

## ***Of Free Will (Article XVIII) On Grace and Free Will*** **Free Will in Augustine and Augsburg**

*By Eric Pelzl*

In Article XVIII of the Augsburg Confession, Augustine is cited as a supporter of the Lutherans' understanding of free will. It provides a quote to back up this claim. However, the quote from *Hypognosticon*, Book III, is wrongly attributed to Augustine. The question then stands; can Lutherans properly claim Augustine's support for their understanding of free will?

The quote from *Hypognosticon* is as follows,

We grant that all men have a free will, free, inasmuch as it has the judgement of reason; not that it is thereby capable, without God, either to begin, or at least, to complete aught in things pertaining to God, but only in works of this life, whether good or evil. "Good" I call those works which spring from the good in nature, such as, willing to labor in the field, to eat and drink, to have a friend, to clothe oneself, to build a house, to marry a wife, to raise cattle, to learn divers useful arts, or whatsoever good pertains to this life. For all these things are not without dependence on the providence of God; yea, of him and through him they are and have their being. "Evil" I call such works as willing to worship an idol, to commit murder, etc. (Triglotta, A.C., XVIII, 51-53)

This quote contains two basic parts which are the core of the Lutheran understanding of free will as expressed in Augsburg Confession. They are civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness. Melancthon writes, "man's will has some liberty to choose civil righteousness, and to work things subject to reason. But it has no power, without the Holy Ghost, to work the righteousness of God, that is, spiritual righteousness" (Triglotta, A. C., XVIII, 51). In *Hypognosticon* these two parts are expressed in the first sentence of the quote with the obvious emphasis of the quote being civil righteousness. Does Augustine agree with the Augsburg Confession? Does he agree with *Hypognosticon*?

The scope of this assignment limits us to Augustine's treatise *On Grace and Free Will*. In this treatise Augustine addresses the error of the Pelagians. They taught that man's will was such that he could fulfill the law and thus merit salvation. They defined God's grace as the forgiveness of sins and the law. Reason drove them to downplay grace in order that they could rationally explain free will's part in salvation. Augustine sets out to show that both free will and grace exist, not because we understand how, but because God tells us so clearly in Scripture.

In *On Grace and Free Will*, Augustine does not dissent from the two parts of the Augsburg Confession, but he does not directly address civil righteousness. He mentions it negatively as the lack of true righteousness: "As many... as are led by their own spirit, trusting in their own virtue, with the addition merely of the law's assistance, without the help of grace, are not the sons of God" (*G.F.W.* 24). But even then, his concern is to compare the condition of a person before and after God's grace, not to explain civil righteousness. Therefore we can not claim Augustine's overt support of the *Hypognosticon*' content, at least from this treatise.

However, Augustine clearly deals with the second part of the doctrine of Free Will, namely, man's will toward spiritual righteousness.

The Augsburg Confession teaches that free will in man is not truly free because all people are slaves to sin and dead to spiritual righteousness. What God has judged as good, man

can not will to do, except by Spirit-born faith. "It is false to say that he who performs the works of the commandments without grace does not sin" (Triglotta, Apol., XVIII, 335).

Therefore the human will is *free* to choose spiritual righteousness only when it is guided by God, only after it has been buried with Christ and risen with him to new life. True Lutherans confess, "this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Ghost is received through the Word" (Triglotta, A.C., XVIII, 51).

That Augustine teaches this is clear. In fact it is the main point of *On Grace and Free Will*. He writes in chapter 32, "It is certain that it is we that will when we will; but it is He [God] who makes us will what is good..." Again in chapter 41 he writes, "...the human will is not taken away, but changed from bad to good, and assisted when it is good." In chapter 10 he quotes Jesus, "No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." By these, as well as others, it is clear that Augustine agrees with the Apology that spiritual righteousness is to be ascribed "to the governing of the Holy Ghost in the regenerate" (XVIII, 337).

Unfortunately, that is not *all* that Augustine says. As he turns towards his final chapters, Augustine carries out a discussion of God's absolute power over human wills. In this discussion he goes further than the Augsburg Confession to declare, "I think, sufficiently clear that God works in the hearts of men to incline their wills whithersoever He wills, whether to good deeds according to His mercy, *or to evil after their own deserts*" (*G.F.W.* 43)<sup>1</sup>. The Augsburg Confession does not deal with double-predestination in the article *On Free Will*, but Augustine steps into it in *On Grace and Free Will*. Later he even more precariously addresses it when he says of a baptized person who falls from faith, "God foreknew [that he] would be ungodly" (*G.F.W.* 45).

Augustine's problem arises because he is attempting to explicate a mystery. He even acknowledges that much later in chapter 44, "These things, no doubt, happen through the secret providence of God, whose judgements are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out". He walks a very fine line of saying more than Scripture on the mystery of free will. Logically, we can not understand how both grace and free will can coexist. Theologically, we know they do because God says so. Augustine clearly shows that both exist. He clearly draws his conclusions from Scripture. He is less clear and less enjoyable when he attempts to explain what Scripture does not.

In Augustine's defense, he was being pushed to explain the connection of grace and free will by the Pelagians whose system was clearly logical in the matter of free will. Moreover, he did not have as many shoulders to stand on in his study of this doctrine. Later theologians could look at the free will from a more thoroughly investigated view, thanks in part to Augustine himself. Partially for this reason the Augsburg Confessors understood the parameters of Scripture when faced with the same doctrinal challenge to free will.

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<sup>1</sup> Italics, mine.