

The Power of Choice and Life: A Short Theological Reflection

by Frank M. Hasel

It has been said that “man has been endowed by God with the greatest and most awesome of freedoms: the freedom of choice.”¹ Indeed, the ability of human beings to make meaningful choices is one of the most significant aspects of what it means to be human. Our freedom to choose is crucial for any theory of ethics, since moral action has to do with choosing what is right. Our ability and privilege to choose grows in the soil of freedom, which is also the seedbed of true love. Divine love never forces us against our will. To be able to choose freely² is one of the highest human goods. It is at the foundation of many human rights statements and declarations.³ One cannot deny human freedom without rejecting what makes us personal beings rather than animals. The priceless freedom to choose gives dignity to our life. At the same time, it makes us responsible for our decisions and the actions that result from them.

Biblically speaking, human beings are created by God with the ability to choose.⁴ Time and again we find core biblical passages that put before us the option to choose⁵ and we are admonished to choose wisely because the fear of the Lord⁶ is the beginning of wisdom. As with any freedom, there is a certain risk. Human beings are capable of choosing poorly and sometimes make wrong choices that are more self-centered than obedient to God’s will. Making right choices leads to blessings, but choosing wrongly leads to negative results. The Bible uses the terminology of blessings and curses for this experience (cf. Deut 28).

According to the Bible, our capacity to choose is an essential part of being created in the image of God. It coheres well with the biblical religious experience and the nature of God. In the Bible, God is the one who freely chose to create us, and God freely chooses to save us in the only way He designed for our salvation. Our freedom to choose reflects this important aspect of God’s nature and makes us powerful agents. In the words of Ellen G. White:

What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure.⁷

Our freedom to choose has significant implications for a number of questions—especially those that deal with God’s moral law and pertain to human life. Our freedom to choose does not enable us to create life—which is, biblically speaking, something only God can do. Our human freedom, however, allows and enables us to modify existing life—for instance, through advances in genetic engineering and cloning, the ability to extend life up to a certain degree, or life support systems that help sustain life. On the other hand, our freedom gives us even the supremacy and power to terminate life. It is remarkable that the divine sacredness of life is not exempt from the power of human choice. As creaturely beings, we have the ability to actually terminate life that, biblically speaking, God has given and only God has the right to end. This pertains to our own life as well as the life of other human beings—born or not yet born.

Our capability to choose to terminate our own life⁸ is something that distinguishes human beings from animals and sets us apart from the animal world. While this ability to choose elevates us as human beings, it is no guarantee that we are more humane. The splendor and glory of our ability to choose is often diminished by the sublime effect of sin on our choice. There is a remarkable and fascinating paradox in our ability of

choice: by choosing to terminate life, we are free to decide to eliminate even the very freedom to choose, which God has given. And the effect of such a decision remains with us as something that is permanent and irreversible. It seems as if God knew about such drastic consequences of our creaturely freedom and therefore provided very strict boundaries to safeguard the sanctity of human life and the freedom it carries. This is reflected in God's apodictic commandment: "You shall not kill!"⁹

In our modern society, however, God's unchangeable moral law and our social and political thought are often at odds with each other. This has to do with a long historical development of thought where freedom is understood to be somewhat synonymous with (personal) liberty. In the wake of the Enlightenment, the individual is believed to have the right to pursue one's life autonomously and apart from overbearing governmental or ecclesiastical restraint or autocratic control. The influential philosopher Immanuel Kant describes the spirit of the Enlightenment in the following words:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] 'Have courage to use your own understanding!'—that is the motto of the enlightenment.¹⁰

In Greek ethics, from the time of Democritus and Plato, self-sufficiency and autarky were considered to be the highest form of being and the basis for the good.¹¹ But in contrast with secular Greek philosophy or the liberal mindset of the Enlightenment, the New Testament sees human beings as basically in bondage to sin (cf. John 8:39; Rom 6:20; 2 Pet 2:19). Biblically speaking, we are not to pursue our independence so as to live without God or outside His will. Our attempts to be autonomous from God lead to the greatest bondage and ends in unfreedom, because by living autonomously apart from God we miss what we were meant to be (Matt 16:25; John 12:15). Our true freedom does not consist of the unfettered power to direct our lives independently of God. Rather, it lies in our loving faith relationship with God as He has intended it to be (Rom 6:22; Gal 5:1, 13; 1 Pet 2:16). Here we encounter another paradox of faith: we gain this freedom only as we deny ourselves (Matt 16:24). For if we are free, we do not belong to ourselves (1 Cor 16:19; 9:19; 1 Pet 2:16), but to God who has set us free (Rom 6:18, 22; Gal 5:1). The gift of freedom is bound to the divine Giver and is a call to be faithful to His will. "All things

are yours . . . and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (1 Cor 3:21, 23).

In matters of faith and love, we realize that human beings do not live just for themselves and by themselves. We are created to live in relationships—with other human beings and supremely with God, our Creator. Without loving relationships life would not exist, and outside a relationship with God no life will ultimately succeed. Living and existing in relationships, however, also limits the boundaries of our freedom. Even in secular society we are free, theoretically at least, only to the extent that the freedom of other human beings is not negatively affected by our individual choices. There is no limitless freedom in this world. Biblically speaking, our freedom to choose is never autonomous freedom. Autonomy strikes at the very heart of biblical faith because God is a God of relationships and it is God, not self, who gives the law and provides divine salvation. Therefore, we are called to make decisions that are in harmony with God's will as it is expressed in Holy Scripture, rather than making decisions that are in violation of His moral law.

Every person is related to God and in the movement of history is also related to one's fellow human beings. However, we cannot make others or the church responsible for our choices and the way we choose. Ultimately our choices are our own responsibility. The Bible also tells us that we all are affected by sin and that we all are influenced by God's grace. This means that in biblical thought freedom is understood as a state of being where we are rescued from the coercive power of sin that enslaves us in order to be free to live in obedience to God. The more we strive to be faithful to God's will and the promptings of His grace, the greater will be our growth in freedom. Any claim to freedom or liberty that suggests license or a departure from fidelity to God's moral law is false (Rom 6:15; cf. 2 Pet 2:19). Thus, freedom is not gained in emancipation from God but is reached in faithfulness to His Word and in loving service to His will. Therefore, our choices should reflect the good will of our Creator and Redeemer God as stated in His moral law, even if this seems to go against human logic. If we choose to live autonomously from God and in violation of His law, we will misuse our freedom and, in doing so, will experience greater bondage to sin. Hence, the Word of God counsels us to choose wisely and in harmony with the Word of God so that we will be seen as children of God, who abide in God's love if we keep His commandments (John 15:10).

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1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Moral Dilemma of the Space Age” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susanna Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 216.

2 Here we are not entering into the complex philosophical discussion of what is meant by free will. The problem of freedom of will is one of the three great metaphysical problems Kant names as lying beyond the power of the human intellect (see John Macquarie, “Free Will and Determinism” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. James F. Childress and John Macquarie [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986], 237). For the purpose of this brief article we assume the common perception that human beings are capable of making meaningful choices that are not forced but reflect the significantly free decision of the individual.

3 While our ability to freely choose is not listed as a universal human right, it is at the foundation of numerous laws and is presupposed in many civil and fundamental rights. It has been pointed out that “the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) gave constitutional formulation for the first time to the principle that all people ‘are by nature equally free and independent.’ This was the starting point for the freedoms mentioned in standard lists of human or basic rights up to the present day” (Heinz Eduard Tödt, “Freedom, 2. Theological” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, eds. Erwin Fahlbush, et.al. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999–2003], 2:352).

4 Even in the first chapters of Scripture, God gives Adam and Eve the opportunity to choose to trust His word or to

follow their own choosing (cf. Gen 2:16–17; 3:6).

5 Cf. Deut 30:19; 1 Chr 21:10–11; Isa 56:4; 66:4 and passim.

6 In biblical terminology, the “fear of the Lord” is closely connected with the keeping of God’s law—that is, with loving obedience (cf. Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 16:8). Thus, it has been aptly said that the “fear [of the Lord] is a virtue that leads to piety, praise, and humility, since one who fears God recognizes that God, not oneself, is the center of the cosmos” (Tremper Longman, III, “Fear of the Lord” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Peter Enns [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008], 205. The one who fears the Lord, who follows God’s commandments, does not have to be afraid of other human beings.

7 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892), 47. Cf. Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 176.

8 For a concise overview of the history of suicide and its reception in Christian thinking, see A. J. Droge, “Suicide,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:225–231.

9 On the meaning of the sixth commandment “You shall not kill,” see Jiri Moskala, ““You Shall not Kill” or “You Shall not Murder”? *The Meaning of Ratsakh in the Sixth Commandment*,” *Reflections* 67 (July 2019), 1–7.

10 Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” as quoted in <http://theliterarylink.com/kant.html> (accessed May 20, 2019).

11 Cf. Tödt, “Freedom,” 352.

“A good end cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil, that good may come out of it. We are too ready to retaliate, rather than forgive or gain by love and information. . . . Force may subdue, but love gains”
(William Penn, in Jeanne Larson and Micheels-Cyrus Madge, Seeds of Peace [Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986], 160).
