

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

Grateful am I to Him Who invigorates me, Christ Jesus, our Lord, for He deems me faithful, assigning me a service, I, who formerly was a calumniator and a persecutor and an outrager: **but I was shown mercy, seeing that I do it being ignorant, in unbelief. Yet the grace of our Lord overwhelms, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.** (1 Timothy 1.12-14 cv)

Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984) was one of the most profound intellectual Christian thinkers of the last century. In his book *A Christian Manifesto*,¹ he wrote that at the core of all beliefs there are two *worldviews*, and all aspects of one's life will be based on which view one holds.

It is not uncommon to hear people refer to one's worldview; even I have used this term in my writings. A *worldview* is the overall way people think and view the world and life as a whole. It is their reality. According to Schaeffer, one's worldview is based on one's view of reality or total reality.

The Christian worldview starts with the living God, the Creator of all things. The total reality of Christianity begins with "the central reality, the objective existence of the personal-infinite God." All things that are in existence came forth from a personal God who is the Creator of all things. Nothing that came into existence came into being apart from Him. Consequently, total reality is based on a living God, and this reality is to engulf all aspects of one's life. He saw true spirituality as engulfing all aspects of life: "True spirituality covers all of reality."

On the totally opposite end of the spectrum is the worldview that has overtaken much thinking in our day that he called "the material-energy, chance concept of reality." This worldview is "based upon the idea that the final reality is impersonal matter or energy shaped into its present form by impersonal chance." In other words, what we see with our human eyes, including our being, came about by pure chance. Material and energy that make up the universe came together or took shape into some form purely by chance. Thus, we have the theory of evolution and mankind evolving from some primordial ooze. There is no personal God who loves and creates out of His love.

One of the consequences of the material-energy worldview is *humanism*, which is defined as "the placing of Man at the center of all things and making him the measure of all things." "The term humanism ... means Man beginning from himself, with no knowledge except what he himself can discover and no standards outside himself. In this view, Man is the measure of all things.... "

¹ *A Christian Manifesto*, Francis A. Schaeffer, Crossway Books, 1981. [Quotes taken from pages 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25.]

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

Consequently, reality is seen from two opposing views, one which begins with the living, personal-infinite God and the other which begins with impersonal-finite material and energy. One view has grace; the other view has no grace.

I am not an expert on Schaeffer's work and thinking, but as I was reading *A Christian Manifesto*, I began to ponder the whole matter of what many call *free will*, especially in light of how so many Christians use the term in regard to salvation. Now, let me be clear that I have no understanding of how brother Schaeffer viewed *free will*, and what follows in no way represents his thinking. I have presented his concept of the two worldviews as a starting point for what I propose in the following. This article is not a review of his teaching.

Simply, I propose that the concept of *free will* comes forth from *humanism* that springs forth from the *material-energy worldview*.

The question at hand is this: Is man saved by his own will, that is, by making a choice to believe God, or is he saved by God alone who overcomes man's will with His will so that man can and does believe God? In other words, does God's will trump man's will at the moment of being saved by grace through faith? Or worded in another way, is man's salvation based on man's will or on God's will? If man does not exercise or is incapable of exercising his so-called *free will*, does this mean that he is forever damned? It is a sad commentary on our day that many who call themselves evangelicals would answer "yes" to this question. For us who hold to universal reconciliation, the answer is a resounding "no," for God our Savior **wills** that all mankind be saved (1 Timothy 2.4).

Before proceeding further, let it be understood that in what follows I use the word *will* in a very comprehensive sense to refer to all the decisions and choices we make all day long, big and small. I realize that some make a distinction between will and choice, but I am not doing that, for I don't see it really changing the argument that I am making. As stated already, it is not a question of man exercising his will but of God overcoming man's will, even his ignorance and unbelief.

Free will.

What is *free will*? To me, it is a strange term. Does it mean that our will comes freely? Or, does it mean that man can make his own choices; he does whatever he wills? I am sure there are different definitions of *free will*, but it seems that it means that man is capable of freely choosing to do what he wants, that is, of exercising his own will (volition). Some add to the definition that *free will* requires that man exercise his will without any external influence. In other words, man is like a free agent that is capable of making whatever choice he wants without any influence from outside himself. He is even free from any influence from his Creator. It is his right to reject the will of the Creator.

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

Such a concept should be an immediate red flag in light of the definition of *humanism*, which places man at the center of all things and makes him the measure of all things. In other words, he not only is the last word on whether God exists but also on what God is like and how one can or must approach Him. Accordingly, God can be impersonal or personal.

I contend that if man's will is truly free, that is, free from any and all external influence, then man's will must be absolute, which again is what *humanism* demands because man has the first and the last say on any matter. Just in case one is not sure of the definition of *absolute*, it means "perfect, pure, not limited, not conditional, unrestricted, not dependent on anything, considered without reference to anything else." The last part of the definition seems to capture the heart of this definition of *free will*. It is a will not dependent on anything and has no reference to anything else. *Humanism!*

But what is the will? In the case of *free will*, it must be the power of self-direction or self-control. Putting these thoughts together, we come up with a concept of *free will* that says man is a free agent to self-direct all his decisions and choices independent of everything and without any external reference point. *Humanism* again!

I will add one more thought to this definition. *Free will* means that whatever we choose for ourselves is the right and perfect choice for us. How could it be anything other than this since there are no external reference points by which to judge our exercise of *free will*? The concept of good or evil would not enter into the picture, for what matters is what is right for us. In other words, there is nothing outside of us that makes a difference. You could say that we are on the top of the mountain and everything else is below us. We are the king of the mountain, which is what *humanism* is all about.

Interestingly, I recently read the following in our local newspaper in response to an article someone had written: "My wife and children are my world, and other family members are simply satellites around that world. If they refuse to recognize my world, then to me, they're just insignificant comets flying through my universe." This quote is a great illustration of humanism. This person's worldview is obviously centered on self, and I would imagine that this one believes in *free will* as well.

If man has *free will* as defined above, then I contend that man is God. Why? Because only a god can make a choice apart from any external influence! Only a god exercises his will according to what is right for him. Only a god has no one higher than himself.

The fact of the matter is that mankind, in general, seems to act and think this way. Sadly, even Christians who hold so strongly to the concept of *free will* have unwittingly bought into this lie as well. They have bought into a concept that emanates from the material-energy worldview.

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

As I consider this matter, it seems that there is a third worldview that is a hybrid in that it does not deny God per se, but it denies His absolute and supreme power and authority over His creation. God is the Creator, but man has taken on a role in His universe as a god in his own right. Although one might accept the Creator God, one who holds this hybrid view nevertheless places man at the center of God's universe to act and think as he wills apart from God. In other words, this view considers God's will, if not meaningless, at least something on par with man's will. For this reason, a hybrid worldview perhaps is more dangerous than holding strictly to the material-energy, pure-chance worldview. Although I cannot quantify it, I suspect that much of what is held by Christendom in our day is based on a hybrid worldview that has resulted in a form of Babel (confusion).

With this last thought in mind, let us look at it from another angle.

You will not die!

The whole notion of *free will* comes from the seed sown in the heart of man in the day that Adam partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The seed sown came from the serpent of old, and it has led to multitudes believing a big lie and falling into a systematized scheme of deception based on a lie.

The serpent said to the woman, **“You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** (Genesis 3.4-5 NASB)

Man believes the lie that he will be like God and that he will never die, even though he will return to the soil of the earth. If we believe that we are like God, then we believe we can make decisions in the same manner as God, that is, make decisions independent of any influence. We can even make decisions over life and death. Consequently, many believe that no one really dies but that they go into another place *in* death, whether heaven or hell. Unfortunately, this thinking is prevalent amongst Christians. Further, billions of people who fear death, even hate it and desire above all else to live forever, choose to die rather than to accept God's offer to live one day in immortality. I find something very strange in this line of thinking.

Let us get to the very heart of the matter. Do we really make any decisions independent of any external reference point? Do we really and truly make decisions as if we are gods unto ourselves? The answer to both questions is no, we do not. Everything we do or don't do is based on some influence in our lives. In fact, our lives are directed every way we go or turn. Governments of today expend a great deal of energy and money controlling the lives of its people. For example, I cannot drive a car legally unless I am of age and have a driver's license. I cannot own a car and drive it legally unless I have insurance, pay taxes, and have it inspected once a year. I might choose not to do any of these things, but then I would be a law-breaker and eventually my actions would lead to trouble.

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

I can hear some at this point proclaiming that I am proving that man has *free will* in regard to his salvation, for my example is proof positive. After all, one who refuses to believe on Jesus is exercising *free will* and this will lead to big trouble. But this misses the point that there are external influences that direct our wills or choices every single day and every single second of the day. Not one of us makes decisions independent of some external influence. There is always something that comes to bear in the exercise of our will.

The news article referenced above makes the point. The one who wrote the article thinks that he reigns in his own world or universe, like any humanist would, but as much as many would like to think it so, it is a big lie. We are dictated to all day long by innumerable influences on our lives. So the concept of *free will* as presented is just not valid.

I propose that the question is not whether we exercise our will in making choices every day, for we most certainly do make choices all day long, but it is whether God's will trumps our will when it comes to believing in His Son. Another way of asking the question is this: Does God's will come to bear on our will to save us, or is salvation totally up to our will?

Some will say that God does not want robots, so He will not interfere with our will in the matter of salvation. Yet, our wills are influenced all day long by our spouses, our children, our parents, society and, most of all, by our government and its laws under which we live. Not one of us lives in some protected bubble free of external influence. So why is it that so many believe that our very Creator has no direct influence on us? Why is it that so many seem to hold that God's love cannot and does not woo our hearts to His Son? Of course, love is another matter entirely; but isn't love a powerful influence?

For a moment, let us consider Jesus' will when He walked on this earth 2,000 years ago. In regard to the purpose of God, Jesus executed God's will perfectly, never executing His own will. While on earth, He was under the will of another source, the will of His Father in heaven.

The Son of God did not come to this earth to exercise His will. He came to do the will of the Father. He had no intention of coming to do what He wanted to do.

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” (John 6.38 NASB; also Matthew 26.39; John 8.28)

It was designated beforehand that the Son would come to this earth in the form of man, not to exercise His own will but to do the will of His Father in going to the cross to die for all mankind. Even His second coming is in the will of His Father.

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

Now, concerning that day and hour no one is aware, neither the messengers of the heavens, **nor the Son; except the Father only.** (Matthew 24.36 cv)

The Son cannot decide on His own that He is tired of waiting, so He is going to return to earth and seize His kingdom. The Father and the Son know the day and the hour, but the Son cannot change the appointed time fixed by His Father's authority (Acts 1.7).

Grace overwhelms.

Consider Paul the apostle. I use him often as an example of one who was apprehended by Christ (Philippians 3.12). On the road to Damascus, Paul had no intention or desire to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In fact, he considered those who did believe in Jesus, the Way, to be his enemies and the enemies of God that needed to be wiped out. Paul's testimony is mighty powerful proof that his will was so set against the Lord and His people that a power beyond him had to blast him out of his ignorance and unbelief.

Grateful am I to Him Who invigorates me, Christ Jesus, our Lord, for He deems me faithful, assigning me a service, I, who formerly was a calumniator and a persecutor and an outrager: but I was shown mercy, **seeing that I do it being ignorant, in unbelief. Yet the grace of our Lord overwhelms, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.** Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all welcome, that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, foremost of whom am I.** But therefore was I shown mercy, that in me, the foremost, Jesus Christ should be displaying all His patience, for a pattern of those who are about to be believing on Him for life eonian. (1 Timothy 1.12-16 cv)

By his own admission, Paul was in ignorance and unbelief. It was like a great mountain in his life that was immovable. Nothing could blast this huge stumbling block from his life. Even worse, Paul never knew that it was a stumbling block until the Lord Jesus met him and blinded him on that dusty road. But what overcame Paul's ignorance and unbelief? Was it Paul's will that all of a sudden decided to accept Christ apart from any external influence? Hardly! A blinding light out of heaven is a mighty powerful influence on one in unbelief. So what changed Paul's mind in that split second when Jesus spoke out of heaven? Paul tells us what did it. **Yet the grace of our Lord overwhelms, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.**

It was the grace of our Lord that met him on that road and overwhelmed his ignorance and unbelief with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Don't miss the truth that Paul has left us. It was grace that overwhelmed him with faith and love. It was not Paul's grace; it was not Paul's faith; and it was not Paul's love. It was all from the Lord Jesus. When he wrote his epistle to the Galatians, Paul declared that it was not his faith; it was the faith of the Son of God.

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

With Christ have I been crucified, yet I am living; no longer I, but living in me is Christ. Now that which I am now living in flesh, **I am living in faith that is of the Son of God**, Who loves me, and gives Himself up for me. (Galatians 2.20 cv)

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh **I live by the faith of the Son of God**, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2.20 KJV)

I can testify that it was neither my will nor my faith that led me to believe in Jesus. One day as I was in unbelief and ignorance, Jesus broke into my life, and by His grace gave me the faith to believe, and He saved me. My boast is in Him alone, for I did nothing to save myself; I had no faith of my own to believe; and my will was overwhelmed with the grace of God so that I bowed the knee to Jesus. Was my will exercised when Jesus met me? It most certainly was. But did I make a choice independent of any external influence? Absolutely not! Then what happened to my will? God came in and trumped my will with faith and love and brought my will into conformance with His will.

Does this make me or anyone else who believes in Jesus into a robot for God? Absolutely not! We continue to make choices all day long, but now we are free to make right choices for God and His kingdom under **the influence and guidance** of the spirit of God.

This leads to one other point regarding man's will.

As You will.

When people are first saved, we tell them that they must obey the Lord and this comes by reading His word, knowing His will for us, and obeying what He speaks to our hearts to do. We might even teach new believers that in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out to His Father, **"Yet not as I will, but as You will"** (Matthew 26.39), and that this is to be their prayer as well. Those of us who have gone on with the Lord for a few years can testify that knowing and doing the will of God is not as easy as it seems. After all, even Jesus was in distress as He prayed to His Father, contemplating the sin that He was to bear and the cross that He faced. Doing the will of God is often taking up our cross (Matthew 16.24), and this is not an easy thing to do, for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Mark 14.38).

Now, this poses a question: If for believers, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, then how does an unbeliever, whose spirit is dead to God and whose flesh is in control, exert his or her will to believe in Jesus? Stated another way: If believers face challenges to do the will of God and they have an earnest of the spirit of God, then how do unbelievers break through these same barriers on their own without the spirit of God? The answer is that unbelievers cannot break through, for they have no means within them to do so; their flesh is in control,

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

and the flesh profits nothing (John 6.63). Simply, doing the will of God that leads to salvation is impossible for an unbeliever. Sinners need the grace of God and the faith of Jesus to break through the barrier of unbelief, and this requires the spirit of God to move upon their hearts of unbelief.

In conclusion, as Christians, let us hold to the worldview of a personal God, the Creator of all things, who is Supreme and Sovereign over the affairs of His creation. God Himself is responsible for His creation, including mankind. Let us shun anything and everything that comes forth from the “material-energy, chance concept of reality,” including any hybrid view that has its roots in *humanism*.

When we were ignorant and in unbelief, by His grace, God broke into our lives and saved us by giving us the faith of the Son of God. Let us not be persuaded by a worldview that robs God of His glory. We do not live by pure chance but by the loving care of a personal God, the Creator of all things, who speaks to men and declares His way for mankind.

“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17.24-31 NASB)

Notice that God alone arranges the appointed times and boundaries for mankind. Why? So that men would seek God! In other words, God arranges things so that mankind will seek after Him. God is the one who pursues mankind. What proof has God provided mankind? He raised Jesus, the Son of God, from the dead. The Creator God is the God of the living, and by His grace, love, and faith manifested through His Son, He alone gives life. This gift is not dependent on man’s will but on God who wills that all mankind be saved. Give God all the glory, and let your boast be in the Lord.

Let us be encouraged that He overlooked the times of ignorance and has overlooked our ignorance and unbelief. **Yet the grace of our Lord overwhelms!**

BEING IGNORANT, IN UNBELIEF, YET THE GRACE

Scripture Abbreviations:

CV	Concordant Version (Literal New Testament)
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible

By: Stuart H. Pouliot

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