesus Christ and thereby are saved from sin, death, and the devil. No longer does the law's accusations of your sin have any merit when Jesus Christ is your defender and advocate. Christ covers you in his righteousness, and the accusation of the law no longer has any weight or merit. Christ is your defender; you are secure.

Justification by Grace Alone

Now, to speak of Christ's righteousness as given or "imputed" to sinners is to address the doctrine of justification. Protestants say that sinners are justified by grace alone through faith alone. Not everyone is on board with that view. In this understanding, justification is seen as "forensic": God granting his favor to sinners, declaring them forgiven, for Jesus' sake. The word "forensic" arose from the public forum in antiquity, where public debate led to pronouncing formal judgments and involved a twofold meaning: to give a verdict of righteousness and speak authoritatively. God's verdict to forgive sinners, for Jesus' sake, provides them a new status where they can no longer be legitimately attacked by the law. Nothing is surer since it is God who authorizes this judgment.

For some thinkers, such as Augustine, justification is understood as "transformative," sinners becoming righteous based on their renewal in Christ. For Augustine, the transformative view is the only workable approach to justification.¹ It's not Christ's righteousness as accounted to believers for Jesus' sake that justifies,

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015): 34.

but instead, believers are made righteous over time. No doubt grace initiates the process that leads believers to eternal life and sustains them. But, in the transformative view, sinners can never be fully assured of their salvation until they are completely perfected, which will happen only in the afterlife. Following this perspective, Roman Catholics believe that those dying in venial sin, sin which does not separate you from God's grace, will suffer in purgatory and finally reach that perfection. While venial sin doesn't damn, it still needs to be purged from our system. Purgatory will inflict pain on sinners, similar to that of those suffering in hell, but such pain will bring about sinners' purification and so grant them access to heaven.

Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century disagreed with this approach to justification. They saw justification in forensic terms, which emphasized that, with respect to God, our *status*, and thus our actual identity, has been changed. God's way of seeing or regarding things makes things become what they are. Christ's righteousness based on his atoning work is mercifully given to sinners. His righteousness is accounted as *their* own. This gift is no legal fiction, since Christ can give his righteousness to whomever he chooses. Likewise, sinners ultimately have nothing to offer God other than their faith. The reformers didn't deny that believers experience not just a change of status but also a change of *nature*, that is, that through faith, they become new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). But they argued that the forensic approach took precedence over the transformative, that sinners' change of status as forgiven sinners served as the basis for their change of nature, their new birth, and not vice versa. Hence, for the reformers, there is an

"effective" dimension to justification, in which believers' natures are indeed renewed. But it is grounded in and dependent on justification as forensic, the change of status from being a sinner to being a forgiven sinner.

The forensic approach to justification led Luther to affirm a paradox: Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners (*simul iustus et peccator*). Naturally, many Christians would deny this. In contrast, they would say that sinners are in the process of becoming saints. But Luther calls out this common perspective as a problem. He acknowledged that we are saints because Christ's righteousness has been imputed to us, Christ's blood covers our sins (1 John 1:7), and our status with God has been changed, even though our old nature remains sinful. The pastoral implication of this *simul* approach is that, with Christ's righteousness imputed to us, we ^{Key} are secure in Christ. Even though our thoughts, feelings, and desires are imperfect, we need not doubt our salvation. Once this understanding of righteousness had been handed over to me through genuine gospel preaching in my later teenage years, I could rest secure in Christ. No doubt, MacArthur and company would be distressed by this. To him, Luther's approach guarantees that we'll all remain spiritual slackers, unworthy of God. But he's off-target. Luther affirms not merely forensic justification, but he also acknowledges that it is effective. Our security in Christ has implications for our lives. God is in the business of making new creatures with new desires and behaviors, even if that newness is not the basis for the assurance of salvation. As Paul writes, "... he [God] who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). Trust in Christ's forgiving words includes the

trust that we are now righteous and thus we want to live like Christ and serve our neighbors.

As mentioned, saving faith is neither faith in our own faith nor in our decisions, feelings, or thoughts. Instead, faith's object lies outside of ourselves, in Christ. As Paul put it, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom 10:17). (Ears are the most passive of all our body's organs.) The Word promises that we are not only accounted righteous for Jesus' sake since he bore our sins, but God also wants to make us new creations. That means that faith receives Christ as God's favor toward us and Christ as already dwelling within us, within our hearts (Eph 3:17), establishing us as new creations. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ dwells within us. Again, that is not an invitation for us to assess our inner state and determine just how much of Christ is within us, how much of our being is controlled by Christ, or any other such analysis that breeds a lack of assurance. But it is a way of recognizing that we are new people in Christ. As Paul put it, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but *Christ who lives in me*. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20, italics mine). There is an effective dimension to justification in which God is working to dismantle the power of the old Adam within us and establish Christ in our hearts through faith.² By faith, we

² For an elaboration, see "Apostles' Creed, Article III," introduced and annotated by Mark Mattes in *Luther's Large Catechism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. John T. Pless and Larry M. Vogel (St. Louis: Concordia 2022), 403-422.

can affirm that we make some progress in this matter. Martin Luther described it beautifully:

For this life is a constant progress from faith to faith, from love to love, from patience to patience, and from affliction to affliction. It is not righteousness, but justification; not purity, but purification; we have not yet arrived at our destination, but we are all on the road, and some are farther advanced than others. God is satisfied to find us busy at work and full of determination. When he is ready he will come quickly, strengthen faith and love, and in an instant take us from this life to heaven. But while we live on earth we must bear with one another, as Christ also bore with us, seeing that none of us is perfect.³

Such transformation is premised on our salvation, which is grounded in Christ's righteousness being imputed to us. It includes our daily resistance to the old nature, our struggle to "put off" the old self, and to "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22, 24). It can be described as an ongoing, continuous conversion, always bringing the gifts of our new birth each day.

Luther and other thinkers, following the scriptures, regard this forensic justification as based on a "joyous exchange." Christ assumes—takes on—our sins, and he dresses us in his own righteousness. Paul even went so far as to say that Christ became sin on our behalf (2 Cor 5:21). This doesn't mean Jesus ever sinned. That

³ Confession and the Lord's Supper in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, vol. 1.2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 212.

can't be the case, or he would need a Savior. But he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) precisely because, like the lambs sacrificed under the Old Covenant rituals, he bears sin. When he died on the cross, any accusation against us from God's law that we are sinners died with him (Col 2:14). Jesus is your defender even when your guard is down, when you are asleep, or unconscious, even in the face of whatever poor decisions your future self will make. Jesus has you covered. Faith grasps Christ. But what we discover is that it is Christ who is holding, carrying, and grasping us. As people of faith, we look to nothing in ourselves or of ourselves but to Christ alone. If we have a hard time believing that Jesus really forgives our sins, we should avail ourselves of private confession and absolution. This is an opportunity to share our sins with the pastor, who, in the pastoral office, is the "ear of Christ." (All Christians are called to do this, but one should confess with a pastor if one is available.) The pastor will then absolve you of your sins. This absolution comes as the very words of Christ himself.⁴ No checklist, including our decisions, feelings, or moral commitments, can compare with Christ's own words. Nothing is stronger than the Word of God.

⁴ For more on confession and absolution see Matthew C. Harrison, "Holy Absolution," and Brent W. Kuhlman "Why Private Confession?" in *Luther's Large Catechism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. John T. Pless and Larry M. Vogel, 703-711.

Once Saved, Always Saved?

The same Christians who tend to advance add-ons to Jesus, such as "Christ + my decision," "Christ + my affections," or "Christ + my obedience," also tend to affirm "once saved, always saved." We need to be very careful with such slogans. We all have met someone who, at thirteen years old, "got saved" at Bible camp but by the end of their sophomore year in college had become a committed atheist. Jesus tells us, "If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (John 15:6). In light of this warning, we must cling to Jesus' promise: "I give them [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). People can fall away from Jesus, and if they persist in their unbelief, they commit the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31). The Holy Spirit works to draw us to Christ. If someone insists on resisting the Spirit, they jeopardize their salvation. With stern language, Hebrews warns:

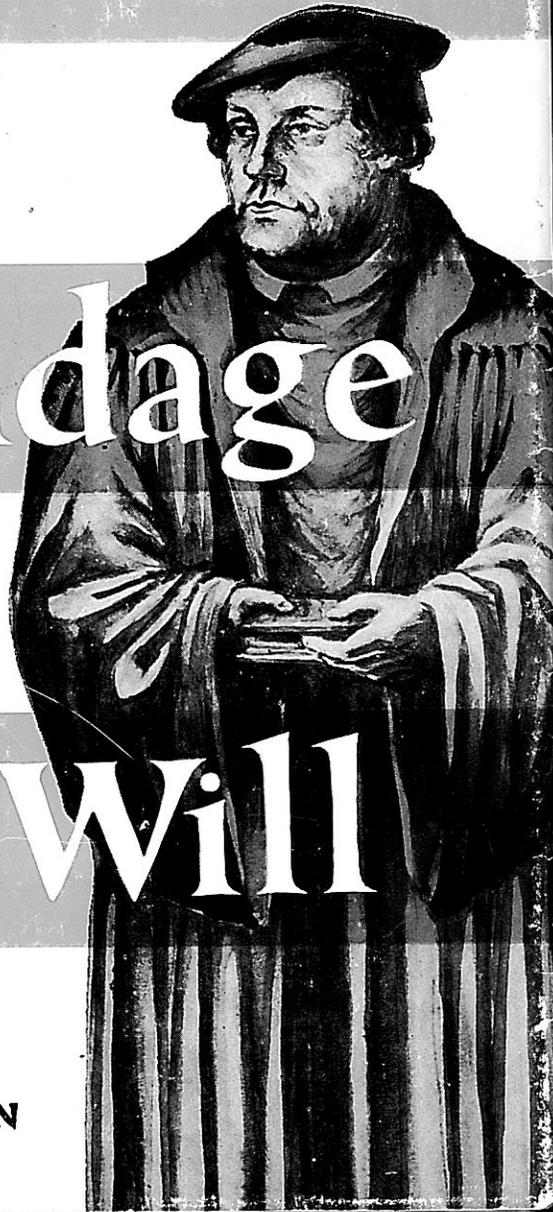
For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted

MARTIN LUTHER

Bondage

of
the Will

Translated by
J.I. PACKER
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of Ezekiel the voice of the law, and expounds it thus: 'I desire not the death of a sinner,' that is, 'I desire not that he should sin mortally, or become a sinner guilty of death, but rather that he should be converted from sin, if he has committed any, and so live.' If it did not thus expound it, the passage would be an irrelevance. But this is completely to overthrow and destroy this sweetest word of Ezekiel: 'I desire not the death'. If we in our blindness will read and understand the Scriptures thus, what wonder if they are obscure and ambiguous? God does not say: 'I desire not the sin of man', but: 'I desire not the death of a sinner'; clearly indicating that He is speaking of the punishment of sin, of which the sinner is sensible by reason of his sin—that is, of the fear of death. He is raising up and comforting the sinner as he lies under this torment and despair, in order that he might not break the bruised reed and quench the smoking flax, but create for him a hope of pardon and salvation, so that he might rather be converted (that is, by saving conversion from the penalty of death) and might live (that is, might be well, and rejoice with an untroubled conscience). For this also must be noted: that as the voice of the law is brought to bear only upon those who neither feel nor know their sins, as Paul says in Rom. 3 ('By the law is the knowledge of sin' [v. 20]), so the word of grace comes only to those who are distressed by a sense of sin and tempted to despair. Therefore, in all the words of the law you will find reference made to sin, as we are shown what we ought to do; and so, on the other hand, in all the words of promise you will find mention made of the evil under which sinners (those, at any rate, that are to be raised up) are labouring. So here, in the words: 'I desire not the death of a sinner', it plainly mentions 'death' and 'a sinner', both the evil that is felt and the man who feels it. But in the words: 'Love God with all thine heart', what is intimated is, not the evil that we feel, but the good that we ought to do, in order that we might know how unable we are to do that good.

Nothing, therefore, could be quoted in support of 'free-will' less appropriately than this passage of Ezekiel; indeed, it makes most strongly against 'free-will'. For it is here shown in what state 'free-will' is, and what its ability is in the matter of recognising sin and turning from it—that is, that it cannot but

fall into a worse condition, and add to its sins despair and impenitence, unless God comes straightway to its help and calls it back and raises it up by the word of promise. The careful concern of God in promising grace to recall and raise up the sinner is itself a sufficiently great and trusty proof that 'free-will' of itself cannot but grow worse and, as Scripture says, 'go down to hell' (cf. Prov. 5.5)—unless you believe that God is the kind of trifler who pours out words of promise in such abundance, not from any need of them for our salvation, but just because He likes talking! Thus you see that not only do all the words of law stand against 'free-will', but also that all the words of promise utterly refute it—that is, that the whole Scripture fights against it!

Hence, you see, this word: 'I desire not the death of a sinner', is concerned only to proclaim and offer to the world the mercy of God. None receive it with joy and gratitude but those who are distressed and troubled at death, those in whom the law has already completed its work, that is, given knowledge of sin. Those that have not yet experienced the work of the law, who do not recognise their sin and have no sense of death, scorn the mercy promised by that word.

(x) *Of God preached and not preached, and of His revealed and secret will* (684-686)

As to why some are touched by the law and others not, so that some receive and others scorn the offer of grace, that is another question, which Ezekiel does not here discuss. He speaks of the published offer of God's mercy, not of the dreadful¹ hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to Himself and forbidden us to know it; and it is much more worthy of reverence than an infinite number of Corycian caverns!

When, now the Diatribe reasons thus: 'Does the righteous Lord deplore the death of His people which He Himself works in them? This seems too ridiculous'—I reply, as I have already said: we

¹ metuenda.

The Death God works + His death God finds

must discuss God, or the will of God, preached, revealed, offered to us, and worshipped by us, in one way, and God not preached, nor revealed, nor offered to us, nor worshipped by us, in another way. Wherever God (hides Himself), and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern. Here that sentiment: 'what is above us does not concern us', really holds good. Lest any should think that this distinction is my own, I am following Paul, who writes to the Thessalonians of Antichrist that 'he should exalt himself above all that is God preached and worshipped' (2 Thess. 2.4); clearly intimating that a man can be exalted above God as He is preached and worshipped, that is, above the word and worship of God, by which He is known to us and has dealings with us. But above God (not worshipped and not preached, that is, God as He is in His own nature and Majesty, nothing can be exalted, but all things are under His powerful hand.

Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us. That is His glory and beauty, in which the Psalmist proclaims Him to be clothed (cf. Ps. 21.5). I say that the righteous God does not deplore the death of His people which He Himself works in them, but He deplores the death which He finds in His people and desires to remove from them. God preached works to the end that sin and death may be taken away, and we may be saved. 'He sent His word and healed them' (Ps. 107.20). But God hidden in Majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, and death, and all in all; nor has He set bounds to Himself by His Word, but has kept Himself free over all things.

The Diatribe is deceived by its own ignorance in that it makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God Himself. God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word show us that He wills. Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His

→ is God's affective or God absolute?
Absolutely Free gift "I love you!" not "general truth"

ABSOLUTE
FREEPDM

Alone
of God
Beauty

inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided. In any case, who can direct himself according to a will that is inscrutable and incomprehensible? It is enough simply to know that there is in God an inscrutable will; what, why, and within what limits it wills, it is wholly unlawful to inquire, or wish to know, or be concerned about, or touch upon; we may only fear and adore!

So it is right to say: 'If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish'; this, I repeat, is right if you spoke of God preached. For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him; as He says in Matt. 23: 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not!' (v. 37). But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Rom. 11: 'Who art thou that repliest against God?' (Rom. 9.20).

(xi) Deut. 30.11-14: obligation is no evidence for ability (686-688)
After this the Diatribe argues: 'If it is not in the power of every man to keep what is commanded, all the exhortations in the Scriptures, and all the promises, threats, expostulations, reproofs, adjurations, blessings, curses and hosts of precepts, are of necessity useless.'

The Diatribe is continually forgetting the question at issue, and dealing with matters foreign to its purpose; and it does not see that all these things make more strongly against itself than against us. From all these passages it proves freedom and ability to fulfil all things, as the very words of the inference which it draws declare; whereas, its intention was to establish such a 'free-will' as can will no good without grace, and an endeavour that may not be ascribed to one's own strength. I do not see that such an endeavour is proved by any of these passages, which only demand duty. This I should have said too often already, were it not that it has to be repeated many times, because the Diatribe harps so often on the same wrong note, putting its readers off with a useless profusion of words.