



"You cannot build character and courage by taking away man's initiative and independence."

—Abraham Lincoln

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Genesis 1 and Free-Moral Agency

What does Scripture say about free-moral agency? Do we have it, or are we human puppets on a string, dancing to the tune of someone else's will? Even though almost all nominal [Christians](#) accept free-moral agency without question, arguments on this topic erupt periodically, especially from advocates of the "[eternal security](#)" doctrine. True, the term "free-moral agency" appears nowhere in the Bible, yet the concept appears so frequently in its pages that its acceptance as a fact is readily acknowledged.

In a letter written some time ago in support of universal salvation, a man wrote:

More importantly, while [God](#) does—ostensibly—give to us all "free will," yet I find that ultimately, and I stress the word ultimately, God's will will be done ([Matthew 6:10](#)). Ultimately, man's goings are "of the Lord" ([Proverbs 20:24](#)) and even a king's heart is in the hand "of the Lord" and He turns it "whithersoever He will" ([Proverbs 21:1](#)). So, "who hath resisted His will?" ([Romans 9:19](#)). . . . Now does the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit provide a power to keep a person from "backsliding," from falling back into a

life of [sin](#)? Yes! God keeps us. See [Psalm 37:23-24](#); [Proverbs 2:8](#); [II Thessalonians 3:3](#); [I Peter 1:5](#); [Jude 24](#).

He is saying that once a person repents, is justified by [faith](#) in Christ's sacrifice, and receives God's Holy Spirit, the will of God overrides the individual's will so that from that time forth his will harmonizes with God's will. Or perhaps the man means that God will save the person ("keep" him) regardless of his conduct that shows that he is still exercising his own will.

According to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, to be *free* in terms of free-moral agency means "not controlled by the will of another, independent, not subject to arbitrary interference." From the same dictionary, *moral* is defined as "of or concerned with the judgment of the [goodness](#) or badness of human action and character or conforming to standards of what is right or just in behavior." It suggests right principles or conduct. *Agency* means "the means or mode of acting; instrumentality," signifying the state or being of exerting power or, in this case, choice. Taken together, then, a human is an instrument of God's creation who is empowered and may voluntarily choose between good and evil.

To get a correct start toward understanding man's free-moral agency, we must ask and answer this question: Is God free to exercise His will? The answer, "Yes, He is free." Then we must ask: For what purpose did He create man? [Genesis 1:26](#) informs us, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." This statement was made immediately after the creation of sea-life, bird-life, and land-life. It is easily observed, especially from other mammals, that we share many things in common with them. However, verse 26 continues, saying, "Let [man] have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over everything creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God repeats in verse 27 that He created man in His own image. Man is not an animal. God created no animals after His image.

Not only is man shaped differently from animals, but also no animal can talk or has hands like a human. Greater than anything else, man has intelligence so far exceeding any animal's that there is no possibility of comparison.

Because of these things, we can easily conclude that God created man to have dominion, to rule. He is a creation patterned after the God-kind, having both intelligence and freedom of will.

Animals are not self-determining; their actions are predetermined by God-created instinct. Thus, their wills are limited by what God has imposed on them. They cannot determine to meet a companion animal in two weeks at a certain location, then plan each day as to what they will do and what route they will take to meet their animal friend. It was man's high quality of intelligence combined with freedom of will that qualified him to be given dominion over every other form of life on earth.

Beginning in [Genesis 2:15](#), man is given two clear instructions. First, he must tend and keep—or as some translations say, cultivate and preserve or adorn and guard—the Garden. He would have to choose to work the Garden to produce food, as well as to keep it from deteriorating. Almost the very first things said to him involve Adam having to choose to do or not do. Did God instruct any animal to do anything remotely similar? They are not in God's image.

The second command involves an even greater responsibility to choose. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that was in the midst of the Garden because in the day they ate its fruit they would surely die. This represents God's first clearly expressed will for man involving a moral choice. It could not have been more clearly stated.

The story of the first sin in Genesis 3 involves four characters: God, who instructed and set the standard; Adam and Eve, who have had the standard clearly taught them; and the Serpent, who arrived on the scene to test them. The outcome of the test was decided in a clash of wills: Satan's, who used his ploys to persuade nascent humanity, and Adam's and Eve's, who chose to allow their desires for the fruit and to be like God to override their knowledge of the moral standard and to indulge in the self-expression of their wills. Conversely, animals cannot sin; they are not free to choose to sin. They truly are close to puppets on a string.

This is the eternal picture of man's moral life. God tells us what is right, but then allows us the freedom to determine what we will do. There is no evidence at all that God tricked Adam and Eve into sinning. He did not stack the deck against them, nor did He overpower them. They were free to choose either way. The same act of creation that creates the possibility of moral character also opens the door to sin. Does not God say to Cain in [Genesis 4:7](#), "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."

The cause of man's plight is not ignorance of the right, but his own desire, which leads him to substitute his will for the will of God. This simple story illustrates why man's relationship with God has run afoul. By deliberate choice, man separates himself from God, who created him and gives him freedom to choose.

Nothing changes regarding the free-moral agency for the person called of God. When one is forgiven and receives God's Spirit, He does not overpower them. The right to choose freely remains, even as with Adam and Eve. To take away this privilege would truly make the individual a puppet on a string and destroy God's creation of him or her in His spiritual image. God is free to choose and so is man created in God's image. It is this freedom of choice that opens the door for man, through redemption and conversion, to be like God in character.

- John W. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Works are not the cause of salvation, but instead are the effect of God's creative efforts at bringing us into His image—a new creation. We are created in Christ Jesus, given a tiny spark of His nature from which to draw spiritual nourishment and receive our power to act. In this context, works are

nothing more than our puny efforts to respond to God's love by voluntarily living like God does. The perfect tense of the verb 'saved' in Ephesians 2:8 (denoting an action started in the past and continuing in the present) does not guarantee that we will always remain in that state, but only if we continue to yield to God's shaping power, mortifying our human nature, and conforming to His image.

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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