

Letter on Free-will

*Elberfeld, October 23, 1861.*

John Nelson Darby

Very dear brother,

I had a little lost sight of an important subject of your last letter but one, solely through the multitude of my occupations. This fresh breaking out of the doctrine of free-will helps on the doctrine of the natural man's pretension not to be entirely lost, for that is really what it amounts to. All men who have never been deeply convinced of sin, all persons with whom this conviction is based upon gross and outward sins, believe more or less in free-will. You know that it is the dogma of the Wesleyans, of all reasoners, of all philosophers. But this idea completely changes all the idea of Christianity and entirely perverts it.

If Christ has come to save that which is lost, free-will has no longer any place. Not that God hinders man from receiving Christ — far from it. But even when God employs all possible motives, everything which is capable of influencing the heart of man, it only serves to demonstrate that man will have none of it, that his heart is so corrupted and his will so decided not to submit to God (whatever may be the truth of the devil's encouraging him in sin), that nothing can induce him to receive the Lord and to abandon sin. If, by liberty of man, it is meant that no one obliges him to reject the Lord, this liberty exists fully. But if it is meant that, because of the dominion of sin to which he is a slave, and willingly a slave, he cannot escape from his state and choose good (while acknowledging that it is good, and approving it), then he has no liberty whatever. He is not subject to the law, neither indeed can be; so that those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

And here is where we touch more closely upon the bottom of the question. Is it the old man that is changed, instructed, and sanctified? or do we receive, in order to be saved, a new nature? The universal character of the unbelief of these times is this — not the formally denying Christianity, as heretofore, or the rejection of Christ openly, but the receiving Him as a person, it will be even said divine, inspired (but as a matter of degree), who re-establishes man in his position of a child of God. Where Wesleyans are taught of God, faith makes them feel that without Christ they are lost, and that it is a question of salvation. Only their fright with regard to pure grace, their desire to gain men, a mixture of charity and of the spirit of man, in a word, their confidence in their own powers, makes them have a confused teaching and not recognize the total fall of man.

186 For myself, I see in the word, and I recognize in myself, the total ruin of man. I see that the cross is the end of all the means that God had employed for gaining the heart of man, and therefore proves that the thing was impossible. God has exhausted all His resources, and man has shewn that he was wicked, without remedy, and the cross of Christ condemns man — sin in the flesh. But this condemnation having been manifested in another's having undergone it, it is the absolute salvation of those who believe; for condemnation, the judgment of sin, is behind us; life was the issue of it in the resurrection. We are dead to sin, and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Redemption, the very word, loses its force when one entertains these ideas of the old man. It becomes an amelioration, a practical deliverance from a moral state, not a redeeming by the accomplished work of another person. Christianity teaches the death of the old man and his just condemnation, then redemption accomplished by Christ, and a new life, eternal

life, *come down from heaven* in His person, and which is communicated to us when Christ enters us by the word. Arminianism, or rather Pelagianism, pretends that man can choose, and that thus the old man is ameliorated by the thing it has accepted. The first step is made without grace, and it is the first step which costs truly in this case.

I believe we ought to hold to the word; but, philosophically and morally speaking, free-will is a false and absurd theory. Freewill is a state of sin. Man ought not to have to choose, as being outside good. Why is he in this state? He ought not to have a will, any choice to make. He ought to obey and enjoy in peace. If he ought to choose good, then he has not got it yet. He is without what is good in himself, any way, since he has not made his decision. But, in fact, man is disposed to follow that which is evil. What cruelty to propose a duty to man who has already turned to evil! Moreover, philosophically speaking, he must be indifferent; otherwise he has already chosen as to his will — he must then be absolutely indifferent. But if he is absolutely indifferent, what is to decide his choice? A creature must have a motive; but he has none, since he is indifferent; if he is not, he has chosen.

Finally, it is not at all thus: man has a conscience; but he has a will and lusts, and they lead him. Man was free in Paradise, but then he enjoyed what was good. He used his free choice, and therefore he is a sinner. To leave him to his free choice, now that he is disposed to do evil, would be a cruelty. God has presented the choice to him, but it was to convince the conscience of the fact, that in no case did man want either good or God.

187 I have been somewhat oppressed with sleep while writing to you, but I think you will understand me. That people should believe that God loves the world — this is very well; but that they should not believe that man is in himself wicked, without remedy (and in spite of the remedy), is very bad. One does not know oneself and one does not know God

. . . The Lord is coming, dear brother; the time for the world is departing. What a blessing! May God find us watching and thinking only of one thing — the One of whom He thinks — Jesus our precious Saviour. Salute the brethren.

Your very affectionate brother, J. N. D.