

Free Will and Liberty for God and Man

(Sermon at Beaverkill Community Church, 7/4/2021)

Sometime, even now if you wish, just hold out your index finger and consider, ponder, when shall I move it? And suddenly it moves. Do you think that you made the decision to move it? Some people think that you do not make the decision but that it just happens. I think most people today believe that they will their movements to happen and that they are free to make that decision. I think that most people believe they have freedom of will, freedom to decide to move about, and personal liberty to think as they will. Not everyone agrees, including many Christian thinkers at the time of the American Revolution.

Today, of course, is July 4th, Independence Day. Exactly two hundred and forty-five years ago, the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America was signed by the delegates to the Second Continental Congress, copies made, and then dispatched to the world, including particularly to George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland. The principal message, LIBERTY, was short, clear, profound and immortal:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men."

Thomas Jefferson was the draftsman and principal author of the Declaration. For him, Liberty and Free Will were concepts joined at the hip. Life and Liberty were corollaries of the axiom of Free Will, and the principal and quintessential duty of government was to

secure the exercise of man's free will constrained only by law.

Here are just a few of the many things Jefferson said on point:

"The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time: the hand of force may destroy but cannot disjoin them."

"Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested His supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion..."

"I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Jefferson, a lawyer, did not develop these thoughts on his own but rested them on the shoulders of many great thinkers, philosophers, and scholars. Principal among the legal thinkers at the time was William Blackstone, an English lawyer who in 1758, authored a stupendous treatise, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, in four Books, which quickly became the "go to" reference tool of every English lawyer, including in the American colonies. It is in print today. In Book I, *The Rights of Persons*, Chapter 1, "Of the Absolute Rights of Individuals," he introduces the subject by observing as follows:

"The absolute rights of man, considered as a free agent, endowed with discernment to know good from evil, and with power of choosing those measures which appear to him to be most desirable, are usually summed up in one appellation, and denominated the natural liberty of mankind. This natural liberty consists properly in a power of acting as one thinks fit, without any restraint or control, unless by the law of nature: being a right inherent in us by birth, and one of the gifts of God to man at his creation, when he endued him with the faculty of free will."

Blackstone goes on at length to enumerate these absolute rights to life, property, defense of body and reputation, preservation of health, rights to move about freely and to live in the kingdom, and rights of application to the courts of justice.

There is long article in Wikipedia on the religious thinking about man's free will and its exercise against the belief held by many that God has pre-knowledge of what is to come. The problem is, of course, if everything is predestined by Almighty God's foreknowledge, how much room can there be for free will in the mind of a puny human being?

Judaism's view of this conundrum seems to me practical-minded and somewhat self-serving. For example, the Twelfth-Century scholar Maimonides reasoned that human beings have free will in the context of choosing to do good or evil because, without free will, the demands of the prophets would have been meaningless, there would be no need for the [Torah](#), and justice could not be administered. In sum, human free will is granted by God as part of the universe's design.

Islam's view of the conflict of free will versus predestination is more nuanced: free will is the main factor for man's accountability in his actions throughout life. Actions taken by people exercising free will are counted on the Day of Judgment because they are their own; however, the free will happens with the permission of God.

When we come to Christianity's evolution through centuries of European conflict and the migration of people from various religious backgrounds and sects into the American colonies, the subject of free will versus predestination becomes extremely complex and

contentious. Just listen to the following very short summary of this evolution in the Wikipedia article I mentioned:

"The notions of free will and predestination are heavily debated among Christians. Free will in the Christian sense is the ability to choose between good or evil. Among Catholics, there are those holding to Thomism, adopted from what Thomas Aquinas put forth in the *Summa Theologica*. There are also some holding to Molinism which was put forth by Jesuit priest Luis de Molina. Among Protestants there is Arminianism, held primarily by Methodist and some Baptists, and formulated by Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius; and there is also Calvinism held by most in the Reformed tradition which was formulated by the French Reformed theologian, John Calvin. John Calvin was heavily influenced by Augustine of Hippo's views on predestination put forth in his work *On the Predestination of the Saints*. Martin Luther seems to hold views on predestination similar to Calvinism in his *On the Bondage of the Will*, thus rejecting free will. In condemnation of Calvin's and Luther's views, the Council of Trent declared that "the free will of man, moved and excited by God, can by its consent co-operate with God, who excites and invites its action; and that it can thereby dispose and prepare itself to obtain the grace of justification. The will can resist grace if it chooses. It is not like a lifeless thing, which remains purely passive. Weakened and diminished by Adam's fall, free will is yet not destroyed. . .

Paul the Apostle discusses Predestination in some of his Epistles.

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." -Romans 8:29-30

"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." - Ephesians 1:5

The exact meaning of these verses has been debated by Christian theologians throughout history."

And I quickly add that the delegates to the Second Continental Congress who debated Jefferson's text for the Declaration of Independence came from all the Christian religious groupings just mentioned:

Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers, Dutch Reformers, and many others. For them, reaching a consensus on the proper expression of the meaning and justice of their cause was arduous, and yet they managed to produce a document worthy of their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

They prevailed, of course, in the arduous years of war ahead but, we should hasten to remind ourselves, they did not solve the intellectual, religious and philosophical problems of kingship, free will, predestination, life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps we, as their heirs, also will fail to solve them. Perhaps we, given the shortness of our lives, even with the knowledge passed on to us by our ancestors, are not destined to solve these problems, ever, or not in this world anyway. Perhaps these are not problems that can be solved with the unaided human intellect. And perhaps this is part of God's plan, which we cannot know and must accept on faith.

Thomas Jefferson in my estimation was very smart, lived a long life, and became wise through a diversity of experience that few people attain. I would not want to end without passing on some of the practical advice he gave for solving human problems that can be solved, and without the necessity of acceptance on faith. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after he signed the Declaration of Independence. In 1825, near the end of his life, he gave these ten items of advice to a young man:

1. Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.
2. Never trouble another for what you can do yourself.
3. Never spend money before you have earned it.
4. Never buy what you don't want because it is cheap.

5. Pride costs more than hunger, thirst or cold.
6. We seldom repent of having eaten too little.
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly.
8. How much pain the evils cost us that never happened.
9. Take things always by the smooth handle.
10. When angry, count ten before you speak; if very angry count to a hundred.

To that, I think we all could say, "**AMEN.**"

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