

ABSTRACT

Sovereignty and Salvation: Engaging the Problem of Free Will with the Augustinian Tradition

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The problem of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human activity in conversion is one theologians continue returning to over the centuries. Augustine established one line of interpretation by arguing that divine choice is determinative in conversion. However, others have leveled criticism against this view for leaving no room for human agency, violating free will, or making loving human response impossible. This thesis engages in a close reading of primary texts, from Augustine (ancient), John Calvin (Reformation) and John Piper (modern) to examine their response to these problems. Through attention to the particular vocabulary of each theologian, this thesis argues that four common tenets are foundational to their understanding and argumentation: inability of the human will, divine initiative, decisive divine work, and human free willingness upon conversion. Their defense against objections hinges on establishing the first tenet and then the logical compatibility of these four ideas. I explore how language of both God leading the will and moving the will, and also language of conversion over time and conversion as a moment, are consonant with this shared framework and contribute to the broader reformed understanding.

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SOVEREIGNTY AND SALVATION:
ENGAGING THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL WITH THE AUGUSTINIAN
TRADITION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introducing the Problem

Throughout the history of the church, the problem of free will and divine sovereignty looms large. Paul addressed issues of divine sovereignty and human accountability in the ninth chapter of Romans: “So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy....You will say to me then, ‘Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’” (9:16, 19). In the early fourth century, Pelagius and Augustine famously clashed over this issue, in a debate sparked by Augustine’s prayer in *Confessions* Book X: “Command what you will; give what you command.”¹ Erasmus and Luther also fired back and forth on this topic, in works aptly titled *On Free Will* and *On the Bondage of the Will*, respectively.² It was a point of contention between the great evangelists George Whitfield and John Wesley. Unlike some other doctrines (that of the Trinity, or Christology), the ecumenical church has no authoritative document or creedal statement that settles this matter. The debate is alive and fierce in contemporary Christianity and carries great implications for how we view the human and the Divine.

When discussing these debates, it is almost difficult to choose a single title that best represents the crux of the issue—free will versus determinism? The nature of

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 343.

² Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, trans. and ed. Winter (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

humanity and the extent of the fall? The extent of the atonement? Calvinism versus Arminianism? The issue is so complex, and the literature so vast, that a comprehensive treatment would be almost unthinkable. The question of predestination is perhaps the most common angle of approach for these debates, but the issue has other dimensions as well. For our discussion, we want to limit ourselves to a different aspect of the issue: the relationship of God's grace and human agency in conversion. When a non-Christian person becomes Christian, what is the role that divine choice or agency plays? What about human choice or agency? Which is decisive?

Particularly, we will look to one family of answers to these questions, that of the reformed or Calvinist tradition, which draws on the work of Augustine.³ This tradition is well known for a high view of divine sovereignty and divine choice in salvation. The specific issue of sovereign grace and human choice in conversion specifically is especially important because this is where some of the fiercest criticisms to a sovereign view of salvation are aimed. Does God's sovereign grace in conversion override or violate human free choice? Does God force humans to repent and believe, or make them love God against their will? With this problem on the table, we will look to the work of three influential theologians in this stream to see how they have dealt with it: Augustine of Hippo (354–430), John Calvin (1509–1564), and John Piper (1946–present).

The objection against a reformed understanding of the conversion of the will is an old one, and we need not tie it down to any one author or historical debate. Even in the most general form, the logic of this objection is straightforward enough: if God's agency

³ I use “reformed” with a lowercase as a general adjective to describe a family of views on salvation; I do not refer to any particular denomination.

or choice is determinative in conversion, then it is coercive. If this is the case, humanity is not choosing conversion—God is forcing it upon them. Can a person converted in this way be said to be free? Can their love be real? Issues of human responsibility follow closely behind: if fallen humanity *cannot* repent, how can God hold them responsible for sin? We can summon a host of examples of this line of reasoning. Erasmus defines free will as “the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation.” In Erasmus’ view, God “invites, but does not compel” sinners to repent—the decisive power lies in the free will, for that is its nature. For him, the alternative, where God is the cause of the will’s choice, would be absurd: “Why do you blame me, when all my works, good or bad, are accomplished by you, and I am only your tool?”⁴ Authors Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell make a similar case against the coherence of Calvinistic thinking in the rigorous contemporary work *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (which also features a hearty endorsement from respected Arminian theologian Roger Olson). The book contains a variety of arguments; perhaps the most relevant for us is the challenge that, if God’s choice is determinative in salvation, human love in response is not genuine. Further, they believe Augustine and Piper treat “will” as an essential theological category but relegate “love” to a subordinate place.⁵ I do not aim to give an extended treatment of all the forms of this challenge here, only to give us a general sense of the problem. Of course, not all objections of this sort are identical, yet

⁴ Erasmus, *On the Free Will*, in *Discourse on Free Will* 26, 35, 40.

⁵ Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Dowers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 218–19.

each of these authors see something in the reformed understanding as fundamentally out of balance. How do the thinkers of the Augustinian tradition respond?

First, a word on the three theologians I have elected to engage. In all likelihood, Augustine and Calvin need no introduction. Augustine's influence in the West is nearly impossible to overstate. With regard to questions of predestination, grace, and conversion, this bishop is seen as the most faithful early church authority by those in the reformed tradition. Calvin quotes him in the *Institutes* twice as much as anyone else.⁶ His prolific writing, and specifically his polemical and pastoral role in the Pelagian controversy, provides us with a wealth of reasoning on our chosen topic. Specifically, we will touch on his early work *On the Free Choice of the Will* before moving to *On Grace and Free Choice* and *Confessions*.

John Calvin's influence is such that his name has been chosen as the title for an entire system of thinking on matters of predestination, salvation, and the atonement. The modern reformed movement traces its origins back to him. Calvin himself believe he was rediscovering an Augustinian understanding of depravity, sinfulness and conversion that had become muddled by subsequent theologians.⁷ We will look to Calvin's *Institutes*, his systematic summary of Christian belief and teaching, to see his views of the human will and God's work of grace.

John Piper, a contemporary reformed Baptist pastor and writer, is surely the most unexpected choice on this list, but those familiar with the contemporary evangelical

⁶ See the Index for John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Battles, ed. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960) 1592–1634.

⁷ Ibid II.2.4.

world should not be too surprised.⁸ I have chosen Piper because the question of divine and human agency is not merely of historical interest—it is as much a question today as it was for Paul, Augustine, Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin. If contemporary people are hearing arguments for Calvinism or a sovereign view of conversion, who are they hearing them from? If people are challenging this view, who might they direct the challenge to? The answer is likely John Piper. Though he writes for a popular audience and not scholars, Piper engages in a good deal of biblical interpretation and also in controversial issues. Augustine and Calvin, too, were primarily pastors and church leaders. Piper is known as a “pastor to pastors” and is regarded as one of the most influential living preachers.⁹

Question of actual historical influence would certainly be worth pursuing regarding these three theologians, but that is not my main aim. Instead, we will try to bring together some of the resources that this tradition has for dealing with the problem of human and divine agency and understand them in relation to one another. In the next three chapters, we will engage the work of each theologian through a close reading of primary source texts. Setting aside for the most part philosophical categories, we will pay careful attention to the language that each author chooses to employ. We will seek to examine their understanding of conversion generally—how do they view fallen humanity

⁸ If there is a missing link in this chain of thinkers, it is the Puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards; a reading of his work on this topic alongside Augustine’s in particular would surely be fruitful grounds for further research.

⁹ See for example “Protestant Pastors Name Graham Most Influential Living Preacher,” LifewayResearch.com, February 2, 2010, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2010/02/02/protestant-pastors-name-graham-most-influential-living-preacher/>; Michael Dudit, “The 25 Most Influential Pastors of the Past 25 Years,” *Preaching.com*. <https://www.preaching.com/articles/the-25-most-influential-pastors-of-the-past-25-years/>

and redeemed humanity? What brings a person from one category to the other?

Particularly, we will pay close attention to the way our authors deal with our leading objection—if the divine will plays a sovereign role, does it override the human will or violate it in some way? As we go, we will note places of continuity or discontinuity in the way our authors discuss conversion and address objections. In our final chapter, we will summarize and evaluate the differences we have seen, and then ultimately attempt to outline the core tenets regarding conversion that we see running through all three authors and the resources they offer for engaging the problem of free will.

CHAPTER 2

Augustine: Healing a Wounded Will

If our aim is to search for answers in this tradition to the problem of free will and God's saving grace, we cannot find a better place to begin than Augustine. Peter King states it this way: "it would not be an exaggeration to say that all discussions of grace and salvation within the Christian tradition, including those that occurred in reformed churches following the Reformation, were influenced by Augustine's legacy and in many cases reduced to alternative readings of his work." King goes on to note that Augustine regarded his understanding of human free will and divine grace "as one of his crowning achievements."¹ Augustine's own comments to his readers in *On Grace and Free Choice* further suggest Augustine views human will and divine grace as compatible, and that he thinks the solution is reasonably understandable.²

We have in Augustine, then, a prolific theologian, whose influence extends through the entire history of the Western church, who believes he has found a satisfactory positive answer to our question. Divine grace, for him, is certainly compatible with human free choice. To see and understand the solution that Augustine proposes, it would seem natural to turn first to his well known work *On the Free Choice of the Will*.

However, while this work does provide us with some useful information on the way

¹ Peter King, Introduction to *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010), xxxi.

² Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, ed. Peter King, Cambridge, 2010, 141, 184.

Augustine understands the will, it deals primarily with the problem of evil and the free will of humanity before the fall. For the majority of this chapter, then, we will engage primarily with Augustine's later work *On Grace and Free Choice*, and also the *Confessions*, his beloved theological autobiography. In these works, we see a picture of a fallen human will that is corrupted and weakened to the point of inability by humanity's first sin, and a picture of God's grace as a preemptive, decisive influence that changes a corrupt will to a good will by healing and orienting it toward higher things—namely, toward God's own self.

On the Free Choice of the Will

We can first look to Augustine's early work, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, to establish some preliminary definitions and set the stage for our discussion. As we have noted, there are multiple 'problems of free will,' and Augustine is interested in more than one of them. *On the Free Choice of the Will* deals with the origin of evil, and aims to exonerate God's agency from causing or committing sin in any way. Its dramatic setting is creation, the garden, and the fall of man. A discussion of this work's historical context would be a book in itself, but we can summarize that *On the Free Choice of the Will* is written in 388 and 391 to defend Christianity against the accusations arising from a Manichean dualism which had attracted Augustine as a young man.³ Since Christians could not accept the idea of an evil principle equal with God, Manichees argued that the Christians made God the cause and origin of evil. Augustine's dialogue partner Evodius

³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, University of California Press, 2000, 35; Michael Mendelson, "Saint Augustine", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, revised Nov. 12, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/>.

begins by asking: “Please tell me whether God is not the author of evil,” and then, if not, “From whom did we learn how to sin?”⁴ These questions occupy the majority of the work. Augustine establishes free will as the reason for the origin of evil, then goes on to discuss whether God is blameworthy for giving free will (Book II) and whether humans are blameworthy when their wills turn from higher to lower goods (Book III).⁵

Augustine himself restates the true purpose of the work in his *Reconsiderations* dealing with *On the Free Choice of the Will*: the discussion is designed to deal with those who locate the origin of evil in something other than the free will of creatures, namely, Manichees.⁶ He refuses to allow the work to be taken as his definitive view on the function of the will and grace in salvation: “Now since this [the origin of evil] was the question at hand, there was no examination of grace in these books...it is one matter to look into the origin of evil and another to look into how we may return to our former good or reach a greater good.”⁷ We must note this carefully. Questions of differences between young Augustine and later Augustine aside, this work has a different topic from his later disputes with the Pelagians. To take this text as the way Augustine viewed the state of humanity’s free will after the fall is to fundamentally misunderstand him.

Despite the fact that *On the Free Choice of the Will* does not engage our question directly, it still offers some building blocks that will be useful in understanding

⁴ Augustine, *Free Choice* 3.

⁵ Ibid 30, 72.

⁶ Augustine, *Reconsiderations*, in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, ed. Peter King, Cambridge, 2010, 127.

⁷ Ibid 128.

Augustine. Chief among these is Augustine's conception of the human will and its role. By the end of Book I, Augustine has developed a hierarchical distinction between eternal things and temporal things. Eternal goods—for example, God's law—cannot fail to make the righteous person happy. The righteous person rejoices in “genuine and certain goods” which cannot fade or be taken away. Temporal goods, by contrast—including “riches, honors pleasures, physical beauty”—can be used rightly or abused. The righteous person “does not attach himself to them with love...he is completely above them, possessing and governing them when there is need; he is ready to lose them.” This person has correctly ordered the temporal goods in relation to the eternal. By contrast, the wicked person “is controlled by the things he ought to control, and in setting them up as goods for himself that need to be put in order and treated properly, he holds himself back from the [true] good.” This wicked elevation of temporal goods beyond their rightful places is, for Augustine, the very definition of sin.⁸

It is in this context of two kinds of goods that the will plays its role. “What each person elects to pursue and embrace is located in the will,” Augustine tells us.⁹ The will has the power to choose between higher and lower goods, and to pursue its choice. Later, in Book III, Augustine will revisit and reinforce this point, claiming that it is foolishness to seek a cause prior to the will: “You should not search beyond the root of the matter.”¹⁰ The will, here, is a self-determinative power. No cause compels its choosing; choosing is

⁸ Augustine, *Free Choice* 28–29.

⁹ Ibid 29.

¹⁰ Ibid 106.

what it does. The will is the faculty which charts the soul's course, whether towards earthly or heavenly things.

In a similar vein, it is also vital to understand how Augustine views true freedom of the will's determinative power, lest we import our cultural conceptions of freedom into Augustine's work. We can certainly use the word "freedom" in the sense which slaves wish to be free, and persons not in bondage think of themselves as free, he notes. (This is the sense of the word most likely to come to our minds in our context.) Yet in a one-sentence aside that we cannot overlook, Augustine quips that freedom "is genuine only if it belongs to happy people who adhere to the eternal law," i.e., those who seek eternal goods.¹¹ This points to a conception of freedom as unencumbered activity that we will see again as we come closer to understanding Augustine's view of saving grace.

What we have then from this work is a distinction between earthly and heavenly goods, and the notion that it is the human will which has the role of rightly ordering them. In addition, we have a hint of a view that genuine freedom can only be enjoyed by a righteous person exercising his or her will for good. To put these building blocks to use, we turn next to a work from much later in Augustine's life.

On Grace and Free Choice

By the time of *Grace and Free Choice* (426–27), Augustine's clashes with Manichaeism have faded. The aging bishop of Hippo, just four years from death, is absorbed in a new controversy surrounding the teachings of Pelagius. Pelagius, a bishop

¹¹ Augustine, *Free Choice* 27.

from Britain, taught that perfect obedience was both possible and necessary for humans.¹² Human nature was capable of fulfilling Christ's commands, and any hindrances were merely habitual or societal; human nature remained fundamentally unchanged from its creation.¹³ In fact, defenders of Pelagius were attempting to wield *On the Free Choice of the Will* to support this viewpoint. They argued that since the will is blameworthy regarding sin, it must be equally capable of choosing good and evil. We see evidence of this clash in Augustine's *Reconsiderations* dealing with *On the Free Choice of the Will*. To deal with the misuse of that text, Augustine has to clarify and limit the extent to which the will can be said to be self-determinative. The will, as with other gifts from God, can be used well (to choose virtue) or badly (to choose sin). These contrasting uses of the will are not legitimate—its proper, created purpose is to seek eternal things. The will is most truly free as it fulfills its created purpose, choosing the good or higher things, and a will oriented toward lower things can be said to be in bondage. "Of our own accord we were able to fall, namely by free choice, but not also to rise up."¹⁴

Augustine expounds his view of the state of fallen humanity more fully in *On Grace and Free Choice*, written to a group of monks to provide clarity for them regarding the Pelagian controversy and the proper relation of human free will and divine grace.¹⁵ There are some, he writes, who would defend divine grace to the point of denying the free will of humanity (Manichees) and others who defend free choice to the extent that

¹² Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* 342.

¹³ Ibid 367.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Reconsiderations* 128–32.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 141.

they deny grace (the Pelagians). It is the second sort that Augustine is chiefly concerned to refute here. He takes only a few pages to set out that humanity does have free will, building his case on scriptural precepts: commands would be pointless if man did not have free will. Next, shifting to his main focus, he warns us that one must not understand these precepts in such a way that “no place is left for the assistance and the grace of God in the conduct of a good and religious life.”¹⁶ How exactly were Pelagius and his followers guilty of this? Augustine’s chief grievance is that Pelagius teaches “God’s grace is given in accordance with our deserts.”¹⁷ Against this simple statement, Augustine must deploy the full force of his arguments.

It is in these arguments that we see how strongly Augustine prioritizes grace in conversion—he tells us that “our turning to God [is] itself God’s gift.”¹⁸ For Augustine, grace has both logical and temporal priority. In fact, for grace to even meet the definition of grace, it can have no cause in the human—it cannot be deserved either by works *or* by a good will. Grace is free, and grace comes first, or it is not grace. Instead of grace coming because it is deserved by faith, Augustine actually posits the opposite: faith itself (or the will to believe, as he defines it) arises in us through God’s grace. However, he is careful to show that this grace goes on to produce a good desert in us. “Our good works, for which eternal life is given, themselves belong to God’s grace.”¹⁹ God’s grace produces a good will which does good works, which truly do deserve God’s favor. Since

¹⁶ Ibid 142–146.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 149.

¹⁸ Ibid 150, 163.

¹⁹ Ibid 156.

these works are the product of a gift, one cannot can take pride in them; one can only be grateful.

In this portion of his argument, Augustine leans heavily (but not exclusively) on the writings of Paul.²⁰ He points to Paul’s own conversion and Paul’s interpretation of that event in 1 Corinthians 15: Paul deserved punishment, not goodness, from God when he persecuted the church. Yet God rendered good to him. Augustine observes that Paul’s great labors are a product of God’s grace working in accord with his free will.²¹

Augustine continues to quote Paul’s writings at length: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Timothy, and Titus all have a part to play at some point. Most of the verses Augustine uses deal with the contrast between grace and works.

There is, however, one non-Pauline passage that plays a key role: Ezekiel 11:19–20 and 36:22–27. In this text, God declares his intent to remove the “heart of stone” from his people and give them “a new heart” and “a new spirit,” and to “bring it about that you walk in my justifications.” For Augustine, the heart of stone describes a will that is “inflexible and completely hardened against God.”²² He reasons that it is absurd to think that a person’s good will could precede God’s action here. Humanity’s fallenness is so deep that our hearts are “stone”—unable to feel, respond, or merit anything good at all. It is *God* who must bring about the change of the will—God gives a new heart and enables

²⁰ All three theologians examined here treat the Pastoral Epistles as works of Paul and interpret them alongside his other letters.

²¹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 151.

²² *Ibid* 165.

obedience. God's reason is not to recompense a deserving human but to "make my great name holy" (36:22–23).

The discussion of this passage leads to the crux of Augustine's argument, which is worth quoting in full:

The will is always free in us, but it is not always good. For it is either (a) free from justice, when it is the servant of sin, and then it is evil; or (b) free from sin, when it is the servant of justice, and then it is good. But God's grace is always good. Through grace it happens that a human being who previously had an evil will has a good will. Through grace it also happens that this good will, which has now begun to exist, increases, and becomes so great that it can fulfill divine commandments, which it shall will to do, since it shall will firmly and completely.²³

Here, we see more clearly what Augustine means when he speaks of the will's freedom—he has moved away from self-determination toward something more like voluntary pursuit of one end. The will either serves justice or sin and is free from the other—for humanity after the fall, there is no middle ground. To our ears, neither state may sound like freedom, since both involve a very real sort of servitude. Yet for Augustine, freedom does not contradict this sort of limitation—the will is still free to voluntarily pursue the master it serves.

We can summarize that for Augustine, God's grace (1) comes to us when we do not deserve it, (2) changes our evil will to a good one, creating faith or the will to believe in us, and (3) works with this good will to increase it and produce good works. This decisive understanding of grace is confirmed in *On the Predestination of the Saints*, where Augustine states even more explicitly that this grace is given only to the elect and

²³ Ibid 167.

is “rejected by no hard heart.”²⁴ However, for us, some questions may still remain. How exactly does this change from a good will to a bad will occur? If the will is designed originally to be a self-determinative faculty, does God not violate the will’s nature when changing it? Augustine does not think so, but in *Grace and Free Will* his priority is to defend *that* God changes or inclines the will; he is content here to use this language without offering a mechanism.

Confessions

To add the final layer of description we are looking for, we turn to the most well-known of Augustine’s works, the *Confessions*. We may be rightly cautious about drawing conclusions to perplexing theological questions from an autobiographical work. However, note that *Confessions* is a retrospective work—it interprets the young Augustine’s experience through the theological lens of the more mature bishop. As biographer Peter Brown notes, *Confessions* is forged by Augustine’s pastoral experience in Hippo and is filled with his reflections on scripture. In fact, even the genre of prayer would have been a legitimate place for “speculative inquiry” and reflection on the nature of God.²⁵ What Augustine sees as theologically and scripturally true about God and conversion, he describes retrospectively in his experience. All that to say: the *Confessions* should be fruitful grounds for understanding Augustine’s theology of the will, especially the part it plays in conversion.

²⁴ Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints* (Washington, D.C. Catholic University of America Press, 1992). I.8.13.

²⁵ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* 155, 157.

In Book VIII, Augustine describes the state of his will in the days and hours leading up to his conversion in the garden. Yet when we look closely, there are earlier passages where Augustine discusses the state of his fallen will and the operation of God's grace to lead him toward conversion. One telling passage comes in Book II, where Augustine writes of stealing pears from a neighbor's tree with his companions. This becomes an archetypal sin for Augustine, leading him to contemplate his motives and the nature of sin. "I loved the self-destruction," he laments, "I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen."²⁶ Augustine views himself as deeply fallen and his loves as seriously disordered. He goes on to describe sin in the terms of higher and lower goods: sin is committed when "an immoderate urge" toward things lower on the scale of goods leads humans to "abandon higher and supreme goods, that is you, Lord God, and your truth and your law."²⁷ Sin happens when a soul, meant to take pleasure in God, sets lower things above God. By definition, sin means the corruption of the will from its created purpose of choosing what is better. Augustine recognizes this corruption in himself at an early age.

Years later, when Augustine comes to Milan and sits under Ambrose's teaching, we see God leading Augustine, as of yet unaware, toward salvation.

I was led to him [Ambrose] by you, unaware that through him, in full awareness, I might be led to you...My pleasure was in the charm of his language...[but] Ambrose taught the sound doctrine of salvation. From sinners such as I, salvation

²⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) II.4.9.

²⁷ *Ibid* II.5.10.

is far distant. Nevertheless, gradually, though I did not realize it, I was drawing closer.²⁸

These are the early stages of a shift in Augustine's will. He speaks of being led by God, first to Ambrose, and then through Ambrose toward salvation. Augustine's desire is not yet turned from lower things toward God; he actually finds Ambrose's subject matter "boring and contemptuous."²⁹ Yet through Augustine's inordinate fascination with rhetoric, God is beginning to work.

Later, in Book VII, some of the intellectual barriers that had kept Augustine from Christianity begin to fall. Neo-Platonic answers to the problem of evil help Augustine to move from a dualistic worldview to accepting a single, supreme being. Here, too, he retrospectively sees God's hand at work: "By inward goads you stirred me to make me find it unendurable until, through my inward perception, you were a certainty to me."³⁰ Here, God stirs up discontent, and even anguish, in Augustine's mind, motivating him to come to surer belief in the one God as the sole creator and ruler of the universe. When Augustine recognizes this, he experiences contentment and awe:

With you as my guide I entered into my inmost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper... When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is being... you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe.³¹

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* V.13.23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid VII.8.12.

³¹ Augustine, *Confessions* VII.10.16.

Though he is not yet fully converted here—he still speaks of himself as far from God and unconvinced by the doctrine of the incarnation—Augustine for the first time contemplates the true creator God and is filled with love and awe. This is more than an intellectual change; Augustine’s desire for God is warming.

This experience propels him onward, yet he is still hindered. Later in this book, he writes: “I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself. . . . I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced ‘the mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.’”³² By the opening of Book VIII, Augustine’s will is in fierce turmoil:

I was deeply disturbed in spirit, angry with indignation and distress that I was not entering into my pact and covenant with you, my God, when all my bones were crying out that I should enter into it. . . . But to reach that destination one does not use ships or chariots or feet. . . . The one necessary condition, which meant not only going but at once arriving there, was to have the will to go—provided only that the will was strong and unqualified, not the turning and twisting first this way, then that, of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part rising up and the other part falling down.³³

Here we see in dramatic personal detail the inability of the fallen will that Augustine described in *On Grace and Free Choice*. Human effort (ships, chariots, or feet) is not what counts in conversion. Rather, to be converted is to have a will wholly turned to God. Augustine is in anguish, because his will does not yet look like this. It is “a will half wounded,” incomplete, unable to *fully* will to submit to Christ even though some desire to do so is present. He goes on:

³² Ibid VII.17.23–18.24.

³³ Ibid VIII.8.19.

The mind orders the mind to will. The recipient of the order is itself, yet it does not perform it. What causes this monstrosity and why does this happen?... The willing is not wholehearted, so the command is not wholehearted... the degree to which the command is not performed lies in the degree to which the will is not engaged... We are dealing with a morbid condition of the mind which, when it is lifted up by the truth, does not unreservedly rise to it but is weighed down by habit.³⁴

Augustine describes a soul wavering in deliberation, yet unable to choose the good. He calls this condition of the will “monstrous” and “morbid.” The will is incapable, it seems, of doing the one thing it should be designed to do according to *Free Choice of the Will*, which is to choose and pursue the better good between alternatives. This is why the will is “wounded” and “monstrous”—it has fallen and cannot fulfill its purpose. (This matches perfectly with Augustine’s notion of evil as a corruption, or incompleteness, of something good.) The will’s condition is “a punishment suffered in my own mind... sin resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam.”³⁵ Augustine’s will is still “free” in that it voluntarily follows its strongest desire. Yet paradoxically, this is *not* a state that Augustine can overcome or escape on his own—there is no way for such a will to “command” itself to will wholeheartedly in the opposite direction.

In the midst of this struggle, Augustine describes the words of “Lady Continence” to him. (It is, in large measure, his sexual desires and unwillingness to live a chaste life that has led him to describe this state of his will.) She says to Augustine,

Are you incapable of doing what these men and women [the pious and chaste Christians before] have done? Do you think them capable of achieving this by

³⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.9.21.

³⁵ *Ibid* VIII.10.22.

their own resources and not by the Lord their God? The Lord gave me to them. Why are you still relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon him...he will catch you and heal you.³⁶

This passage signals the shift that will happen in Augustine just moments later when he reads from Romans 13. It is not in Augustine's power to live chastely—but it is in God's power. It is not in Augustine's power to make his will wholehearted towards God—but God is able to do this. God can heal his half-wounded, morbid will. God can restore and strengthen the will to enable it to be wholehearted. It is precisely here that we see exactly why God's act of grace is not overthrowing the will's freedom: God's act that accomplishes the changing of the will is an act of mercy, an act of healing, an act of restoration. In fact, God is actually restoring the will to be able to do what it was originally intended to do—to desire God as the supreme good.

We see this confirmed in the opening of Book IX, where Augustine reflects on his conversion in the garden. God has drawn the corruption out of Augustine and healed his wounded will: “The nub of the problem was to reject my will and desire yours. But where through so many years was my freedom of will? From what deep and hidden recess was it called out in a moment?”³⁷ His will, in this strengthened state, is more free than before—it can truly fulfill its purpose unhindered by lower desires. He remarks joyfully:

Suddenly it had become sweet to me to be without the sweets of folly. What I once feared to lose was now a delight to dismiss. You turned them out and entered their place, pleasanter than any pleasure...Already my mind was free of ‘biting cares’...And I was now talking with you, Lord my God, my radiance, my wealth, and my salvation.³⁸

³⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.11.27.

³⁷ Ibid IX.1.1.

³⁸ Ibid.

Not only has God graciously healed and restored Augustine's will—God did this through the giving of God's very self. Experiencing the goodness of God has freed Augustine from desires for earthly pleasure, reputation, and gain. It is now God alone that animates and draws his will. What we read here is a resounding echo of a line right at the beginning of the *Confessions*: “Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself?”³⁹

We began with a question: How is God's sovereign grace in salvation compatible the free will of individuals? By now we have seen the fullness of Augustine's answer. In our deep sinfulness, humanity's will is still free in the sense that it voluntarily pursues lower things, but it is wounded and incapable of turning fully toward God. Because of this, God's grace must move first—God must bring about the change of our will. Yet God does this not by overriding the will's freedom, but through a gift of grace. Note that on the one hand, Augustine uses contrasting, black-and-white descriptors to describe the change in the will: an old heart and a new heart, evil and good, earthward and heavenward. On the other hand, we see God warming Augustine's desire over time before finally and decisively strengthening the good desires. God even co-opts Augustine's sinful desires to lead him toward conversion. God's action is one of drawing and healing. Ultimately, God restores the will to be able to recognize God as the highest good and pursue God as such. The result is an experience of deeper freedom and joy than the will has known before. With Augustine's answer in place, we move to Calvin. We keep our

³⁹ Ibid I.5.5.

central question but also prepare to pose a new one: how do their answers relate to one another?

CHAPTER THREE

Calvin: God's Good Governance of the Will

Unlike Augustine, John Calvin does in fact leave a systematic summary of his theological thinking, the *Institutes* (or, Instruction) *of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536 and revised throughout Calvin's life until 1559.¹ In the McNeill/Battles edition of the *Institutes*, there is an extensive index of references which can give us a peek at the theological relationship between Augustine and Calvin.² As we would expect, Calvin is deeply engaged with theologians that precede him: there are around a hundred citations each for Thomas Aquinas, Peter Lombard, and Martin Luther, to give a few examples. However, when the index comes to Augustine, there are more than thirteen *columns* of references—each containing over fifty entries!³ Calvin is deeply acquainted with Augustine's thought, which serves as a landmark for him throughout the *Institutes*. His debt to this father is "constantly apparent," and they often agree greatly.⁴ However, Calvin's allegiance to Augustine is not blind; he is willing to change course when his reading of Scripture and his reasoning leads in other directions.⁵

¹ Of Augustine's works, part II of *City of God* would be the closest, it is not so much a systematic theology as a history of redemption, "universal history, telling the story of mankind." G.R. Evans, Introduction to *City of God*, Penguin, 2003, 1–1i; Ford Lewis Battles, Translator's Note to *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. McNeill, Westminster John Knox, 1960, xix.

² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. McNeill, Westminster John Knox, 1960, 1592–1634.

³ The only theologian with even half as many citations as Augustine is, interestingly enough, Peter Martyr Vermigli.

⁴ McNeill, "Introduction," *Institutes of the Christian Religion* lvii.

⁵ *Ibid* lviii.

My goal in this chapter is first to set out Calvin’s notion of the will and his approach to our guiding question—how do we understand the relationship of divine and human agency in conversion? As we go, we will explore the distinctions that arise between Calvin and Augustine, and evaluate the common ways of thinking they offer. Calvin is often understood to be recovering the thought of Augustine on matters of free will, predestination, and the operation of God’s grace in salvation. A close reading of the *Institutes*, on the one hand, indeed confirms much substantial agreement between Augustine and Calvin. The deeply sinful state of fallen man, the preeminence of God’s grace, and the results of God’s grace in the will are all closely parallel in the two authors, as we will see. On the other hand, some asymmetry does exist—there are both differences of emphasis and differences of meaning that need to be noted. One distinction exists regarding the operation of the Spirit before the moment of conversion, and another in the way they approach the compatibility of divine and human agency overall—Calvin does strive to argue for some compatibility and balance, but not to the same extent as Augustine. For Calvin, attributing everything in salvation to God alone is a greater theological and pastoral goal than maintaining balance or explicating the mechanism of God’s grace; this will be evidenced by Calvin’s unique language.

Calvin’s Guiding Axiom

Calvin’s aim when he discusses free will in the *Institutes* is true knowledge of humanity’s nature.⁶ Such knowledge is twofold: it consists both of “what we were given at creation” and “our miserable condition after man’s fall.”⁷ For Calvin, there is a constant danger of confusing

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* II.1.1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

humanity's current state with its original, minimizing the effects of the fall and overstating the goodness now found in humanity. He sets forth this danger in the strongest language: "Since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, they are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in themselves that deserves to be considered hateful."⁸ Vast numbers of previous thinkers have fallen into this trap, such as the philosophers, who "would have him [man] contemplate in himself nothing but what swells him with empty assurance and puffs him up with pride."⁹ The danger to assign humanity more than their due is so great that avoiding it becomes one of Calvin's driving aims in Book II. His aim is to describe the human condition and redemption in a way that does justice to the full effects of the fall:

Here, then, is what God's truth requires us to seek in examining ourselves: it requires the kind of knowledge that will strip us of all confidence in our own ability, deprive us of all occasion for boasting, and lead us to submission. We ought to keep this rule if we wish to reach the true goal of both wisdom and action.¹⁰

For Calvin, there are of course some theologians who have "a more modest attitude" in considering humanity's fallen state. They do not see the human as totally self-sufficient for living the blessed life; one must have assistance from God. Yet even these theologians have fallen into the trap, for they "divide the credit" in a way that still leaves room for boasting in the self's goodness.¹¹ This is set up—if Calvin is going to take a stance that differs from a majority of his theological predecessors, he must establish strong reasons for doing so. What temptation could be strong enough to lead so many thinkers into confusion and error? It is the ever-dangerous sin

⁸ Ibid II.1.2.

⁹ Ibid II.1.1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid II.1.2.

of human pride. To avoid the trap, Calvin carries this theological axiom forward throughout the *Institutes*: *be wary of attributing too much goodness to fallen humanity*.

The Fall and its Results

When Calvin describes the state of Adam before the fall, he is generous. Yet as he begins, he keeps the reader on guard, warning what is coming next: “to be sure, before we come to the miserable condition of man to which he is now subjected, it is worth-while to know what he was like when first created.”¹² Because he was created by a good God, Adam had no defect in nature, no corruption within. He was given God’s image “within him...as an inner good of the soul.”¹³ Adam was endowed with two principle faculties, understanding and will. Understanding serves to “distinguish between objects, as each seems worthy of approval or disapproval,” and will must “choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but reject and flee what it disapproves.”¹⁴ Understanding determines and appraises, making distinctions between good and evil, but the will controls choice, and only will can actually move to action.

Before the fall, freedom of will certainly existed in Adam. He was able to incline either way, free to choose good: “In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life...Adam could have stood if he wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will...his will was capable of being bent to one side or the other, and was not given the constancy to persevere[.]”¹⁵ Calvin defines free will in the way we naturally expect, as the ability

¹² Ibid I.15.1.

¹³ Ibid I.15.4.

¹⁴ Ibid I.15.7.

¹⁵ Ibid I.15.8.

to incline either toward good or evil. It is worth noting, though, how Calvin uses the passive—the will is “able to be bent” toward good or evil. For Calvin, even here in Eden, freedom to incline either way does not mean the will is impervious from outside influences. God could have upheld Adam’s will without violating it, and Calvin also implies that Adam’s will was subject to the influence of Satan, an influence which God in his “secret predestination” did not prevent.¹⁶ Calvin’s main aim here is to exonerate God from any blame for the fall, and he reminds us at every turn that we cannot ascribe Adam’s characteristics from before the fall to humanity now: “man was far different at the first creation from his whole posterity, who, deriving their origin from his corrupted state, have contracted from him a hereditary taint.”¹⁷

Calvin locates the cause of the fall in disobedience or unfaithfulness, and also notes the presence of pride or lack of reverence for God’s command.¹⁸ He spends much more time, though, on the fall’s effects and the resulting corruption of human nature, which will serve as the foundation for his soteriology. For Calvin, the punishment for Adam’s fall was the removal of the gifts that God had bestowed upon human nature. This lack of original gifts is passed on to subsequent generations. Calvin describes vividly how vice comes in in the place of lost goodness: “In place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice, with which adornments he had been clad, there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice—but he [Adam] also entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries.”¹⁹ For Calvin, the effect of the fall on Adam and his descendants is so great that he calls the heavenly

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid II.1.4.

¹⁹ Ibid II.1.5.

image “obliterated” in humanity. Yet the image is not totally gone, though the strength of some of Calvin’s statements comes close to suggesting that. Elsewhere, he is willing to say that “his [man’s] soul bears, though *almost* obliterated, the image of God.”²⁰ The image being obliterated does not mean it is gone; it means that the image has been corrupted, perverted, possessed by sin. In either case, this language of obliteration or near obliteration serves Calvin’s goal: it highlights the depth of humanity’s fall from Eden.

The depravity caused by the fall in Adam cannot be spread by imitation, Calvin argues. Instead, he reasons that Adam cannot pass on what he does not have, namely, virtue and goodness given by God.²¹ These gifts have been lost for all humanity. Calvin thus arrives at his view of original sin, which he defines as “a hereditary depravity of the soul, which first makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls ‘works of the flesh.’”²² This is a deep depravity that extends to every part of human nature—no part of the soul remains unstained. In all of this, Calvin sees himself as laying a similar foundation as Augustine did against Pelagius. Augustine “labored to show us that we are corrupted not by derived wickedness, but that we bear inborn defect from our mother’s womb.”²³

Nowhere are the fall’s effects more pronounced (and more misunderstood) than in the human will—Calvin devotes four entire chapters to the subject. He reviews the teachings of the the church fathers and other preceding theologians, but he finds that “all the ancients, save Augustine, so differ, waver, or speak confusedly on this subject, that almost nothing certain can

²⁰ Ibid I.15.1–4 chapter heading. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Ibid II.1.7.

²² Ibid II.1.8.

²³ Ibid.

be derived from their writings.”²⁴ Though theologians have largely recognized that the human will is “gravely wounded” by the fall, Calvin still finds thinkers like Chrysostom and Jerome guilty of that all-too-common mistake: they “credit man with more zeal for virtue” than he actually possesses. Jerome mistakenly maintains that in salvation, “Ours is to begin, God’s to fulfill,” and Chrysostom in the same vein holds that “we cannot acquire heavenly favor unless we bring our portion.” Chrysostom even says that in salvation God “allows everything to hinge on the sick man’s own judgement.”²⁵ Calvin quotes this line in mockery—if the person is so sick with sin, how could their judgement ever be sound? Though Calvin quotes the fathers, he seems to have a contemporary position in mind as well, the very one held by Erasmus.²⁶ The problem with this position is that it “splits the credit” and violates his foundational principle of humility—these theologians are trying to assign some parts of conversion to the human will and some parts to God’s grace. For Calvin, the fallen human will deserves no credit, and it cannot succeed in even the smallest endeavor if not helped by grace. In fact, for Calvin it is not only problematic to attribute fallen humans with power to do good, but also to attribute to them any sort of will towards the good, no matter how ineffectual.²⁷

Calvin’s title for Book II Chapter 2 would come as a shock to those who posed some of our leading objections—Calvin says that “man has now been deprived of freedom of choice and bound over to miserable servitude.” Deprived of freedom of choice? That is a bold claim—even Augustine desired to show that fallen humanity has free will. We must pay careful attention to

²⁴ Ibid II.2.4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, footnote 14.

²⁷ Ibid II.2.6.

how Calvin further delineates and defends this statement. As a systematic thinker, Calvin cares about definitions, and there are multiple ways of defining “free will” or “free choice.” The first possible definition is the one used by Augustine: “free from compulsion.” Calvin is perfectly fine with applying this notion of free choice to fallen humanity. This sort of free will does not imply equal ability to choose good or evil; it only means that fallen man chooses sin voluntarily, without being forced.²⁸ Calvin summarizes this idea by saying that fallen humanity sins “necessarily but without compulsion”—necessarily, in that there can be no other outcome, yet without compulsion, in that no outside power forces the person to sin against their will.²⁹ The human is a voluntary slave. Yet even though Calvin thinks this notion accurately describes the condition of fallen humanity, it is not the natural meaning of the phrase “free will.” “A noble freedom indeed,” he scoffs. “What purpose is served by labeling with a proud name such a slight thing?”³⁰

There is another possible definition of free will, one that Calvin sees as more intuitive, more common in popular usage and far more problematic. Free will can also mean “free choice equally of good and evil,” like Calvin ascribed to Adam in the garden.³¹ For Calvin, this is the natural meaning of the phrase. He is eager to emphasize the places where Augustine’s rhetoric denies this sort of freedom or emphasizes the will’s slavery. Ultimately, the term “free will” is so loaded with bad meaning that Calvin chooses to leave it behind:

²⁸ Ibid II.2.7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid; Ibid I.15.8.

If anyone, then, can use this word without understanding it in a bad sense, I shall not trouble him on this account. But I hold that because it cannot be retained without great peril, it will, on the contrary, be a great boon for the church if it be abolished.³²

This is the first point of distinction between Calvin and Augustine. Augustine, knowing the philosophical and theological freight that the term “free will” carries in his own time, is still willing to defend the phrase. Dispensing with it would be unthinkable. Even in the middle of the Pelagian controversy, when *Grace and Free Will* was written, Augustine makes positive arguments for free will, though his definition does not match that of Pelagius. For Augustine, free will and inability to choose righteousness are not opposites; they are compatible. Calvin, on the other hand, refuses to contend for the term, even though he sees himself in substantial agreement with Augustine. Calvin is not willing to make positive arguments for what he sees as a watered-down definition. For him, the phrase “free will” is dangerous and confusing, and therefore expendable. One could suggest several factors that are at play in Calvin’s decision. Perhaps during the medieval period, the term has picked up more and more of a problematic connotation from ongoing Pelagian or philosophical influences. Perhaps as a reformer, Calvin is choosing consciously to step away from the common Roman Catholic definition to distance himself from any idea of works-righteousness. No matter the historical factors at play, we should remember Calvin’s favorite theological axiom, that fallen humanity is always tempted to ascribe more credit to itself than it is due. In light of this principle, Calvin’s rejection of the term makes perfect sense. If “free will” might falsely imply some goodness in fallen humanity, it is safer to abandon the phrase.

³² Ibid II.2.8.

Conversion: Created Anew

From his theology of the fall, Calvin sets about building his theology of conversion. He quotes Augustine again as saying that in the fall, humanity's natural gifts (such as understanding in arts and sciences) were corrupted while the supernatural gifts (such as spiritual understanding) were lost.³³ To will effectually is a supernatural gift that has been lost in the fall; it must be restored by God. Not even a feeble will exists in fallen humanity—only a will bent wholly on evil.³⁴ For this reason, the fallen person requires total regeneration by the Holy Spirit. This regeneration restores in us the image of God, which the fall has all but destroyed.³⁵ Some of Calvin's metaphors for the Spirit's work sound similar to Augustine's. Calvin describes the Spirit's work as "correcting" and "curing" fallen human nature. God begins working by "arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts."³⁶

More often, though, Calvin's language is more drastic. Immediately after the previous quotation, he clarifies his meaning: it is more correct to say that God works by "bending, forming, and directing our hearts to righteousness."³⁷ Recreation and replacement become central metaphors for Calvin, and he too draws heavily from Ezekiel 36. God "removes" the heart of stone and gives the new heart of flesh. Calvin's application of the passage shows his view clearly:

If by this comparison the Lord wished to show that nothing good can ever be wrung from our heart, unless it become wholly other, let us not divide between him and us what

³³ Ibid II.2.12.

³⁴ Ibid II.2.27.

³⁵ Ibid III.3.8.

³⁶ Ibid II.3.6.

³⁷ Ibid.

he claims for himself alone. If, therefore, a stone is transformed into flesh when God converts us to zeal for the right, whatever is of our own will is effaced...I also say that [the will] is created anew, not meaning that the will now begins to exist, but that it is changed from an evil to a good will.³⁸

Conversion, for Calvin, means that the Spirit regenerates or totally changes the character of the will. What we have of our own is sinful, corrupt; what we receive by grace is “wholly other.”

The Lord “extinguishes” our will and “substitutes” a new one from himself.³⁹ This is God’s work alone—God “expressly excludes us from all participation in it.”⁴⁰ Against the earlier references to Jerome and Chrysostom, Calvin maintains that the initiative is God’s. Against Erasmus, he holds that the Spirit brings not just a possibility of willing good but actually produces a good will.⁴¹

Finally, in continuity with Augustine, Calvin says that the work of the Spirit in conversion brings greater freedom than humanity experienced living in sin: “The original freedom was to be able not to sin; but ours is much greater, not to be able to sin.” The truest sense of freedom is to be a voluntary servant of God, free to obey wholeheartedly. God’s grace forms a heart that then obeys freely and willingly, so that “whatever good works that then follow are the fruit and effect of grace.”⁴² In this way, Calvin holds that redeemed humanity is indeed deeply good yet still owes all its goodness to the work of grace.

Here we can pause to note another difference from Augustine. In *Confessions*, the Spirit was at work to change Augustine’s heart and move his desires toward good before his moment of conversion in the garden. This is why Augustine was able to lament the “morbid” state of his will

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid II.3.7.

⁴⁰ Ibid II.3.6.

⁴¹ Ibid II.3.10.

⁴² Ibid II.3.14.

in the moments leading up to the garden. His will was ineffectual, not “wholehearted.” His desire was partly turned toward Christ, but not fully enough to follow. Yet for Calvin, the moment of regeneration is the *beginning* of any good desire in the human. He sees renewal as a process (the Christian is not instantly perfected but continually renewed), but this process begins sharply at regeneration.⁴³ For him there can be no struggle until the person is regenerated.⁴⁴ He repeatedly states that we have nothing of the Spirit apart from regeneration.⁴⁵

Having set out Calvin’s view of fallen humanity and conversion, we can next ask how Calvin’s thought answers our starting question: how is God’s grace in salvation compatible with human free will? On the one hand, we might appeal to Calvin’s refusal to use the term “free will.” If the fallen human cannot truly be said to have free will, is there anything to violate? Yes, Calvin does limit the extent of fallen human freedom; yet this still feels like a cheap answer. We must also remember that even fallen humanity still had to be free from compulsion in its slavery to sin. The deeper answer offered by Calvin is rather that the operation of the human will is within the realm of divine sovereignty. According to Calvin, “the Lord by his Spirit directs, bends, and governs, our heart and reigns in it as his own possession.”⁴⁶ God’s bending or turning of the will is not an improper violation of the proper order; rather it is part of God’s good governance and ordering of all things. Calvin spends Book II Chapter 4 defending this idea, both in cases of “hardening” and of conversion. Human freedom does not operate outside the realm of

⁴³ Ibid III.3.8.

⁴⁴ Ibid II.2.27.

⁴⁵ Ibid II.3.1.

⁴⁶ Ibid II.3.10.

God's sovereignty but within it.⁴⁷ He quotes Proverbs 21:1: "In his hand the Lord holds the king's heart as streams of water, and turns it wherever he will."⁴⁸ If God holds even the wills of kings, how could any human will be exempt? To ascribe too much to the human is to minimize this glorious divine governance.

In this area, Augustine's thought and Calvin's thought are substantially in agreement, but one more distinction must still be noted—a distinction in purpose and emphasis. Augustine approaches the topic looking to show balance and compatibility. His aim in *Grace and Free Will* was to show that the statements "humanity has free will," and "conversion is only by God's grace" are not contradictory but can be held together.⁴⁹ Calvin, on the other hand, does not set out to uphold any qualities in humanity at all (with the one possible exception of freedom from compulsion). He first defines God's sovereignty over all things and humanity's deep sinfulness. After doing this, Calvin is willing to modify the common understanding of human faculties if it does not do justice to God's sovereignty and the fall, even if this means abandoning popular language. We can see this as a difference in rhetorical strategy. Both limit the use of "freedom"; perhaps for the sake of persuasion, Augustine would rather redefine a term popular with his audience and adversaries. For the sake of clarity, even safety, Calvin would rather start with his most important premises and rule out anything that might contradict them.

We have seen three areas of variation between Augustine and Calvin. First, Augustine is willing to defend the term "free will" applied to fallen humanity, provided it is defined correctly. Calvin agrees with Augustine's definition, but would rather discard the term for attributing too

⁴⁷ Ibid II.4.7.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *On Grace and Free Choice* 141.

much to fallen humanity. Second, while both attribute the conversion of the human desire wholly to God, Augustine leaves more room for the operation of the Spirit before the “moment” of conversion. For Calvin, the fallen person’s will is totally bent on evil until regeneration. Third, Augustine approaches the problem of free will looking for compatibility; Calvin would rather start with God’s sovereignty in salvation and let descriptions of human freedom make room accordingly.

I also want to highlight the major areas where Calvin’s thought lies in continuity with Augustine’s. First, both Calvin and Augustine make use the image of “voluntary slavery” to describe the fallen person’s state in bondage to sin. This image helps both visualize how a person can be totally trapped in sin and unable to escape, yet still culpable for sinning. Another way Calvin reflects Augustine is in his total insistence on the logical and temporal priority of grace. Both can imagine no place where the human will operates independently of God’s grace; any movement toward goodness in the human will is indebted to grace. Ezekiel 36 is paradigmatic for both in this regard. Next, both see the state of freedom resulting from salvation as the best possible freedom, even greater than that of Adam—total freedom from sin’s power, and freedom to serve God. Finally, both insist on God’s sovereignty over the human will, in hardening and conversion. God can work the outcome that he sees fit in the human will, and this is fully within his right as creator and ruler. Notice, however, what Calvin does not pick up on. The hierarchy of values does not come into play in Calvin’s discussion of the fall and conversion; he speaks instead in terms of faithfulness or unfaithfulness, submission or insubordination. Nor does Calvin do much with the mechanism we noted in Augustine, where God graciously gives God’s own self to the human will as its highest good. Calvin does mention the love for God’s holiness, but he

speaks of it as motivation for the Christian life and not as motivation in the will's conversion.⁵⁰ Calvin is less interested in explaining the mechanism by which God moves the will and more interested in defending God's right to do so. It would be an argument from silence to say Calvin disagrees in these areas; we can only say he does not prioritize them in the same way as Augustine.

To summarize, Calvin's driving theological principle is a concern for God's magisterial rule and an insistence that we not overstate the goodness in fallen humanity. In light of this, he rejects using the term "free will" for humanity as implying equal choice of good or evil. However, he does insist that human subjugation to sin is voluntary. For Calvin, the human will is so deeply sinful that it cannot desire good until it is recreated by the Holy Spirit. This recreation is the sole root of any good desire in the human. Recreation of the human heart or will is a sovereign act, totally within God's power and right as the governor of the universe.

From this understanding of Calvin, we move to a contemporary theologian in the line of reformed thinkers, John Piper, in order to examine what Piper's understanding of conversion might have to add to this conversation.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* III.6.2.

CHAPTER FOUR

Piper: A New Taste for God's Glory

Many know John Piper principally as a Calvinist popular theologian and baptist pastor (or sometimes a “calvinist” pastor, depending on who we are asking). Piper certainly stands in the theological tradition of Augustine and Calvin—he quotes both frequently, and has written on Augustine in at least one book and on Calvin in multiple works.¹ As we will see, there are elements from the thought of each theologian that make their way into Piper’s work. Yet Piper will depart at times from previous theologians, as he himself notes.² Even with areas where we are tempted to see Piper as retreading the path of Calvin or Calvinism, we must proceed slowly in our analysis. Yes, both Piper and Calvin teach irresistible sovereign grace. However, *whether* theologians teach this doctrine is not our only concern. We are asking *how* theologians with a strong view of God’s sovereignty in salvation deal with the problems or objections that arise from such a view. How much of a priority is human freedom for Piper? How is Piper reconciling it with God’s decisive action? How do his answers mirror or depart from Augustine and Calvin?

¹ See: *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God’s Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); *John Calvin and His Passion for the Majesty of God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

² John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God’s Grace* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2013) 9. One obvious example of such a departure would be infant baptism, promoted and defended by Augustine and Calvin, yet Piper subscribes to believer’s baptism.

As with Calvin, we can start with some of Piper’s theological “axioms” or the core elements that influence the rest of his thought. Themes of desire, satisfaction, and divine glory dominate the writing of John Piper. If there is one book that forms a cornerstone for this element of Piper’s teaching, it is *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, first published in 1986. Piper’s online teaching and publishing ministry is also named after this work. *Desiring God* sets out Piper’s chief theological thrust, which he calls Christian Hedonism: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”³ Christian Hedonism is, chiefly, an understanding of how humans are meant to relate to God. If we are to understand Piper’s position on grace and conversion, we must begin with this bedrock of his thought.

Piper’s Christian Hedonism

Piper explains the reasoning of his position in this way: God’s highest priority is God’s own glory. God is the greatest and happiest of all beings, and delights in God’s own glory.⁴ Yet God is not selfish in a negative way—God is also supremely loving. How can God be self-centered and loving? It is because God is the highest good, the source of all happiness.⁵ The way God loves is by giving God’s self, for God is “an all-glorious, totally self-sufficient being,” bringing incomparable delight to those who experience God.⁶ On our side, humans are created to delight in God’s infinite worth. Editing a

³ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (10th Anniversary Edition, Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1996) 50.

⁴ Ibid 33–34.

⁵ Ibid 20.

⁶ Ibid 47.

conjunction in a phrase from the Westminster Catechism, Piper writes that “the chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.”⁷ According to Piper, God’s love and God’s self-exaltation are one and the same thing, and for humans, loving God and glorifying God are one and the same action.

Here, right at the beginning of our analysis of Piper, we must note the echo of Augustine. Love and pleasure are both concepts laced throughout the *Confessions*; pleasure is especially crucial considering the role fleshly or sexual desire played in hindering Augustine’s conversion. Also, recall the hierarchy of goods that appeared in each of Augustine works that we discussed. When Piper writes of God as the highest good or greatest pleasure, he is using a deeply Augustinian concept. We see this, for one, in the well-known lines from the opening of *Confessions*: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁸ This language of humanity “taking pleasure in praising” certainly has made its way in to Piper’s mind. Elsewhere, in a paragraph we previously looked at, Augustine writes of God as “pleasanter than any pleasure...brighter than all light...higher than any honor.”⁹ Augustine certainly cared about humanity’s desire and love for God. However, what we do not see in Augustine is the explicit conflation of love and glorification that Piper gives us. For Augustine, love for God is for God’s person. Piper writes of love for God’s person, but also speaks explicitly of love of God’s glory itself.

⁷ Ibid 15.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* I.1.1., 3.

⁹ Ibid VIII.1.1.

What is the word “glory” doing for Piper? It has a range of meaning, encompassing everything from innate desirability to public reputation. This is driven by Piper’s Christian Hedonism—for the human, to glorify God is to love God; for God, to love is to glorify God’s self. Thus sometimes, Piper uses glory to mean loveliness or desirability. For example, Piper describes the human perception of Christ’s glory as seeing Christ as “a treasure chest of holy joy,” or seeing Christ as “supremely desirable.”¹⁰ When Piper uses glory in this way, he writes of humans “loving” or “cherishing” it. Other times, though, glory has more of a connotation of public recognition, reputation, or fame. For example, Piper writes that humans bear God’s image “so that we would image forth God’s glory into the world.” For Piper, the image is a public display, meant to convince others how good and worthy God is. Piper often speaks of humans “recognizing,” or “acknowledging” God’s glory, both public actions. With this range of meaning, one synonym I would suggest that might be helpful in understanding Piper’s use of “glory” would be “splendor.” Splendor can mean radiance or loveliness, but it also carries a magisterial, royal, public connotation. Piper does not use this word as often, but it can help us grasp what range “glory” can have for him.

When we see especially the more public, royal side of Piper’s conception of glory, we catch a glimpse of how Calvin’s magisterial, supremely sovereign and transcendent view of God is present in Piper’s view as well. For Calvin, concern for God’s own glory was a chief motivator, and this is taken up as a cornerstone for Piper’s Christian Hedonism. Calvin’s driving concern that humanity *must* give God proper honor and

¹⁰ Piper, *Desiring God* 66.

worship becomes crucial for Piper as well. Piper, like Calvin, emphasizes humility and submission that come from acknowledging God as the sovereign, the rightful power. Thus, in Piper's Christian Hedonism, Augustine is certainly not the only theologian whose work is reflected. Calvin's high, magisterial view of God, and the corresponding human posture, is echoed as well.

Conversion: Creation of a Christian Hedonist

We turn now to Piper's understanding of conversion more narrowly. Piper titles chapter 2 of *Desiring God* as "Conversion: the Creation of a Christian Hedonist." This title language alone conveys much about Piper's view: in conversion, he sees an individual as *becoming* a Christian Hedonist—becoming the type of person who loves God as the highest good, or values God's glory as they ought. In this chapter, Piper briefly lays out his view of the fall of humanity, the work of Jesus, and how an individual comes to be saved. First, he gives a definition of sin that corresponds to his position of Christian Hedonism: "All sin comes from not putting supreme value on the glory of God—this is the very essence of sin."¹¹ Humans, without exception, fail to fulfill their duty to acknowledge and value God's glory. Piper also describes the condition of the human heart that has turned from God's glory as "blind," "hard," "dead," and "unable to submit."¹² A sinful human is incapable of repenting of sin and trusting in God; in other words, they are incapable of converting. In his other book, *Five Points* (which sets out

¹¹ Piper, *Desiring God* 56–57. In this, Piper also seems indebted to Anselm's theology of the 'debt of honor' in *Cur Deus Homo*, where sin is presented as failing to give God the honor we owe.

¹² *Ibid.*

Piper's understanding of the traditional five points of Calvinism) Piper clarifies his notion of human sinfulness or depravity more. There, he writes that while sinful humans might be able to perform actions that are externally good (like keeping the Biblical commands), such deeds cannot be considered truly 'good' because they are not motivated by God's glory.¹³ Thus, when a human turns away from glorifying God, they turn from all real goodness, corrupting every action.

In Piper's definition of sin, he is close to Calvin but not identical: the human failure to correctly acknowledge the value of God's glory is the central problem here, whereas Calvin has a more general idea of unfaithfulness or prideful usurpation. However, Piper is also incredibly close to Augustine's definition of choosing lesser goods over the supreme good. As we have seen, Piper's description of fallen humans as blind, dead, and unable to obey is old, familiar territory for all of our theologians.

Before we move on to the rest of Piper's explanation of conversion, we must note in what way he treats the phrase "free will" as applied to fallen humanity. He addresses this question not in *Desiring God* but in other articles. All humans certainly have free will in the sense that they may be held accountable for choices they have made—the choices are truly their own. However, the fallen human will is also under a sort of bondage, which he calls "bondage to choosing irrationally."¹⁴ In this sense, the fallen human will is not free—if it were, it would naturally choose the greater good, God. In this phrasing, Piper's view calls to mind the work of Calvin, but perhaps that of Augustine even more. Like

¹³ John Piper, *Five Points* 17–18.

¹⁴ John Piper, "A Beginner's Guide to 'Free Will,'" (July 26, 2016, accessed Jan 11, 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-beginner-s-guide-to-free-will>).

Augustine, Piper thinks that a will bent on choosing a lesser good cannot be truly free—it must be impaired or blinded in some sense. In this sense, free will needs to be restored by God in salvation. Lastly, if by “free will” one means an “ultimately or decisively self-determining” power, *no* human can be said to have free will.¹⁵ While both have “real” agency, the human’s power to determine is secondary, not “ultimate” or “decisive.” For Piper, only God’s agency is ultimately decisive, and human accountability is still real—these two ideas can both be true. In making this point, Calvin’s worry about the danger of the phrase “free will” seems to have convinced Piper. If the phrase is meant to attribute any sort of ultimate, sovereign, or final control to humanity, it is not being used truthfully.

Creation of a New Taste

Next in chapter 2 of *Desiring God*, Piper describes the work of Jesus. Given his position as a reformed baptist and as a Christian hedonist, his narrative is what we might expect: God upholds the worth of God’s glory (which humanity had failed to do) and punishes humanity’s contempt by pouring his wrath on the Son. After this, he must explain how the sacrifice of Jesus comes to apply to individuals—a concern much closer to our guiding question. Since the human is unable to repent or trust Christ, conversion for Piper requires a “supernatural” or “miraculous” work of God.¹⁶ What exactly is this miracle that God performs? According to Piper, *God creates a new taste for God and God’s glory*. This is the key to Piper’s understanding of conversion. He writes that “behind and beneath the act of faith which pleases God, a new taste has been created. A

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Piper, *Desiring God* 62.

taste for the glory of God and the beauty of Christ. Behold, a joy has been born!”¹⁷ It is interesting that Piper chooses the word “taste” as opposed to “desire,” which he uses so often. I suspect this is because Piper is emphasizing that God is not only creating a desire in the human, but also creating the ability to even perceive God’s glory—an ability which fallen humanity lacked. Piper, like Calvin, is stressing the complete deadness of the fallen person, and the suddenness with which new life begins.

The miraculous work that God performs in creating this taste enables the human to convert, or to repent and trust Christ. Piper summarizes that

Conversion is what happens to the heart when Christ becomes for us a Treasure Chest of holy joy. Saving faith is the heartfelt conviction that Christ is both solidly reliable and supremely desirable. The newness of a Christian convert is a new spiritual taste for the glory of Christ.¹⁸

This miracle enables the human to trust and repent sincerely. God’s glory is, once again, the motivation for human life, as intended. Thus conversion is “a human decision...based on an awesome miracle performed by a sovereign God.”¹⁹ However, we should also note how God is restoring the human to fulfill their created purpose—to glorify God by loving God above all.

Piper brings in some familiar passages in explaining this view of conversion—as with Augustine and Calvin, he draws on the “new heart” language in Ezekiel 11 and 36:25–27, and also uses similar language from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah.²⁰ For Piper,

¹⁷ Ibid 67.

¹⁸ Ibid 66.

¹⁹ Ibid 65.

²⁰ Ibid 63.

Ezekiel 36:22–23 plays a crucial part as well, where God declares that it is not for the sake of Israel but for the sake of God’s great name that God is acting. John 3:18–20 is also significant for Piper; in this passage, humans refuse to acknowledge the Son because they love darkness rather than light. Piper reasons that humans in this state need to be enabled by God to see and love the light.

Piper’s chapter on Irresistible Grace in *Five Points* also helps clarify his view of conversion. We must note first that this chapter comes immediately after the chapter on Total Depravity—Piper forgoes the usual order of “TULIP” to present the points in an order a person might experience them. So here, depravity is the immediate state from which a person experiences God’s grace. In this chapter, the precise relationship of human agency to divine agency takes center stage.

Piper first explains how, because of human depravity, it must be God who “draws” the human to faith and gives the gift of repentance. When God gives repentance, this means that God has “changed our heart and made it willing to repent...the gift of repentance is the overcoming of resistance to repentance.”²¹ Piper, though, knows this language can be problematic or create tension. If God is making us willing to do something or overcoming our resistance, is God violating our will? Piper does not think so. In fact, Piper answers that “irresistible grace never implies that God forces us to repent or believe or follow Jesus against our will.” Piper argues that believing and repenting must be *willing* actions, or they are not sincere or real. “Irresistible grace does drag the unwilling into the kingdom, it makes the unwilling willing. It does not work with

²¹ Piper, *Five Points* 31.

constraint from the outside...it works with power from the inside, like *new thirst and compelling desire*.”²² A few paragraphs down, he elaborates: “something happened in their [the elect] hearts that changed the way they saw Christ...They are acting freely from what they truly value as infinitely precious.”²³ So here, just as in chapter 2 of *Desiring God*, we see same language of “new taste” and “desire.” The giving of this new sense is so momentous that Piper sees it as the essence of the new birth that happens in Christians.²⁴

It should be clear now how Piper deals with the question of whether God’s grace violates the human will: he answers it by appealing to the notions of desire, value, and glory that is so central to his theology. God works in the heart by giving this new taste or new sense, which Piper describes both as a desire for God’s own self or for Christ’s glory. Once a person has this sense or desire, their natural, free response is to love Christ, trust him, and repent from sin. God does not force belief for Piper; God gives the motivation that produces free, willing belief. This allow Piper to maintain that human agency *is* involved in conversion in an important way. The reborn person truly does desire to repent, trust, and follow Christ. They experience conversion as a free choice. However, this position also allows Piper to maintain that the initiative and the power must come from God, for this change of taste is a supernatural miracle. In this way, Piper can speak of God being “at work beneath our will.”²⁵ Piper also believes that this miracle is totally

²² Ibid 31–32; emphasis mine.

²³ Ibid 32–33.

²⁴ Ibid 34.

²⁵ Ibid 33.

effectual—the person thus awakened would never will anything other than to repent and believe. So this restoration of spiritual sight and taste for God’s glory is only given to God’s elect.²⁶

In *Five Points*, Piper grounds this view of conversion in a biblical passage we have not yet explored with either of the other authors: 2 Corinthians 4:4–6:

The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This passage echoes the “blindness” language we have seen in Augustine, Calvin, and their biblical texts to describe the depravity of the human heart. Paul’s phrasing here, though, is crucial to Piper’s argument. What is the sinful person blind to? It is “seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (v. 4). If we could only behold Christ’s worth as displayed in the gospel, we would be changed. Yet for that to happen, God must perform the miracle—God must “shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Piper elsewhere makes it clear that he sees Ezekiel 36 and 2 Corinthians 4 as referring to the same event, where God a dead heart “bored with Christ” with a heart that “senses the worth of Jesus.”²⁷

On this reading, Piper’s answer to the tensions of free will and divine sovereignty seem to call forth the theology of Augustine more than that of Calvin, in that Augustine

²⁶ Ibid 60.

²⁷ John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens when we are Born Again* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009) 41–42.

and Piper are both concerned with highlighting human desire as the mechanism God sovereignly uses to draw the person to Christ. For both, love is the key. Augustine spoke of God giving God's own self to the human, an act which banished all longings for lesser things. Piper speaks of God creating a new taste for God's glory. Both speak of delighting in God as the deepest purpose of the human—a purpose which is re-actualized in God's work of conversion. Both use a hierarchy of goods, with God as the greatest good, and teach that true freedom of will means recognizing and seeking God as the greatest good. Lastly, both seem more interested overall than Calvin in reconciling the problems that are created by their view of sovereignty, and thus also in explaining the exact *mechanism* by which God converts the human will. Piper is as much an Augustinian in his teaching on salvation as he is a Calvinist.

However, there are still differences we must note. The chief one, which has surfaced several times throughout the chapter, is that Augustine uses only language of *love of God*, while Piper includes language of *love of God's glory*. For Piper, the phrases become essentially interchangeable, and both are used to describe the motivation with which God draws the human. To some, this may seem like a semantic difference. It is crucial, though, because it shows that in Piper's work, one of Calvin's central themes has become a core part of an essentially Augustinian answer to the problem of free will. For Piper, God is working within and through the human will, to draw it to God. Yet as God works within the will, God is creating the sort of reverence, submission, and awe at God's transcendent majesty that Calvin emphasized so much. Piper takes the reason that Calvin

downplays the need for a mechanism—namely, God’s sovereign majesty—and makes it into his mechanism.

We now have a grasp on the way Piper engages our problem and contributes to the conversation on the will. From here, we may proceed to our final chapter, where we will set out in summary the language of all three theologians side-by-side, attempt to characterize both their common approach to our question and the significance of their unique language when they vary, and unpack some implications of this for the broader Augustinian understanding.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: The Framework of Augustinian Conversion

For the past three chapters, for the most part, we have let our theologians speak for themselves regarding the role of divine and human agency in conversion. We have briefly noted some significant areas of overlap, but also some non-trivial areas of divergence. So then, how might we summarize the way our theologians have grappled with this issue? What vision do they offer us of the fallen person, the work of God to redeem, and the role of divine and human agency in that work? What sorts of answers do they have to offer when facing difficulties and objections that can arise? Are the continuities in their work enough to form a coherent understanding of conversion? Or are the discontinuities too great? Ultimately, can we see a way forward for those who desire to defend a sovereign view of God's grace in salvation? In this final chapter, I plan to begin by summarizing the areas of variation we have seen so far in the thought of Augustine, Calvin, and Piper. However, after we weigh the significance of these differences, we will evaluate the continuity we have seen—the shared convictions of all three authors regarding conversion. So, I will set out the core tenets that are shared in common, which I will call the framework of Augustinian conversion. Finally, I would like to summarize the strategies we have seen for dealing with difficulties in the Augustinian viewpoint and offer some reflections on the value of different arguments we have seen.

Three Areas of Variance

To begin, there are three specific areas where we have explored variation in our authors' thought: the suitability of the word "free" to describe humanity, the timeline or process of conversion, and the type of language they use to describe God's influence in the will. These are not exhaustive of the variation we could point out, but they are most important because they directly touch our leading question—how is God's sovereign grace in conversion compatible with human free will? The first issue, the suitability of the word "free," calls the wording of our question itself into question. The other two issues, the timeline or process of conversion and the verbs used to describe God's work, are closely related to each other and to our question—it is here that we get a sense of what God is doing in conversion, and how God's work is accomplished.

First, we have seen a lively discussion among our authors regarding what place the word "freedom" has in our descriptions of the fallen human will. For Augustine, the word was acceptable, provided one did not use it in a way that implied a sufficient power in the fallen human to overcome sin and earn grace.¹ He spoke of a voluntary slavery—humans freely choose injustice, but are so enthralled with it that they are actually "free from justice...servant of sin." He also spoke of a truer or greater freedom, freedom *from* sin and lower things, realized only in the redeemed person.² Calvin, on the other hand, conceded that Augustine's notion of the fallen person's freedom was accurate, yet still felt

¹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Will* 146, 167.

² *Ibid* 167.

that “free” was far too high a title for a will that was deeply broken by the fall. Calvin would prefer to say that we sin “necessarily,” but not by “compulsion,” and leave off the word “freedom.”³ In Piper’s carefully calculated wording, the fallen human will is “free” only in a severely limited sense. If by free one means accountable for its actions, the word is acceptable, but not if one means ultimately self-determining or not bound to lower things.⁴ All three authors are weighing the significance of this word’s possible connotations, and all three seek to minimize confusion, but they come to different conclusions. While the issue of whether the fallen human is truly “free” or not is indeed a matter of great importance, the difference between our authors proves to be semantic here. Calvin and Piper agree with Augustine in the substance of his definition. All three authors recognize that the freedom of a fallen person is limited, and they describe the resulting limited freedom in a similar way; they disagree only in whether “freedom” is appropriate to describe this limited state.

More significantly, we have seen variation when we consider the timeline of the conversion of the will. For the most part, our writers have portrayed the turning of the human will as an instantaneous, single-moment event, described in binary terms: a dead person coming alive; a new heart being given; recreation; a blind person receiving sight. Augustine leans toward this language in *Grace and Free Will*, where he labors to show the depth of human inability in order to refute the Pelagian idea that the human can deserve God’s grace.⁵ However, in *Confessions*, we observed that the Spirit was working

³ Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.7, II.2.8.

⁴ Piper, “A Beginner’s Guide to ‘Free Will.’”

⁵ Augustine, *Grace and Free Will* 164-65.

in Augustine's desires for years leading up to his conversion moment in the garden.⁶ This gives us a picture of God changing a person's desires slowly, sometimes perceptibly, sometimes only visible in retrospect. The writings of Calvin and Piper both feature stricter before/after language, though Piper has a logical progression from regeneration of the will (a divine work) to conversion (human repentance and belief).⁷

Lastly and most importantly of all, we have seen variation in the language that theologians use to describe the mechanism of God's action in or upon the will. Broadly, we can distinguish language of *moving* and language of *leading*. In language of moving, God performs active verbs: *moving, bending, shaping, remaking, recreating, changing, and inclining* the human will or heart. These verbs do not imply action on the human will's part. Calvin makes heaviest use of this language, emphasizing God's complete sovereign control.⁸ It also features some in *Grace and Free Will* and in parts of Piper's writing.⁹ However, Calvin to a limited extent and Piper and Augustine in particular also feature leading language, where God *leads, draws, rouses* or *calls* the human will. Language of *healing* and *correction* also fits into this category. With this language, the human will has a role, but it follows the decisive action of God. Calvin only briefly uses language of this sort, but he speak of God "correcting" and "curing" human corruption, and "bestowing what we lack."¹⁰ Augustine and Piper both speak of God working

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* V.13.23; VII.8.12, 10.16.

⁷ Piper, *Desiring God* 62.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.6.

⁹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 167, 176–77; Piper, *Five Points* 31.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.3.6.

internally in the will, giving new desires or delights which the will joyfully follows. Augustine spoke of the will's turning as a gift of God's grace, and also of God giving God's very self to him, eclipsing all lower goods.¹¹ Piper spoke of a sovereign leading, where God grants a new taste or sense for the glory of Christ, which moves the person to repentance and belief.¹² The motivations that Augustine and Piper spoke of were not identical (Piper brought in language of love of God's glory), yet in both authors, we see a similar mechanism—God decisively motivating the human will to movement, resulting in repentance and wholehearted following. Borrowing a phrase from Calvin's description of depravity, we might say that in the language of leading, humans convert necessarily (because God decisively brings it about) but not of compulsion (God grants them, by grace and regeneration, to be willing participants).

Yet this variation is not the end of the story. Despite differences, it should be clear by now that our authors are all building from a similar foundation, a set of beliefs more intrinsic to their thought than any differences, which forms a consistent framework for understanding conversion. We can describe this framework of Augustinian conversion in four parts: (A) Inability of the human will, (B) Sovereign divine initiative, (C) Decisive or effectual divine work, (D) Human willing response upon conversion. These are the basic elements of Augustine's understanding that are incorporated and defended by all three of our authors against alternate understandings of conversion (like those of Pelagius, of Erasmus, or of Jacob Arminius). These four ideas become non-negotiable,

¹¹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 164; *Confessions* IX.1.1.

¹² Piper, *Desiring God* 66–67.

not only for Augustine, Calvin, and Piper but for other Reformed thinkers from Calvin down to the modern day.

By calling this the framework of Augustinian conversion, we need not say that everyone who teaches these four tenets holds an identical view of conversion or salvation to Augustine or each other. However, it is clear that those who take up this framework share a distinctive common foundation and are indebted to Augustine's influence. Also, one might observe that some of these framework elements I have identified resemble some of the Five Points of Calvinism. However, it is best that we not conflate our framework with those—the two will not be identical. For one, only one of our theologians (Piper, not Calvin) has consciously subscribed to and written on the Five Points.¹³ Also, my goal is not to analyze the entire soteriological understanding of Calvin or any of our theologians. My intention is rather to highlight our theologians views that deal specifically with our question, regarding the role of divine and human agency in the conversion of the will. We are (thankfully!) not wading into the host of issues that come with all five points—debates on the extent of the atonement, God's predestination, etc.—though some of our issues will intersect election and perseverance to some extent. Let us proceed then to set out our framework.

(A) Inability of the human will. For all three of our theologians, human inability and unwillingness to choose God has been a starting point in dealing with conversion. This is foundational and non-negotiable; no matter how our theologians attribute “free will” to fallen humans, they are only willing to do so in a way that makes room for this

¹³ Piper, *Five Points* 9,12.

tenet. Augustine’s description of the fallen will is complex, but he is firm on this point. In *Grace and Free Will*, he described human inability using the language of Ezekiel—the fallen person has a calloused heart of stone, undeserving of grace, “free from justice.”¹⁴ In *Confessions*, Augustine’s own will was “half-wounded” before his experience in the garden; though he had some desire for God, his desires for lower things were stronger, and his will was powerless to correct itself or command itself to desire righteousness more.¹⁵ (This is the chief reason why we must use caution applying “total depravity” language to Augustine’s picture—he certainly attributes good desires to himself before the garden experience. However, the picture is not totally opposed to that of Calvin either—the good desires were still too weak, and even they were given by the Spirit.) For Calvin and Piper, human inability was even more black-and-white: Calvin spoke of a human insubordination, hatred for God, and a desire to usurp God, penetrating to every part of the fallen person.¹⁶ He also took up Ezekiel’s language of deadness and hardness, and argued that the fallen person desires no good thing at all.¹⁷ For Piper, any good desire that the human might have is tainted because it is not motivated by a genuine desire to love and glorify God.¹⁸ In addition, the human is totally in the dark, unable to rightly perceive God or taste God’s glory.¹⁹

¹⁴ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 165, 167.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.9.21.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* II.1.4, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid* II.2.27.

¹⁸ Piper, *Five Points* 20–21.

¹⁹ Piper, *Desiring God* 67.

(B) Sovereign divine initiative. If the human will refuses to seek God wholeheartedly, it follows that the process of conversion must begin with God. For each of our theologians, God takes initiative and takes action first to set the conversion of the will in motion. However our theologians describe the human response or cooperation, they always leave room for this doctrine—they will never portray the human as making a first or decisive move toward reconciliation with God. God’s miraculous action is needed for the human will to even consider choosing God. This point is the singular focus of Augustine’s *Grace and Free Will*. In addition, we see first-hand in *Confessions* how the Spirit takes action in Augustine’s life through a variety of means to warm his desires to the existence of God, and then how God in the garden liberated Augustine’s will to love God wholeheartedly. We also see repeatedly in all three authors the language of Ezekiel 36, where God gives a new heart, a pure heart willing to obey God. Calvin described God’s initiative as a work of recreation; Piper used rebirth language, and also spoke of receiving a new sense or taste.

(C) Decisive or effectual divine work. Not only does God’s movement come first, it is totally decisive. The fact that God acts determines the outcome. This point is closely related to (B), yet not everyone who believes God moves first agree that the work of grace is always effectual. Erasmus, as we saw, held that God “offers everyone favorable opportunities for repentance,” which a person can turn toward or away from; human agency has a decisive role to play.²⁰ However, when our theologians describe human cooperation, they do not hold that humans could ever turn away or reject God’s

²⁰ Erasmus, “On Free Will,” in *Discourse on Free Will* 35.

work of conversion. Another way of saying this is that God works effectually *in* the human desire; the unwilling person becomes fully willing. Augustine spoke of God making an evil will good, and furnishing it with further strength once good.²¹ He also gave us the language of God making the will more free through conversion, which Calvin and Piper pick up on.²² Calvin spoke of the Holy Spirit completely removing the human's hard heart and substituting a totally new one.²³ Piper too spoke of the Holy Spirit "decisively drawing", by the irresistible beauty of God's glory.²⁴

(D) Human free willingness upon conversion. This point may feel different from the rest of the framework I have laid out. Probably due to the influence of Calvin's axiom that we discussed, the Reformed stream of theology has never been known for attributing too much to the human will. However, human free willingness upon conversion is indeed taught by all of our authors and actually follows logically from point (C)—God's work in the human will is effectual; the human will is *more* free at the end of the process. It voluntarily loves and pursues God, and is free *from* the power of sin. The human is not a robot who is forced to love God from conversion onward; the person who believes does so freely and sincerely. Thus, any sense of human weakness, inability, or dependency must make room for this fact; the weakness or hardness of heart that our theologians described must be put to an end in conversion. The will of the Christian is awake and alive to God and loves God wholeheartedly, though it is not independent of

²¹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Will* 167–9.

²² Augustine, *Confessions* IX.1.1.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.6.

²⁴ Piper, *Five Points* 29, 33–34.

God's ongoing grace. We see Augustine experiencing this free love for God at the beginning of *Confessions* IX, which we have quoted at length. We see it in *Grace and Free Will*, where a human will is made good by grace, and then begins to sincerely fulfill God's commands.²⁵ We also saw in Calvin how the human will becomes authentically good through regeneration.²⁶ Piper too was careful to emphasize this idea in particular when he spoke of sincere repentance and obedience—the human will must be wholehearted, free and sincere in these actions in order for them to be authentic.²⁷

Together, these four ideas form a coherent framework for understanding how God's grace brings about conversion in a fallen human person, built on the language of Ezekiel 36 and Paul's epistles. As we have seen, that does not make the three views of conversion totally identical. Yet the continuity here is deep—these four ideas serve as pillars for each theologian, arising from their interpretation of Scripture and upholding the rest of their theology of salvation. Taken as a whole, they constitute what we think of as a distinctly Augustinian or Reformed understanding of the roles of divine and human agency in conversion. When our authors begin making arguments and dealing with objections, they are either drawing on the ideas in this framework, attempting to defend these ideas, or attempting to show their inner consistency. Furthermore, we can show that even when our authors vary in the language they use, they do so in a way that aims to reinforce the ideas of this framework or deal with objections to it. We can now take a

²⁵ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 167.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.8.

²⁷ Piper, *Five Points* 31–32.

closer look at some of these strategies our theologians have offered us in dealing with potential difficulties.

First, regardless of whether they were willing to call the fallen human will “free,” all three of our theologians spoke of God’s action as liberating the will, to the point where it was more free after conversion than before or even more free than Adam before the fall. This is a powerful argument—if the objection is raised that God is not respecting free will in bringing about a person’s conversion, our theologians are ready to reply: of course God is respecting human free will—God is taking the human from a state of limited (or no) freedom to a state of true, total freedom. This is not violation, but healing and restoration, the reconstructive work of a good physician. It was *sin*, and the fall, that violated human freedom, not God; in reality, humanity voluntarily threw their own freedom away. Point (D), human willingness upon conversion, is crucial in reinforcing this argument and helps to clarify the Augustinian position. The result of conversion is not a God-serving automaton; it is a free, restored human person who sincerely loves God above all and obeys out of love. If critics wish to persist, they will have to object to our theologians’ language of the fallen human’s inability, for the work of conversion is not compulsion but liberation and healing.

Another strategy we have seen for dealing with difficulties in this framework of conversion is to take these four points as non-negotiable and adjust other ideas in light of them. For example, all three of our authors work to undermine possible objections to a sovereign view of conversion by careful definition. This is why Calvin rejects the term “free will” as applied to the fallen person—for him, “free will” carries too strong a

connotation of human ability or potential to choose God that contradicts his view of human inability, point (A), so he rejects the term as misleading.²⁸ If we are to accept the framework, we must be willing to adjust our view of humanity, in particular fallen humanity. We must be willing to accept a concept of fallen human freedom that is quite limited in comparison to the word's range of meaning. If we indeed possess freedom, it is not ultimate self-determination; it is a voluntary slavery. Calvin's line of reasoning (and Piper's, which follows close in step) certainly serves the framework in a way: it makes a strong case for point (A), human inability, and helps protect the inner integrity of the overall system from contradiction or confusion. Yet he does require readers to make significant concessions, or else reject the argument.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that it is Calvin who concludes that the word "freedom" is not worth the trouble, given that his historical context is most drastically polemical of our three authors. However, while Augustine also tempers his notion of freedom to make sure it accounts for human inability, he does retain the word and argue that it must be held in balance with divine grace. According to him, we must not defend free choice in a way that denies grace, nor dispense of free choice when we defend grace.²⁹ His retention of the word, even with some caveats, serves the framework as well, but in a more rhetorical sense. His language can serve to minimize the shock factor of throwing out "freedom" entirely, and keep his hearers from swinging too far in the opposite direction. Augustine helps us keep balance within the framework; he helps us

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.7–8.

²⁹ Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice* 141.

see that “voluntary” does not contradict “slavery”, and that holding strongly to point (A) does not contradict either human responsibility, or point (D).

Even when we consider the more significant areas of variation in our theologians’ language, like the varied timelines of conversion, we can see how the work of each serves their shared framework. Calvin and Piper’s black-and-white language (also featured some by Augustine), is chosen purposefully. Binary descriptions of rebirth, death and life, blindness and sight, and instantaneous regeneration serve the framework by accentuating points (A), (B), and (C). Binary language highlights the absoluteness of human ability and the miraculous nature of conversion where God begins and guarantees the change in the human will. The full extent of God’s miraculous work becomes clear when we see the contrasting before and after states side by side. However, Augustine’s description of God gradually warming his heart before the garden moment in *Confessions* also has something to offer. This portrayal of God’s work in the will over time can help deal with a different kind of objection to (A), (B), and (C): objections arising from personal experience. Some Christians will not feel that their desires change all at once; some will not have a single moment they can point to. A great many will sympathize with Augustine when he describes his will as wounded and half-hearted, willing and yet unwilling to submit to God. Augustine’s language in *Confessions* makes room for all of these experiences while still upholding (A), (B), and (C) as non-negotiable. Every time Augustine describes good desires or impulses, he attributes them to the work of God’s Spirit in him. At the last, it is God, not Augustine, who acts decisively to overcome the final resistance of Augustine’s

old evil will in the garden. God is still the sole initiator and the finisher of Augustine's conversion; yet in retrospect Augustine can perceive God working toward his salvation over his whole life.

Finally, at the most important place of variance—the verbs our authors use when describing God's influence on the will—this framework proves to have plenty of room for varied description. In both leading and moving language, our authors remain firmly within the framework and attempt to bolster it. The reasons for Calvin's heavy use of moving language should not be hard to guess. Naturally, this type of language highlights human inability, divine initiative, and the effectual nature of God's work, the first three elements. It also downplays the need for an explanatory mechanism of turning the human will—God simply turns it. The emphasis is on God as author and finisher of conversion; the human is totally dependent. However, sole use of this language has potential to leave out point (D), human free willingness upon conversion, which each of our three theologians hold to. Augustine and Piper's language of leading or drawing, on the other hand, helps to emphasize point (D) and provide a more clear mechanism by which God sovereignly accomplishes the movement of the will while allowing human agency a secondary role—a role given by grace. In fact, it would be accurate to say that for Augustine and Piper, the human will is a free participant not only as a result of conversion but *in* conversion (yet not in the way Erasmus or Arminius would teach). A human will—restored by the Spirit, made good by God's decisive grace, and motivated by love—chooses to repent and believe. Using this language to clarify the nature of God's work is another crucial apologetic for the Augustinian view of conversion.

Augustine and Piper show that speaking of drawing, motivation, and love does not undermine a notion of divine sovereignty in conversion—it can be compatible with it.

We, as readers of these three thinkers, are now in a position to draw some final conclusions regarding these observations. At this point, we have answered many of the questions we set out with, and in a sense our inquiry is complete. We have identified a common framework, upheld by each of our authors, for thinking about divine and human agency in conversion—the four ‘building blocks’ of an Augustinian understanding of God’s work in the will. Within that framework, we have examined where our authors depart from one another and why they do so. Ultimately, we have seen that even when our authors depart, they do so with the goal of defending and upholding their common understanding, either playing up the distinctives of the Augustinian view, or preserving its balance and inner coherence. Each author’s unique language gives him certain tools with which to uphold, flesh out, or explain the framework, in contexts that range from pastoral to polemical to missionary. Our authors have offered to us several thoughtful ways of arguing for the Augustinian view. We have seen how conversion can serve as healing and liberation, how common notions of human freedom might cloud our theological understanding, and how God can act decisively by grace to make the human will good while still granting it a role.

So what are we to make of these observations? Ultimately, everyone who thinks seriously about theology must sooner or later accept or reject the arguments for an Augustinian understanding of conversion for themselves. My goal here is not to offer a comprehensive case for the validity of this viewpoint; if anything, our observations here

should highlight the importance of rigorous biblical interpretation in addressing questions of divine and human agency. Augustine, Calvin, and Piper have made a case for the consistency and internal logic of the Augustinian viewpoint; the reader must judge whether their case makes the best sense of the relevant biblical texts. Instead, I offer a few final reflections as a person who does accept the elements of the framework, and who sees them as biblically faithful: how can we make use of the unique language from each author? Must we choose between binary or gradual language of conversion, or between language of leading or moving? Or is there room for varied language within our shared framework? I have come to conclude that the latter must be the case—there is room within our framework for varied description of the mysterious relationship between divine and human agency (to a point, of course). No one verb or mechanism can do justice to God’s work in the human will. No one way of speaking about conversion can do justice to every biblical text and every experience of the Spirit.

We can observe something of a pendulum swing taking place. Certain ways of describing conversion tend to emphasize points (A), (B), and (C) of our framework—specifically binary language of conversion, language of God moving the human will, and restricting the use of the word “freedom.” No one could walk away from reading Augustine’s *Grace and Free Will*, Book II of Calvin’s *Institutes*, or Piper’s *Five Points* without coming to terms with human inability, God’s initiative, and the efficacy of God’s work. Clearly, these ideas are essential and distinctive components of Augustinian theology. However, Augustine also features language that prominently displays the human’s subsequent love and willingness—point (D). Though (A), (B), and (C) are more

unique to those who follow Augustine, they are no more essential than point (D). As we have seen, point (D) is especially valuable to our authors when they deal with objections or misconceptions. Perhaps most important and most unique of all, those who follow Augustine maintain that human inability, divine initiative, and efficacious divine work taken together *do not contradict human willingness upon conversion*. Defending this idea, or helping others to grasp it, is the cornerstone of defending the Augustinian view from the objections we have been considering. For this reason, we cannot cast aside language of God leading the human will or working gradually over time.

To an extent, all of our theologians have recognized the need for variation and balance in language, but in my view Augustine strikes the best balance of all. His work is not easily prone to caricature. Across *Grace and Free Will* and *Confessions*, he offers us a variety of language and resources that help us both to uphold the framework and to show its inner logic from multiple angles. It is difficult indeed to add something to this understanding of the will that Augustine's thought does not anticipate. Of course, we must not neglect the resources that Calvin and modern authors like Piper offer us. Yet to faithfully maintain the Augustinian framework against alternate understandings of conversion, to show clearly its inner coherence, and keep it balanced, we in the Reformed tradition must continually return to the thought of Augustine himself—in *Confessions*, *Grace and Free Will* and his other works beyond the scope of this project. We must strive not only for clarity in maintaining our view of divine and human agency, but also for charity and rhetorical balance in defending it.

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