

# Landon - Sharp Debate on Free Will

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and  
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**Affirmative**  
**David Landon**

Proposition: The Scriptures teach that man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.

"The basis of Calvinism," wrote Keith in a 1999 church publication, "is the belief that the sovereignty of God rules out the free will of man." Contrary to Keith's assertion, Calvinists believe both. It is important however, that our understanding of the will of man be Biblically informed; that we do not simply and uncritically accept the popular notion of free will.

One serious problem with this subject is the lack of definition one finds in many writers. Often those most vocal in accusing others of denying free will, have never taken the trouble to tell us either what free will is, or what it can do (or not do). Terms such as liberty, ability, motive, cause, necessity, and contingency are rarely noted, much less defined. Let a man, in obedience to Scripture, merely suggest that fallen man sins necessarily, and is incapable of converting himself; unable apart from the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to even desire conversion, and straightway he is accused of denying free will. This problem will appear the more serious when we consider that almost all the questions in controversy between Calvinists and all other theologies, hinge on the resolution of this one article, free will. Particularly is this true with the doctrines of original sin and efficacious grace, which are usually rejected simply because they do not square with the popular (read Arminian) notion of that freedom of will that is considered essential to moral agency.

That strictest of necessitarians, Jonathan Edwards, defined the faculty of the will as "that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of choosing." Its liberty or freedom appears both negatively and positively. First, and negatively, in the absence, concerning the will, of either constraint or restraint. A man cannot be said to act freely in anything that he is forced or compelled to do. Neither is that will free that is restrained or prevented from choosing according to its good pleasure.

Positively, the will may be said to be free when a person acts voluntarily and electively. Men choose according to their good pleasure, and herein lies both their freedom and accountability. It is evident then, that Calvinists believe in free will. But, as Calvin asks, "... why should so small a matter have been dignified with so proud a title? An admirable freedom! that man is not forced to be the servant of sin, while he is however, a voluntary

slave; his will being bound by the fetters of sin," ( Institutes 2.2.7). *A voluntary slave*, - that is the Reformed (and Biblical) distinctive that has been obscured in almost every age of the church. Voluntary because our choices are free and unforced, and yet a slave to sin because we are fallen in Adam. And thus our proposition, that our being in a state of sin has made us powerless to will any spiritual good. The manner in which we prove this proposition is first to demonstrate that all choices of the will are caused choices, that is, that the will is not self-determined. Secondly we will show that the causes of the acts of the will are, in sinful man, always evil.

1. It should be obvious that any choice of the will is an effect, and, being an effect, must have a cause. Scripture teaches that even Adam in Paradise did not exert his will *in equilibrio*, but was created upright, with understanding, will, and affections all set upon God, Ecclesiastes 7:29. Neither was Adam's will self-determined. Much more now, after the fall, all acts of the will, having their beginning in time must have a cause sufficient to account for their coming into being. The 19th century theologian Robert Dabney cited rational spontaneity and native disposition as the two determinates of all volitions. The mind views and weighs the relative goodness of those things that come within its purview, and the will chooses what appears to the mind to be the greatest good. According to Edwards, "the will is always determined by that which appears most agreeable." Even if the object of choice is evil, yet the evil is not chosen as it is evil, but, rather, as it is perceived as good (all things considered). That the will either is self determined, or that it is set in equipoise between good and evil, and able with equal facility to choose between them, is beyond the ability of any devotee of Pelagius or Arminius to prove.

2. The causes of choice are, in the unregenerate, always evil, and therefore fallen man sins necessarily. As was demonstrated in our debate on Total Depravity, Adam was federal head of all men. When he fell he lost, not only for himself, but for his posterity also, that uprightness he originally had as a gift from God. (See Romans 5:12-19.) Man has become corrupt. The thoughts of his heart are only evil continually. Gen. 6:5. Though fallen man is at liberty to love God if he will ( he being free from either constraint or restraint ) yet he has no ability to do so. Liberty and ability are key words in this debate. It is impossible to have a Biblical understanding of free will without seeing how the ideas of liberty and ability play out in each of the four states of human nature. These states or conditions of man are:

A. Man before the fall,- Here we see both liberty and ability to obey God perfectly, yet with the possibility of sinning. God created man upright, Ecclesiastes 7:29, and in His image. Genesis 1:27.

B. Man after the fall,- Man has the liberty to obey and please God, but no longer the ability. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," John 3:6. Mankind, fallen in Adam, is born "of corruptible seed" (1 Peter 1:23), and therefore can produce only evil, Luke 6:45. That fallen man is wise to do evil, Jer.4:22, argues that such is now man's nature. Man in a state of sin cannot obey, know, or please God. 1 Cor.2:14; Romans 8:8; John 6:44. Indeed fallen man cannot cease from sin," 2 Peter 2:14. In other words, fallen man sins

necessarily. Man, having committed sin, is now the servant of sin, John 8:34. "Voluntary slaves," to use Calvin's words. It must be noted that in spite of his inability to render perfect obedience to God, fallen man is still under an obligation to do so. Hence the commands and invitations of Scripture. Commands to repent, believe, and obey certainly prove that it is our duty to do these things. They do not prove ability, and yet Keith has constantly assumed and asserted this, out philosophizing, on this point, even Calvinists.

C. Man after regeneration,- Man has the liberty, and the ability, to obey God, though (because of remaining sin) not perfectly. This new ability has not come as a result of a decision of the will; it is an effect of the almighty operation of the Spirit of God, John 1:13. One of the primary evidences that God has powerfully worked in the heart of a sinner is a new willingness to obey God, Psalm 110:3; Philippians 2:13. Only the will renewed by grace is truly free, John 8:36.

D. Man glorified,- In heaven the saints will again have both the liberty and ability to obey God perfectly. We agree with what the Church has always taught, that the saints will have ability *only* to obey God. They will be *non posse peccare*- unable to sin. In other words, they will be necessarily holy. We do not find the cause of this impeccability where Keith has constantly found it; in the removal of Satan and/or the occasions of sin from the scene. We give glory to God; to His regenerating and sanctifying work whereby He makes His people love righteousness in spite of Satan and his machinations.

There is, then, a certain necessity that is not opposed to liberty; a moral, as distinguished from a natural necessity. "Moral necessity," writes Edwards, "may be as absolute as natural necessity. That is, the effect may be as perfectly connected with its moral cause, as a natural, necessary effect is with its natural cause." Natural ability and moral inability may co-exist. Examples might include a loving parent who is naturally able, while morally unable, to kill his child. The unregenerate is unable to please God. Those in heaven are necessarily holy. Yet the one is still responsible, and the other still praiseworthy.

Calvin's words provide a fit summary and conclusion: "Simply to will is the part of man, to will ill the part of corrupt nature, to will well the part of grace."

Questions:

1. How is it that those in heaven will never again sin? Do they not yet possess free wills?
  2. Is not God necessarily good, and the devil necessarily evil?
  3. Demonstrate that responsibility proves ability.
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## Negative

### Keith Sharp

This debate is a contest between human philosophy and the Scriptures. Calvinism is not derived from the Scriptures but is a human philosophy imposed on the Scriptures. Dave's affirmative emphatically demonstrates this truth. In a 1500 word article, Dave wrote 604 words before even referencing (and misusing) one biblical passage. But before this he quoted both Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin, while musing about "Arminian," "necessitarians," and "*in equilibrio*."

Dave is eminently correct in pin pointing our disagreement. He asserts "the will is not self-determined." This is radical error and the precise point of our disagreement. How can a being who lacks the power to determine his own will be said to have free will? Only one blinded by theological bias can believe that a being whose will is determined by forces over which he has no control possesses free will. My pet dog has as much free will as the human Calvinism describes. My dog acts "voluntarily and electively." She can do as she pleases. But, lacking the power to make moral choices, she lacks free will. If man's inherent nature is so evil that, whereas he "acts voluntarily and electively," nonetheless he is "powerless to will any spiritual good," his will is no more free than an animal's.

The first passage Dave references blows up in his face. Ecclesiastes 7:29 states:

"Truly, this only I have found:

That God made man upright,

But they have sought out many schemes."

The noun "man" is the antecedent of the pronoun "they." Thus, "man" is a reference, not just to Adam, but to all mankind. All mankind has been made upright, but they leave God by seeking "out many schemes." Thus, we determine our own will. We are made with "that natural liberty that is neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to do good or evil."

Frankly, I'm not concerned about human will "*in equilibrio*" or the human wisdom of Robert Dabney, Jonathan Edwards, Pelagius, Augustine, John Calvin, or James Arminius (1 Corinthians 1:18-30). The Scriptures plainly teach man has the power to determine whether he will serve God or Satan.

*And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*  
(Joshua 24:15)

The Presbyterians themselves affirm that Adam and Eve, before they fell, possessed "that natural liberty that [was] neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to do good or evil." That is all I affirm of people today. All philosophical musing about human will "*in equilibrio*" is thus obliterated. "Why should it be thought incredible by you that" Adam's offspring possess the same free will with which our forefather was created?

Dave whistles past the graveyard when he asserts that in our first debate he proved that Adam is our "federal head" and that we all fell in him. Please read again that first debate and judge for yourself. "Death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12), not because all sinned in Adam.

Genesis 6:5 does not say that men "are born with evil hearts." The earth was *not* corrupt because all men were born totally depraved, but because "all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth." (Genesis 6:12) They were not born corrupted but corrupted their way (Ecclesiastes 7:29). They determined their own wills. God destroyed that generation because of their wickedness. If every generation is born as evil as they, justice demands that God destroy every generation of man.

Liberty devoid of ability is a sham. If I demanded of my son that he make the football team, and punished him if he failed, whereas he had the liberty to try out for the team but lacked the ability to make the team, I would be grossly unjust. This is Calvinism's picture of God but on a worldwide scale involving the eternal destiny of our souls. Calvinism blasphemes the God of heaven, of Whom the psalmist affirms, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne." (Psalm 97:2)

Dave affirms that Adam, before the fall, possessed that very free will I affirm we have. "Why should it be thought incredible by you that" Adam's offspring possess the same free will with which our forefather was created?

John 3:6 simply affirms concerning "flesh" that the part of man that is begotten of our fleshly fathers is our flesh. It says nothing of the moral or spiritual nature of flesh. But this also implies the truth elsewhere stated, that God is the Father of our spirits (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:9). If our inherent spiritual nature is so corrupt we cannot choose to renounce sin, obey God, or come to Christ, God is at fault.

Jeremiah 4:22 is a description of ungodly Judah and Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day, not all mankind (cf. verses 3 - 21). But they had the power to change their will, for the Lord commanded them, "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, That you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?" (verse 14) Of course, Calvinists blaspheme the just God or heaven by affirming they had the responsibility but not the ability to repent.

Beginning in 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul contrasts human and divine wisdom. Divine wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit through the inspired Word (1 Corinthians 2:6-13). The "natural man"(verse 14) is guided by human wisdom (including theology and

denominational creeds), whereas the "spiritual man" is guided by the Word of God (verses 14-16). Calvinists fit the meaning of the "natural man."

"Those ... in the flesh" (Romans 8:8) are those who "set their minds on the things of the flesh." (verse 5). They are "carnal," i.e., fleshly minded. Some "saints" are carnal (1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:1-3). Are they able to make decisions pleasing to God?

To come to the Son we must be drawn by the Father (John 6:44). How does the Father draw us? "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." (John 6:45)

The ones Peter states "cannot cease from sin" (2 Peter 2:14) are false teachers (verse 1). This by no means proves that the whole human race "cannot cease from sin." Even these false teachers were not born in such a depraved condition. Rather, "They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray." (verses 14-15) They were once in the right way, else they could not have forsaken it and gone astray. Rather than being born depraved, they made themselves that way as a free act of their own wills.

Yes, sinners are the voluntary slaves of sin (John 8:34). But sinners have the freedom of will to renounce this slavery (Romans 6:16-18), and saints have the freedom of will to return to this slavery (Romans 6:12-15).

The new birth is not of human will (John 1:13), i.e., we're not born again by obeying the doctrines of men. But we are born of the Spirit (John 3:5) "through the word of God." (1 Peter 1:22-23) "Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you." (1 Peter 1:25; James 1:18) That divine power evidenced in the righteous lives of God's saints (Psalm 110:3; Philippians 2:13) is the power of His word (Romans 1:16-17; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:21). God doesn't use the miraculous, direct power of the Holy Spirit to forcibly change the sinner's will, thus reducing him to a programmable computer. He employs the moral persuasion of the gospel (Matthew 11:28-30), thus leaving man's will free to accept or reject the invitation.

Only the Son can free us from sin (John 8:36), but His truth is what makes us free (John 8:32).

Unlike Calvinistic theologians, I refuse to speculate on the unrevealed (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Peter 4:11). We shall certainly be changed when Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:50-54; 1 John 3:2), but the exact nature of the change has not been revealed. Satan will be in "the lake of fire and brimstone" (Revelation 20:10) and no longer able to tempt or deceive the saints.

Whether inability is natural or moral, it still negates free will, as defined by the Presbyterian creed, as well as responsibility.

Answers to Questions:

1. Already answered.
2. God, in His form as God, cannot be tempted to sin (James 1:13). When the divine Word took the form of a man, He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) The Scriptures do not reveal Satan's original condition.
3. God is just and holds us accountable only for what we are able to do (Matthew 25:14-30).

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## Response

David Landon

Keith is every bit like Luther's rhetorician who, when writing on oratory, was not concerned with its various parts, but was content merely to define it as the art of speaking well. In like manner, Keith is willing to exhaust an entire debate proving what no one has ever yet denied, namely, that free will consists in the ability to choose according to one's good pleasure. When confronted with concepts such as necessity, contingency, motive, and *in equilibrio* Keith's response is, "Frankly, I'm not concerned." Yet (let the reader take note) it was Keith who, in the very first sentence of his affirmative, said that we were to discuss this subject "in more depth." What, precisely, did Keith mean by "more depth?"

Essential matters: that is what virtually every writer on this subject has called the above concepts. Instances of human philosophy is what Keith calls them. Scripture, however, does not condemn philosophy outright, but only that philosophy that is not "after Christ," Colossians 2:8. And what, after all, is to be preferred;- a larger portion of philosophy (philosophy that is "after Christ," 604 words to be exact) followed by a few verses, or (as in Keith's affirmative) many verses, preceded by one small, subtle, and philosophically false presupposition that, like the proverbial fly in the ointment, ruins the whole. That presupposition is that responsibility implies ability. Keith has failed to prove this presupposition, and his supporting texts are as consistent with the Reformed creeds as they are with his own.

Free will, then, is the ability to choose according to one's good pleasure. It is the Biblical and Reformed position that it is never the good pleasure of a sinner to choose what is truly and spiritually good. Even the relative "good" that he occasionally does is never done from a right motive (faith working by love), nor according to a right rule (the Scriptures), and never for a right end (to the glory of God). It is always the good pleasure of man born in sin to love darkness, and hate the light.

Keith's papers on this subject amount to a sustained caricature of Calvinism. As,

1. The self-determination of the will,- we do not deny that it is the individual who determines and chooses. We do deny that the will can determine itself in a state of perfect equipoise between two moral choices without regard to either motive or any previous moral bias. This sort of self-determination is necessary to Keith's idea of liberty.

2. Adam's offspring do possess the same free will that Adam did. We are under no necessity of nature to sin. We have however, as a punishment for our sin in Adam, lost that original rectitude and uprightness that Adam had, and that would have been ours had Adam stood. The plural pronoun "they" in Ecclesiastes 7:29 completely supports our position. "They" (all mankind) sinned in Adam, Romans 5:19.

3. Keith's illustration of his son playing football would be a good one if we set the case as it really is; if Keith's son had the ability, as well as the liberty, to play football, but squandered that talent through sin and negligence, it would be just to punish him. Further, if his son happened to be head and root of all mankind, it may be perfectly just to make him a representative of all his posterity.

4. It is a caricature to represent us as holding that the Holy Spirit "forcibly" changes the sinners will. We have always said that He effects this change by representing Christ to the mind and understanding in such a way as will make the sinner willing.

### **Conclusion**

Scripture teaches both human liberty and Divine sovereignty. Scripture also teaches that what God does towards the salvation of man actually saves, rather than merely make salvation possible. Keith's defense of the popular doctrine of free will fails at both points. Keith may sing a new tune, but it is still the old song. The old song contains the lines found in Isaiah 14, "I will ascend, I will be like the Most High." *I must allow the Holy Spirit to do His work*, is the substance of what Keith wrote in his tract entitled You Must Be Born Again. Human will is sovereign.

The old song contains the lines found in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. "I fast, I tithe." Keith would add the line, "I choose Christ, I change my heart." This is the will's self righteousness.

In past debates Keith has used an illustration of a hiker who has fallen off a cliff, and needs rescuing. The rescuer represents God, the rope extended the things He has done towards our salvation, and grabbing on to the rope represents what is required on our part if we are to be saved. Why are only some saved? Calvinists say that God, in sovereign mercy, saves His elect. Keith says that the rope has been extended to all men, and that free will must determine to grab hold. This is a critical difference. In a scheme of salvation (such as Keith's) that represents God as doing equally for all, and yet not all are saved, it is clear that it is man's action, not God's, that is determinative. I agree that the rope must be grabbed, but I say that God's work of giving life to the dead victim, and making him willing to grab the rope, is determinative.



In Luke 18 the Pharisee thanked God that he was not as other men. That was a good prayer up to that point. Then he remembered that in his system, God had done equally as much for the publican. It became necessary to enumerate the things by which he made himself to differ. At the end of the day, there is no difference between "I fast and tithe," and "I freely chose Christ."

We conclude, without Christ freewill can do nothing, John 15:5.

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## **Affirmative**

### **Keith Sharp**

In this, the sixth debate between my friend David Landon and me, we will discuss in more depth one of our crucial differences: human free will. I affirm: **"The Scriptures teach that God has endued the will of all responsible people with that natural liberty that it is neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to do good or evil."** This proposition is taken almost verbatim from the **Westminster Confession of Faith**, the Presbyterian creed, chapter eleven, paragraph one. I added "The Scriptures," i.e., the sixty-six books of the Bible, as the authoritative source of this truth. I changed "man" to "all responsible people." Some, due to inherent lack of intelligence or sanity, are never capable of making moral decisions and therefore are not responsible. Otherwise, those who attain the age of accountability (cf. Romans 7:9) are inherently able and free to choose and to do either good or evil.

The authors of the **WCF** thus correctly explained free will: "Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and well-pleasing to God; but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it." "Mutably" means "changeably" (**Webster**. 1492). I affirm that people today have the same nature as the first couple.

## **Divine Justice**

This debate implicitly involves the nature of God as well as the spiritual nature of man. If God is truly just, and He is (Deuteronomy 32:4), He holds us accountable only for what we are inherently capable of doing (1 John 5:3; Matthew 25:14-30). Responsibility is the ability to respond.

## **The Nature of Man**

Adam is our father according to the flesh (cf. Hebrews 12:9), and we inherit his fleshly nature. But God is the father of our spirits (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:9). If our inherent spiritual nature is so corrupt we cannot choose to renounce sin, obey God, or come to Christ, God is at fault.

## **Man Under No Compulsion to Sin**

We agree that Adam and Eve possessed free will in the sense of my proposition. Eve, being directly created by God, was perfect in body, soul and spirit (Genesis 1:27; 2:21-22). But Eve was deceived by Satan and sinned (Genesis 3:1-6; 1 Timothy 2:14). If being disposed to believe a lie is proof of inherent depravity, why did Eve believe the lie? Eve was tempted through the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life (Genesis 3:6). People today sin for the same reasons Eve did: not inherent depravity, but deception by Satan (2 Corinthians 11:3) through the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life (1 John 2:16). We have the same inherent nature Adam and Eve had.

We sin for the same reason Adam, who we agree had free will, did. Adam was warned not to sin (Genesis 2:16-17), and so are we (1 Corinthians 15:34). Our first father sinned by giving in to temptation (Genesis 3:6), and so do we (James 1:14-15). God rejected Adam's excuse (Genesis 3:11-12,17-19), and He rejects ours (James 1:14-15). Adam, by blaming His sin on Eve, in reality blamed God, who gave Him his wife (Genesis 2:22). If we blame Adam for our sins, we are in reality blaming God, who made him the father of mankind (cf. James 1:13).

.Cain is the first test case for free will (Genesis 4:3-12). The Lord warned him, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." (Verse 7) God could not tell Cain he "should rule over" sin if he could not do so. Cain, therefore, had the ability to overcome sin. He had free will.

Ancient Israelites had free will. They were able to keep the law of God (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). To do so they had to keep all His commandments always (Deuteronomy 5:29,33; 6:2,24-25; 8:1; 10:12; 11:8,22,32; 15:5; 17:19; 19:9; 26:18; 27:1; 28:1,58; 30:2,8; 31:12), carefully (Deuteronomy 5:32; 8:11; 11:22,32; 15:5; 17:19; 28:1,58), diligently (Deuteronomy 11:13,22), and with all their hearts and souls (Deuteronomy 10:12; 11:13; 26:16; 30:2,10; 32:46).

The example of Jesus proves we are under no compulsion to sin (Romans 8:3; cf. Matthew 12:41-42; Hebrews 11:7). Yes, He was the fully divine Son of God (Hebrews chapter 1), but He was also made like us in all things (Hebrews 2:17), "was in all points tempted as we are" (Hebrews 4:15; cf. Genesis 3:1-6; Matthew 4:1-11; 1 John 2:15-17), was tempted as man, not as God (James 1:13), lived in a terribly wicked generation (Matthew 12:41-45; 17:17; 23:33-36), and knew nothing that enabled Him to avoid sin that we cannot know (Psalm 119:11; Ephesians 5:17). But He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 7:26-27; cf. John 8:46), and we are to live as He did (Luke 6:40; 1 Peter 2:21-22; 1 John 2:6).

We are commanded not to sin (John 5:14; 8:11; Romans 6:12-13; 1 Corinthians 15:34; Hebrews 12:1; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2:21-22; 1 John 2:1,6). God does not demand of us what we cannot do. Therefore, we do not have to sin.

We sin when we succumb to temptation (James 1:14-15). Since God won't allow Satan to tempt us beyond our ability to overcome (1 Corinthians 10:13), we have the ability to not sin.

### **Man Able to Choose Salvation**

The Lord commands all people to choose Him (Deuteronomy 30:19-20; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 56:1-5; Revelation 22:17). God does not demand of us what we cannot do. Thus, all people can choose Him.

Israel freely chose to serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14-25).

The general truth is that a properly trained child will live accordingly (Proverbs 22:6).

Fathers have the duty of training their children to live godly lives (Ephesians 6:4). Thus, children are capable of being trained to serve the Lord.

The Lord calls all people to come to Him (Isaiah 45:22; Matthew 11:28-30; Matthew 28:19-20; Revelation 22:17). He calls us by the gospel (Mark 16:15-16; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). He only requires of us what we have the ability to do. Therefore, all people have the ability to come to Him.

God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). God only commands what we are able to obey. Thus, all men everywhere are able to repent.

People are capable of changing their hearts. They can prepare their hearts to seek God (2 Chronicles 7:12-13; Ezra 7:10), apply them to instruction and wisdom (Psalm 90:72; Proverbs 23:12), seek the Lord with their whole hearts (Psalm 119:10), inscribe mercy and truth on their hearts (Proverbs 3:3-4), place the word of God in their hearts so as not to sin (Psalm 119:11), and guard their hearts (Proverbs 3:3). Also, people can harden their hearts (Zechariah 7:12; Psalm 95:8-11; Hebrews 3:7-11; 4:6-7).

People can change their minds (Matthew 7:18; 12:33; 3:8). This is brought about by the Word of God (Psalm 19:7; Acts 11:13-14,18; 26:16-20) and is done by repentance (Matthew 21:28-29). One can renew his mind (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23), have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), set his affections on things above (Colossians 3:2), and can "gird up the loins of his mind" for service to God (1 Peter 1:13; 4:1). On the other hand, man can give himself over to a "depraved" mind (Romans 1:28, **NASB**) and allow his mind to be corrupt and defiled (1 Timothy 6:5; Titus 1:15).

### **Believers Able to Disbelieve**

Free will does not cease when we are saved. Those who have believed in and obeyed the Lord, so that we are saved from sin, may turn to disbelief and disobedience. The Hebrew writer addresses "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling...." (Hebrews 3:1). He

exhorts, "consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus...." (Ibid), informs us we are the house of Christ (verse 6) and addresses us as "brethren." (verse 11)

But he cautions that we will be ultimately saved "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end." (verse 5, cf. verse 14) The term "if" has justly been called the biggest little word in the English language. The Greek word from which it is translated is "a conditional particle." (Thayer. 162)

The inspired author appeals to Israel in the wilderness as the example of the danger (verses 8-10). They once believed in the Lord (Exodus 14:31; Psalm 106:12) but hardened their hearts and rebelled (Hebrews 3:8,16), went astray (verses 9-10), and became disobedient unbelievers (verses 18-19). Thus, God did not allow them to enter His rest (verses 11,18-19). The inspired writer solemnly warns:

*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God....* (Hebrews 3:12-13)

### **Conclusion**

We each have the inherent ability to believe or disbelieve, obey God or sin, be saved or be lost. "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

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### **Negative**

#### **David Landon**

Thanks to my friend Keith, for taking part in this discussion of a decidedly tough subject. Keith rightly calls human free will, "one of our crucial differences." That being the case, why does he (as in past debates) take up so much space defending things we agree on? A great amount of ink was wasted proving that man is under no compulsion to sin. I agree. All the verses under Keith's heading, "Man Able to Choose Salvation," I would agree with if the word able were changed to responsible. Same with Keith's final heading; had he grouped these verses under the head, "Believers responsible not to disbelieve," there would have been no debate. Keith's entire position is built on the sandy foundation of one single presupposition: Responsibility proves ability. This master axiom, Keith repeats at least six times, in various forms, without once pausing to offer proof.

Keith's response, at this point, would almost certainly be, "Physician, heal thyself." My affirmative on necessity and moral inability, Keith would say, smells too much of the lamp. All this talk: of necessity and contingency, these endless distinctions of cause and effect, of liberty and ability; of what practical use can all this be to the average man in the street? Two answers may be given to this objection:

1. Throughout the history of the Church, in her controversies about free will, these are the words and concepts that have been considered essential matters by all disputants. Not to consider them, said Luther, would be as if a rhetorician, purposing to write on oratory, should say, "In my judgment, all that superfluous nonsense about invention, arrangement, elocution, memory, pronunciation, need not be mentioned; it is enough to know, that oratory, is the art of speaking well." It is necessary, if Keith would prove that the will is able, with equal facility, to move itself towards good or evil, to show (among other things) that the will is self determined, and that perfect liberty excludes any necessity whatever. Especially, he must demonstrate (not merely assert) his master thesis, that responsibility proves ability. He has done none of these things.

2. The average man on the street knows a great deal about these matters, though he may not use the same terminology. He knows, for instance, that there is a difference between liberty and ability. He may have knowledge of some who, through repeated acts of immorality, have formed fixed habits, which, in turn, have led to a certain moral inability. They still possess freedom of will, they continue to be responsible subjects, and they continue to be either praiseworthy, or blameworthy, depending on the choices they make; yet they labor all the while under a certain necessity of sinning. They are like those of whom Peter writes, certain ones "having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin," 2 Peter 2:14.

Our "man on the street" (if he is a saved man) knows too, that God, at the point of his conversion, changed his will, drawing him to Christ in such a way as not to do violence to his will. We have all heard the expression, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't force him to drink." But oh the wonders of a strategically placed block of salt. In like manner, God is able to make us willing to drink of the water of life; often by use of the salt of affliction, but chiefly by His Spirit's work in our hearts, in giving us such a sight of the glory of Christ as is sufficient to overcome all opposition, 2 Corinthians 4:6.

### **Responsibility does not prove ability**

I repeat, Keith has not demonstrated the one thing needful, namely, that responsibility implies ability. The closest he comes to a proof is found under his heading, **Divine Justice**. Put into the form of an argument, the major proposition would be *If God is just, He only holds us accountable for what we are capable of doing*. The minor proposition would be, *God is just*, and the conclusion is, *therefore we capable of doing all we are accountable for*. Our problem is with the major proposition. It is coussingerman to this argument: God's justice requires that Adam and Eve should be lost forever upon their first transgression, but God is just, therefore, etc. Again, the major proposition is at fault. Strict justice may require the banishment of our first parents from paradise, but mercy interposed. It is evident, then, that Keith's view of justice may not best explain the facts. It may be just and right that God require of us only what we are able to perform. It might, on the other hand, be perfectly just and right for God to appoint a representative of all men (Adam) and in justice give unto him a positive command, promising to give life upon obedience; life not only to Adam, but to all those whom he represents as well. It may, moreover, be perfectly just for God to punish, upon his disobedience, not only

Adam, but all those as well for whom he stood as a public person. Finally, it may be just for God to remove that original righteousness from Adam and his posterity, thus ensuring, as part of the punishment for sin, the native depravity and corruption of all men. I do not argue for these things now; that was the subject of another debate. I merely point out, that when Keith would seek to demonstrate the proposition that *responsibility proves ability*, he needs to go to the scriptures, not to human philosophy or Webster; neither to some vague notion of what God's justice entails. Granted, Keith quoted Scripture. And every verse will equally support the Reformed, or Calvinistic, system. For proof of this look again at Keith's three major headings:

1. "Man under no compulsion to sin." Calvinists agree that the will is not truly free if it is forced. At the same time we say that it is certain (because men love darkness ) that all will sin. All men, if left to themselves, **naturally** love darkness (John 3:19) and hate God. As one old Puritan put it, if a certain tree, in every clime, and under every condition, should bring forth only noxious and inedible fruit, we must say that it is its nature so to do.

2. "Man able to choose salvation." Man is still made in God's image, and retains his reason, will, affections, and understanding. He is therefore a responsible being. Thus the commands and invitations of Scripture. We would even grant that man is able, were it not for his love of darkness.

3. "Believers able to disbelieve." We agree, and add, that believers, if left to themselves would *only* disbelieve. God's grace intervenes. He has promised to preserve His people.

The problem, then, with Keith's use of Scripture under these three heads, is his failure to give proper weight to other groups of texts; those that explicitly picture man's native depravity and inability, and his absolute need of Divine grace and mercy. It is only the Reformed, or Calvinistic, system that is able to account for all the texts of Scripture.

### Conclusion

According to Keith, "The basis of Calvinism is the belief that the sovereignty of God rules out the free will of man." That is caricature. What is not caricature, is the fact that all non-Calvinistic theories of free will rule out the sovereignty of God. In all these it is man who is sovereign. According to Keith, it is man who makes himself to differ from others. "People are capable of changing their hearts." Repentance, renewing one's mind, coming to Christ, and several other things are all, according to Keith, within the power of free will. Inferences and conclusions all drawn from a solitary presupposition, that responsibility implies ability.

The word "if" is "the biggest little word in the English language?" "If" is an important word, proving responsibility, and the relationship between means and end, cause and effect. Keith has assigned to this word the thankless and impossible task of proving ability as well. There is however, a bigger, and more theologically significant, word than "if" and that is the word "I." This is the word of pride and self-reliance, repeated five

times by the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. This word feeds off the popular doctrine of free will. "I," when coupled with "will," is the expression of self-sovereignty. "I will," repeated Lucifer, five times in Isaiah 14. This "house-devil" "I will" is still with us. Keith says we have the ability to choose to be saved. Scripture says it is not of our will, John 1:13, but of God's, 5:21.

Luther's words are a good conclusion of the matter, "If any man doth ascribe of salvation, even the very least, to the free will of man, he knoweth nothing of grace, and he hath not learnt Jesus Christ aright."

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## Response

### Keith Sharp

Thanks, Dave, for another good discussion free of rancor.

Dave asserts, "we agree" then backtracks, explaining, "I would agree ... if the word able were changed to responsible." If we are responsible, we are able. We don't agree. Calvinists do **not** believe man has free will.

Dave claims I assert without scriptural proof that "responsibility proves ability." I again introduced Matthew 25:14-30, and Dave again ignored it. The lord gave "talents" (money), "to each according to his own ability." (verse 15) He held each servant responsible for using his own ability and opportunities and nothing more. The Lord is just. He is not like a father who holds his son accountable for making the football team, whereas the son lacks the ability. Human responsibility proves human ability.

I also repeatedly introduced 1 John 5:3, which teaches that God's "commandments are not burdensome." If we lack the ability to keep them, they are burdensome. It's irrelevant that John is addressing Christians, for Calvinists contend Christians also lack the ability to live without sin.

Dave didn't reply to arguments on the fact we receive our spirits from God, the parallel between our temptations and that of Adam and Eve, ancient Israel's ability to keep God's law, Jesus' sinless life, God's refusal to allow Satan to tempt us beyond our ability, the divine assurance that properly trained children will generally live as they should, and the facts people can change their hearts and minds. Each argument independently proves my proposition.

Calvinists are "yes and no" (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:18) on free will as on other subjects. Dave asserts we agree "that man is under no compulsion to sin" yet affirms, "fallen man sins necessarily."

Why wrestle with philosophical ramifications of free will, when Calvinists themselves believe Adam and Eve had free will? Reject human philosophy and accept God's Word.

The fact some sin so much they sear over their consciences (1 Timothy 4:2) and "cannot cease from sin" (2 Peter 2:14) doesn't prove God holds us accountable for inherent inability. A drunk can't drive safely, but he's responsible for accidents he causes. He wasn't born a drunk.

There's a great difference between God providentially arranging for the sinner to hear the gospel (Acts 8:26-29) and God directly, supernaturally changing the heart of a rebellious sinner to a receptive hearer. The first preserves free will; the second reduces man to a programmable computer. According to Calvinism, God spreads the spiritual feast of the gospel before all. But all have an inherent malady that makes this feast repulsive to them. God inexplicably administers an antidote to some (supernatural work of the Holy Spirit directly on the elect sinner's heart), so the feast is irresistible to them. He lets the rest die and blames them for not eating.

Second Corinthians 4:6 refers to preachers (verse 5) who were "earthen vessels" of the gospel (verse 7), i.e., inspired apostles, prophets, and preachers.

If Dave adds one word - the word "inherently" - to the major premise he charges I believe, I'll defend it. *If God is just, He only holds us accountable for what we are inherently capable of doing.* Since our spiritual nature is from God (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:9), He is responsible for our **inherent** spiritual ability. Would I be just to condemn my sons for being physically short, an attribute they inherited from me?

God's mercy toward Adam and Eve (and us) is the opposite of Calvinism. Certainly the Lord's justice is tempered by mercy (Psalm 101:1). But Calvinists teach that God imputes the sin of the father (Adam) to the children (the human race). Rather than merciful, that's unfair, and the Lord forbids us to charge Him with such gross injustice (Ezekiel 18:1-3,20,29). God being the witness, it is appallingly unjust to appoint one man to represent all and to charge all with his sin.

"Calvinists agree that the will is not truly free if it is forced." (David Landon) "...fallen man sins necessarily." (David Landon)

In the "world" in which men love darkness (John 3:19-20), there are also those who love the light (John 3:21). Cornelius, while unregenerate (Acts 11:13-14), was "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household." (Acts 10:1-2) One tree (Jesus) produced only good fruit.

Dave ignored my arguments on Hebrews three.

Yes, all sin, not through inherent depravity, but free, unconstrained choice. Calvinists cannot successfully deal with the many passages that teach human responsibility. They



resort to blasphemy by charging God with holding us responsible for what we are inherently unable to do.

Dave charges that my statement, "The basis of Calvinism is the belief that the sovereignty of God rules out the free will of man", is "caricature" (misrepresentation) but then charges that, if we can change our own hearts, repent, renew our minds, and come to Christ, we are sovereign rather than God. Thus, Dave himself sustains my charge. Calvinists totally misunderstand divine sovereignty. We have the ability to sow to the flesh or to the spirit, but God will surely judge us according to our sowing (Galatians 6:7-8). That's divine sovereignty!

Calvinists fail to see the difference between those who proudly follow their own wills (e.g., Lucifer, Isaiah 14:12-14) and those who humbly, freely choose to submit their wills to God's will (Romans 6:16-18). "I surrender all," centering in the big word "I," is the deepest recognition of divine sovereignty (cf. Matthew 16:24).

Calvinists cannot differentiate between those who think they've earned righteousness (Luke 18:9-14) and those who humbly accept the righteousness which is from God alone (Romans 10:4-10).

Did Luther rule out free will? Luther misunderstood grace. Paul understood grace very well. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age...." (Titus 2:11-12) We should, and we can.