

Inability

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1. State the three main elements involved in the consequences entailed by the sin of Adam upon his posterity.

These are—1st. The guilt, or just penal responsibility of Adam's first sin or apostatizing act, which is imputed or judicially charged upon his descendants, whereby every child is born into the world in a state of antenatal forfeiture or condemnation. 2nd. The entire depravity of our nature, involving a sinful innate disposition inevitably leading to actual transgression. 3rd. The entire inability of the soul to change its own nature, or to do anything spiritually good in obedience to the divine law.

2. What three great types of doctrine on the subject of human ability to fulfill the law of God have always coexisted in the church?

1st. Pelagian.—(a) Moral character can be predicated only of volitions. (b) Ability is always the measure of responsibility. (c) Hence every man has always plenary power to do all that it is his duty to do. (d) Hence the human will alone, to the exclusion of the interference of any internal influence from God, must decide human character and destiny. The only divine influence needed by man or consistent with his character as a self-determined agent is an external, providential, and educational one.

2nd. Semipelagian.—(a) Man's nature has been so far weakened by the fall that it cannot act aright in spiritual matters without divine assistance. (b) This weakened moral state which infants inherit from their parents is the cause of sin, but not itself sin in the sense of deserving the wrath of God. (c) Man must strive to do his whole duty, when God meets him with cooperative grace, and renders his efforts successful. (d) Man is not responsible for the sins he commits until after he has enjoyed and abused the influences of grace.

3rd. Augustinian.—Which was adopted by all the original Protestant Churches, Lutheran and Reformed. (a) Man is by nature so entirely depraved in his moral nature as to be totally unable to do anything spiritually good, or in any degree to begin or to dispose himself thereto. (b) That even under the exciting and suasive influences of divine grace the will of man is totally unable to act aright in cooperation with grace, until after the will itself is by the energy of grace radically and permanently renewed. (c) Even after the renewal of the will it ever continues

dependent upon divine grace, to prompt, direct, and enable it in the performance of every good work.

3. How does the *usus loquendi* of the words "Liberty" and "Ability" in this connection, among the early differ from that of the later Protestant writers?

The early writers often use the term "liberty" in the sense in which we now use the term "ability," and deny that man since the fall possesses any "liberty" of will with respect to divine things.

While modern theologians hold precisely the same doctrine entertained by these early writers they now think it more judicious to distinguish between the two terms in their constant use. By "liberty" is meant the inalienable property of a free agent, good or bad, to exercise volitions as he pleases; that is, according to the prevailing dispositions and tendencies of his soul. By "ability," on the other hand, is meant the power of a depraved human soul, naturally indisposed to spiritual good, to change its governing tendencies or dispositions by means of any volition, however strenuous, or to obey the requirements of the law in the absence of all holy dispositions. The permanent affections of the soul govern the volitions, but the volitions cannot alter the affections. And when we say that no man since the fall has any ability to render that spiritual obedience which the law demands, we mean (a) that the radical moral dispositions of every man is opposed to that obedience, and (b) man has absolutely no ability to change them or (c) to exercise volitions contrary to them.

4. State the orthodox doctrine both negatively and positively.

The orthodox doctrine does not teach—1st. That man by the fall has lost any of his constitutional faculties necessary to constitute him a responsible moral agent. These are (a) reason, (b) conscience, (c) free will. Man possesses all of these in exercise. He has power to know the truth; he recognizes and feels moral distinctions and obligations; his affections and tendencies and habits of action are spontaneous; in all his volitions he chooses and refuses freely as he pleases. Therefore he is responsible. Nor, 2nd., that man has not power to feel and to do many things which are good and amiable, benevolent and just, in the relations he sustains to his fellow-men. This is often admitted in the Protestant confessions and Theological Classics, where it is conceded that man since the fall has a capacity for *humana justitia* (man's justice), and "civil good," etc.

But the Orthodox doctrine does teach— 1st. That the inability of man since the fall concerns things which involve our relation as spiritual beings to God—the apprehension and love of spiritual excellence and action in conformity therewith. These matters are designated in the Confessions "things of God," "things of the Spirit," "things which pertain to salvation." 2nd. That man since the fall is utterly unable to know, or to feel, or to act in correspondence with these things. A

natural man may be intellectually illuminated but he is spiritually blind. He may possess natural affections, but his heart is dead toward God, and invincibly averse to his person and law. He may obey the letter, but he cannot obey in spirit and in truth.

5. In what sense is this inability absolute, and in what sense natural, and in what sense moral?

1st. It is absolute in the proper sense of that term. No unregenerate man has power either directly or indirectly to do what is required of him in this respect; nor to change his own nature so as to increase his power; nor to prepare himself for grace, nor in the first instance to cooperate with grace, until in the act of regeneration God changes his nature and gives him through grace gracious ability to act graciously in constant dependence upon grace.

2nd. It is natural in the sense that it is not accidental or adventitious but innate, and that it belongs to our fallen nature as propagated by natural law from parent to child since the fall.

3rd. It is not natural in one sense, because it does not belong to the nature of man as created. Man was created with plenary ability to do all that was in any way required of him, and the possession of such ability is always requisite to the moral perfection of his nature. He may be a real man without it, but can be a perfect man only with it. The ability graciously bestowed upon man in regeneration is not an endowment extra-natural, but consists in the restoration of his nature, in part, to its condition of primitive integrity.

4th. It is not natural in another sense, because it does not result in the least from any constitutional deficiency in human nature as it now exists as to its rational and moral faculties of soul.

5th. This inability is purely moral, because while every responsible man possesses all moral as well as intellectual faculties requisite for right action, the moral state of his faculties is such that right action is impossible. Its essence is in the inability of the soul to know, love, or choose spiritual good, and its ground exists in that moral corruption of soul whereby it is blind, insensible, and totally averse to all that is spiritually good.

6. What is the history and value of the famous distinction between natural and moral ability?

This distinction was first explicitly presented in this form by John Cameron, born in Glasgow, 1580, Prof. in the Theological School in Saumur, France, 1618, died 1625.

President Edwards in his great work "On the Will," Pt. 1., Sec. 4, adopts the same terms, affirming that men since the fall have natural ability to do all that is required of them, but are destitute of moral ability to do so. By natural ability he meant the possession by every responsible free agent, as the condition of his responsibility, of all the constitutional faculties necessary to enable him to obey God's law. By moral ability he meant that inherent moral state of those faculties, that righteous disposition of heart, requisite to the performance of those duties.

As thus stated, and as President Edwards held and used it, there is no question as to the validity and importance of this distinction. The same principle is explicitly recognized in the statement of the orthodox doctrine given above, Questions 4 and 5. Nevertheless we seriously object to the phraseology used, for the following reasons:

1st. This phraseology has no warrant in the analogy of the Scriptures. They never say that man has one kind of ability but has not another. They everywhere consistently teach that man is not able to do what is required of him. They never teach that he is able in any sense.

2nd. It has never been adopted in the Creed Statements of any one of the Reformed Churches.

3rd. It is essentially ambiguous. It has been often used to express, sometimes to cover, Semipelagian error. It is naturally misleading and confusing when addressed to the struggling sinner. His language assures him that he is able in a certain sense, when it is only true that he possesses some of the essential prerequisites of ability. Ability begins only after all its essential conditions are present. To say that a dead bird has muscular ability to fly, and only lacks vital ability, is trifling with words. The truth is, the sinner is absolutely unable because of a moral deficiency. It is right enough to say that his inability is purely and simply moral. But it is simply untrue and misleading to tell him he has natural ability, when the fact is precisely that he is unable. The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is not a mere moral suasion but a new moral creation.

4th. Natural is not the proper antithesis of moral. A thing may be at the same time natural and moral. This inability of man as shown above, is certainly wholly moral, and it is yet in an important sense natural, i.e., incident to his nature in its present state as naturally propagated.

5th. The language does not accurately express the important distinction intended. The inability is moral and is not either physical or constitutional. It has its ground not in the want of any faculty, but in the corrupt moral state of the faculties, in the inveterate disinclination of the affections. and dispositions of the voluntary nature.

7. Prove the fact of this inability from Scripture.

Jeremiah 13:23; John 6:44,65; 15:5; Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 2:14.

8. Prove the same from what Scriptures teach of the moral condition of man by nature.

It is a state of spiritual blindness and darkness, Ephesians 4:18, of spiritual death.—Colossians 2:13. The unregenerate are the "servants of sin."—Romans 6:20. They are "without strength."—Romans 5:6. Men are said to be subjects of Satan and led about by him at his will.—2 Timothy 2:26. The only way to change the character of our actions is declared to be to change the character of our hearts.—Matthew 12:33–35.

9. Prove the same from what the Scriptures teach as to the nature and necessity of regeneration.

As to its nature it is taught that regeneration is a "new birth," a "new creation," a "begetting anew," a "giving a new heart"—the subjects of it are "new creatures," "God's workmanship," etc. It is accomplished by the "exceeding greatness of the mighty power of God."—Ephesians 1:18–20. All Christian graces, as love, Joy, faith, peace, etc., are declared to be "fruits of the Spirit."—Galatians 5:22,23. God "worketh in you to will and to do of his good pleasure."—Philippians 2:13.

As to its necessity this radical change of the governing states and proclivities of the will itself is declared to be absolutely necessary in the case of every child of Adam, without exception, in order to salvation.

It is plain, therefore, that man must be absolutely spiritually impotent antecedent to this change wrought in him by divine power, and that all ability he may ever have even to cooperate with the grace that saves him, must be consequent upon that change.

10. Prove the same from experience.

1st. From the experience of every convinced sinner. All genuine conviction of sin embraces these two elements: (a) A thorough conviction of responsibility and guilt, justifying God and prostrating self before him in confession and absolute self emptying. (b) A thorough conviction of our own moral impotence and dependence as much upon divine grace to enable us, as upon Christ's merits to justify us. A sinner must in both senses, i.e., as to guilt and as to helplessness, be brought into a state of utter self-despair, or he cannot be brought to Christ.

2nd. From the experience of every true Christian. His most intimate conviction is (a) that he was absolutely helpless and that he was saved by a divine

intervention, ab extra. (b) That his present degree of spiritual strength is sustained solely by the constant communications of the Holy Ghost, and that he lives spiritually only as he clings close to Christ.

3rd. From the universal experience of the human family. We argue that man is absolutely destitute of spiritual ability, because there has never been discovered a single example of a mere man who has exercised it since the foundation of the earth.

11. State and refute the objection brought against our doctrine on the alleged ground that "ability is the measure of responsibility."

The maxim that "ability is the measure of responsibility" is undoubtedly true under some conditions and false under others. The mistake which utterly vitiates the above cited objection to the Scriptural doctrine of inability, consists in a failure to discriminate between the conditions under which the maxim is true, and the conditions under which it is false.

It is a self-evident truth, and one not denied by any party, that an inability which consists either (a) in the absence of the faculties absolutely necessary for the performance of a duty, or (b) in the absence of an opportunity to use them, is entirely inconsistent with moral responsibility in the case. If a man has not eyes, or if having them he is unavoidably destitute of light, he cannot be morally bound to see. So, likewise, if a man is destitute of intellect, or of natural conscience, or of any of the constitutional faculties essential to moral agency, he cannot be responsible for acting as a moral agent.

And it is further evident that this irresponsibility arises solely from the bare fact of the inability. It matters not at all in this respect whether the inability be self-induced or not, if only it be a real incapacity. A man, for instance, who has put out his own eyes in order to avoid the draft, may be justly held responsible for that act, but he can never more be held responsible for seeing, i.e., for using eyes that he does not possess.

On the other hand it is no less evident that when the inability consists solely in the want of the proper dispositions and affections, instead of being inconsistent with responsibility it is the very ground and reason of just condemnation. Nothing is more certain nor more universally confessed, than that the affections and dispositions are (1) not under the control of the will. They can no more be changed than our stature by a mere volition. (2) Yet we are responsible for them.

Those who maintain that responsibility is necessarily limited by ability must consequently hold either (1) that every man, however degraded, is able by a volition at once to conform himself to the highest standard of virtue, which is absurd; or (2) that the standard of moral obligation is lowered more and more in

proportion as a man sins, and by sin loses the capacity for obedience, i.e., that moral obligation decreases as guilt increases, or in other words that God's rights decrease as our rebellion against him increases. Which is also absurd, for the principle obviously vacates law altogether, making both its precept and penalty void, since the sinner carries the law down with himself: It takes the law out of God's hands, and puts it in the hands of the sinner, who always determines the extent of its requirements by the extent of his own apostasy.

12. Prove that men are responsible for their affections. 1

1st. The whole volume of Scripture testifies to the fact that God requires men to possess right affections. and that he judges and treats men according to their affections. Christ declares (Matthew 22:37–40) that the whole moral law. is summarily comprehended in these two commandments, to Love God with the whole heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." But "love "is an affection not a volition, nor is it under the immediate control of the volitions.

2nd. It is the instinctive judgment of all men that moral dispositions and affections are intrinsically either good or evil, and worthy in every case according to their character, and irrespective of their origin of praise or blame. Some affections indeed are in themselves morally indifferent and become right or wrong only when adopted by the will as a principle of action in preference to other competing principles, e.g., the affection of self–love. But there are other affections which are intrinsically good, like love to God and disinterested benevolence towards our fellow–creatures, and others which are intrinsically evil, like malice or distrust of God, without any consideration of their origin.—Romans 7:14–23. Every volition derives all its moral quality from the quality of the affection that prompts it; while, on the other hand, the moral quality of the affection is original, and independent, and absolute.

3rd. The Scriptures and universal Christian experience teach that the common condition of man is one at once morally impotent and responsible. Hence the two cannot be inconsistent.

13. How can man's inability be reconciled with the commands, promises, and threatenings of God?

God righteously deals with the sinner according to the measure of his responsibility, and not according to the measure of his sinful inability. It would have been a compromise altogether unworthy of God to have lowered his demands in proportion to man's sin. Besides, under the gospel dispensation God makes use of his commands, promises, and threatenings, as gracious means, under the influence of his Spirit, to enlighten the minds, quicken the consciences, and to sanctify the hearts of men.

14. How can man's inability be shown to be consistent with the rational use of means?

The efficiency of all means lies in the power of God, and not in the ability of man. God has established a connection between certain means and the ends desired; he has commanded us to use them, and has promised to bless them; and human experience has proved God's faithfulness to his engagements, and the instrumental connection between the means and the end.

15. Show that the legitimate practical effect of this doctrine is not to lead sinners to procrastinate.

It obviously and rightly tends to extinguish the false hopes of every sinner, and to paralyze their efforts to extricate themselves in the exercise of their own strength, or in reliance upon their own resources. But both reason and experience assure us that the natural and actual effect of this great truth is— 1st. To humble the soul and fill it with self-despair. 2nd. To shut it up to immediate and unreserved reliance upon the sovereign grace of God in Christ, the only ground of possible hope remaining. 3rd. Subsequent to conversion this truth leads the soul of the Christian to habitual self-distrust, diligence, and watchfulness, and to habitual confidence in and gratitude towards God.

THE AUTHORITATIVE STATEMENTS OF THE VARIOUS CHURCHES

ROMISH DOCTRINE.—"Council of Trent," Sess. 6, can. 7.—"If any one shall say, that all the works performed before justification, on whatsoever principle they are done, are truly sins, and merit the wrath of God. . . . anathema sit." See further under the heads of "Original Sin" and "Effectual Calling."

LUTHERAN DOCTRINE.—"Aug. Confession, p. 15."—"Human will possesses a certain ability (libertatem) for effecting civil righteousness, and for choosing things apparent to the senses. But, without the Holy Spirit, it has not the power of effecting the righteousness of God, or spiritual righteousness, because the animal man does not perceive those things which are of the Spirit of God."

"Formula Concordiæ," p. 579.—"Therefore we believe that as much as the power is wanting to a corpse to revive itself and restore to itself corporeal life, by so much is all and every faculty wanting to a man who by reason of sin is spiritually dead, of recalling himself to spiritual life. "Ib., p. 656.—"We believe that the intellect, heart, and will of an unrenewed man are altogether unable, in spiritual and divine things, and of their own proper natural vigor, to understand, to believe, to embrace, to think, to will, to commence, to perfect, to transact, to operate, or to cooperate anything. "

REFORMED DOCTRINE.—"Thirty–Nine Articles of the Church of England," Art. 10.—"The condition of man after the fall of Adam, is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God: wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good–will, and working with us when we have that good–will."

"Confession Helvetica Posterior."—"In the unrenewed man there is no free will for good, and no strength for performing that which is good.....No one denies that in external things the renewed and the unrenewed alike have free–will; for man has this constitution in common with the other animals, that some things he wills, and some things he wills not. . . . We condemn on this subject the Manicheans, who deny that evil originated in the exercise of a free–will by a good man. We also condemn the Pelagians, who say that even the bad man possesses sufficient free–will for performing the good commanded."

"Formula Consensus Helvetica," Can. 22.—"We hold therefore that they speak with too little accuracy and not without danger, who call this inability to believe moral inability, and do not hold it to be natural, adding that man in whatever condition he may be placed is able to believe if he will, and that faith in some way or other, indeed, is self–originated; and yet the Apostle most distinctly calls it the gift of God "(Ephesians 2:8).

"Articles of Synod of Dort," Chap. 3. Art. 3.—"All men are conceived in sin, and born children of wrath, indisposed to all saving good, prepense to evil, dead in sins and the slaves of sin, and without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to correct their depraved nature, or to dispose themselves to the correction of it."

"Confession of Faith," Chap. 9. § 3. – "Man, by his fall and state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself or to prepare himself thereunto."

REMONSTRANT DOCTRINE.—Limborch, "Theol. Christ.," Lib. 4, ch. 14. § 21.—"The grace of God is the primary cause of faith, without which a man is not able rightly to use his free–will. . . . Therefore free will cooperates with grace, otherwise the obedience or the disobedience of man would have no place. Grace is not the sole cause, although it is the primary cause of salvation, . . . for the cooperation itself of the free–will with grace is of grace as a primary cause: for unless the free–will had been excited by prevenient grace it would not have been able to cooperate with grace. "

SOCINIAN DOCTRINE—"Racovian Catechism," Ques. 422.—"Is not free–will placed in our power so that we may obey God? Surely, because it is certain that

the first man was so constituted by God that he was endowed with free-will. Nor truly has any cause supervened why God should have deprived man of that free-will subsequently to his fall."

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