

Theses on the Captivated and Liberated Will  
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1. The most fundamental challenge for presenting the gospel in the current North American context is that the gospel presupposes a bound will while most North Americans presuppose a free will. More than anything, Americans value choice. With respect to God, however, they habitually make a category mistake. They think you can accept or reject God just like you might accept or reject a product.
2. The issue over the freedom of the will is not over whether or not people make choices. The problem is that the choices that people make are done by a will captivated to the self. The sinful human is unable to trust God and for that reason feels more secure in trusting the self.
3. Our transgression against God and our neighbor certainly can be seen in our various thoughts, words, and deeds. Yet it goes much deeper — to the very core of our condition. We are held captive by our own will, holding God in suspicion, hoping to create our own future, and working to manage life itself. Thus, we are unable to create or will faith in God or goodness on our part.
4. The question of the bound will has nothing whatever to do with choices before the world (*coram mundo*), but only before God (*coram deo*). The teaching that the will is free, neutral, or un-captivated endorses the view that the human as a subject can stand over the gospel, deciding either for or against Jesus Christ as the promise of new, eternal life.
5. Sinners in their captivity have already made a decision for Christ: it is to put him on the cross!
6. If God is all-powerful and all-good, then the will, *coram deo*, is not free. It is rather captivated to its own perception of its own good and, thus, bound to reject and crucify Jesus Christ. To be saved means to be delivered from such a self curved in on itself. If Jesus Christ is to be Lord, the sinful self must die and the new person in Christ must be raised.
7. One's religious identity (or seeming lack thereof) indicates the idols to which one's will is bound. Evangelical Protestants, no less than Roman Catholics, or secularists, assume that we deal with a God whom we can choose. This is most manifest in current evangelistic tactics: If I accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior, then Jesus will help me fulfill my potential — psychologically, economically, or socially. To accept Jesus on my terms is, however, in truth, to reject Jesus Christ as Lord and makes the self into an idol.

8. While touting radical difference from mainline Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism strikingly parallels mainline Protestantism. In a way, both liberal and conservative modes of American religion are the same tune but played in strikingly different ways. Both Evangelicals and Mainliners accentuate the subjective dimension to religion. Both seek a therapeutic Jesus, who can heal my psychological pain, in order to issue in a socially transformative Christ. For the political right, this Christ liberates an agenda that supports stability for the traditional family but license for the economy (even when that economy is indifferent to the traditional family's well-being). For the political left, this Christ liberates an agenda that promotes diversity in family structures but seeks to tame an economy run amok.

9. We might find ourselves as responsible citizens persuaded by proposals for social renewal presented by political ideologues. However, we must be clear that counter to all secular visions of politics on either side of the aisle, politics cannot save. Politics are for the ordering of community, matters of the first use of the law.

10. It is not clear that the Christian faith should fit itself into a political agenda. Instead that political agenda must be tested, step by step, with the Christian faith. When it is accepted that politics cannot save, then there is no reason ever to translate the faith into the requirements of any political ideology.

11. Both Evangelicals and Mainliners accept the "Christ transforming culture" perspective (Richard Niebuhr). Evangelical-Lutherans should reject this core fundamental assumption of both the left and the right. The role of the Christian is not to Christianize culture but to serve as a little Christ within one's vocation.

12. The self is not primarily a consumer of religious goods but, even in spiritual matters, is bound to will what one wills. Only law and gospel, properly distinguished, can free sinners from such self-centeredness. This is why sharing Jesus Christ, not primarily as example but as promise, directly in preaching, is the most important outreach that the church can offer to sinners.

13. Free choice, accepted by Scholasticism, Humanism, Roman Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and Mainline Protestantism, assumes the continuous subjectivity of the self. That view is incompatible with Evangelical-Lutheran teaching in which the accusing law and/or the hidden God mortifies and kills such subjectivity in order that the new person in Christ might walk by faith. In the Evangelical-Lutheran perspective, the chief heresy of our time is Pelagianism, the view that the sinner can save himself apart from grace, or semi-Pelagianism, the view that the sinner with a jumpstart from grace can grow more god-like. The answer to such heresy is that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone. The Christian walks by faith not by sight, whether that sight be psychological wholeness, a "Christian family," material prosperity, or moral rectitude. It is faith, and faith alone, that both sets limits to the law and fulfills the law.

14. The gospel is not a repair job on the old being or God's acceptance of us "just as we are" but a summoning of the dead to life. In Christ we have new life, a new Lord, and a

new kingdom. It is because God loves the sinner that the sinner is reckoned by God as lovely. To have a Lord means that at the core of one's being one will be provided for and protected.

15. Sanctification, then, is not the goal but the source of good works. God is so for us in Jesus Christ that he becomes one with us — akin to fire as one with heated iron. Only preaching delivers these goods. Only this truth can extinguish that desire in which we think we can use God to control our fate.

16. The Christian seeks not the moral reform of the world but confronts the secular realm with the truths of the first commandment — challenging any and every idolatry by which secular government would justify its behavior.

17. In the Holy Scriptures God interprets sinners — simultaneously condemning them to hell and granting new, resurrected life. In God's written word, we are fitted into God's agenda, not vice versa.

18. The will as freed, paradoxically, is captivated to God, not self, and now has a new object and driving force. It fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things. And in that light, it lives outside of itself in God and neighbor, seeking the latter's well-being.

19. The doctrine of justification depends on the doctrine of election. The elect man is Jesus Christ. God's eternal election of the believer in Christ is made real in the actual proclamation of Christ as forgiveness and promise. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone as a God- (not human-) centered theological perspective creates a new heart and right spirit within the sinner, so that the sinner in faith gives God the glory and praise which is His due.