

God said:

Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness!

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things that crawl about upon the earth!

27 So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God did he create it,
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them,

God said to them:

Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth
and subdue it!

Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all living things that crawl about upon the earth!

I love these words from the opening of our Bible, the words that tell of the creation of Humanity. We can see that God actually commands us to do two big things: first, to procreate and bring more humans into the world. And then, to have dominion over all the earth. This is big, especially for today. It seems clear from this that God is telling humans to be in charge. It says that we are given immense power. That is sobering.

After studying all of this a lot more carefully in the last 10 years, I believe that in a very real way, some might say that we did in fact invent freedom, although originally it was for a different reason. We will get to that in a minute. Let's remember that back in Europe with its royalty and wealthy land owners, for those born into power and status, there was only freedom for those who had this inherited power. They were in the lucky duck club, which was very small. What a magnificent thing that people came here dreaming of a situation *where*

regular people could have a chance to control their own destiny, at least in some ways. We call that the American Dream, don't we? And that is a great dream. When we check, we see that while many people wanted a free system of life, a lot of the desire for freedom came first from those who were persecuted for different religious beliefs, or for not belonging to the right religious group. People came here wanting freedom of religion, and with that freedom came the desire to want to be able to choose other aspects of regular life. That is truly a great thing. But, there is a but... We should absolutely celebrate freedom and the human enterprise of being a free agent, a chooser. But we have a religion situation that we must address. For that, we need to look at the extra piece of paper today. Let's take a look at this:

Seven questions are before us that need to be asked. Can I have volunteers read the list for us, one at a time, with different voices each time?

1. What do we mean by the expression "free will?"
2. Do we really have control?
3. Does God have everything planned out?
4. Are we truly free, or are we simply playing out a part pre-determined by God?
Does God have a plan for your life?
5. Is the future "set?"
6. What does the Bible really say about these things?
7. Is everything that happens "the Will of God?"

Why look at something like this today, you might be wondering. Why? Well, because we need to be clear about something. One key thing I have tried to emphasize is that our beliefs matter. Why? Because our actions flow directly from what we believe. That is simply how it works. So, our beliefs matter. OK. Well, we are celebrating the July 4th Holiday, and we are celebrating freedom. But then many people will come to church and have ideas that really do not fall in line with the idea of freedom and liberty at all. Have we noticed that snag before? There is a snag here.

We say we believe in freedom, and we celebrate freedom. But then we come to church and many suggest that really it is an illusion. How so? Because, many are told, God is actually in total control of everything. God has things planned out. We are simply playing out our part in what God has already determined. The future is set. Everything is God's will. Everything happens for a reason. That is what many people are told. What an irony! People in American history push for more human freedom on this continent, and yet religious beliefs develop that tell us that everything is simply happening according to the pre-determined plan of God.

What do we mean by the term "free will?" Some churches get named by this phrase. Many Baptist Churches from 200 or 250 years ago rebelled against a Presbyterian idea of Predestination, where the future is set, we are simply pawns in a big chess game of life, and there is nothing that we really choose.

Baptists didn't like that idea, and many of them became "Free Will Baptists." And I say *good for them!*

Free Will means that God gives us this dangerous power to choose, and even to shape our own destiny, and even to horribly effect the lives of others! Some folks say that God knows how things will play out, but Free Will must mean that humans have the freedom to choose what they do. I'd also add that free will means that God is not going to intervene, even when we make bad or terrible choices.

Many of these questions revolve around the same big question of FREE WILL. Do we really have control? Or, does God have everything planned out? Are we simply playing out a movie script predetermined by God? Is the future set? These are things that responsible Christians should consider. Let me give you an example of why we must do this:

On Thursday morning, just three days ago, my first cousin Jimmy was on his motorcycle near Charlotte, NC which is south of where he lives. So he was just minding his own business, actually looking for a new hay baler. Well, while near Charlotte, he was hit by a drunk driver who had actually stolen a car and didn't have a drivers license. He was killed instantly. I will be traveling down to Statesville, NC sometime later this week to go to his funeral and possibly to take part in it. Now, the simple question is, was this vehicular homicide death of my cousin, all a part of God's plan? Or did this drunk driver unfortunately make some horrendously bad choices, which she will regret for the rest of her life?

I don't know what the preacher will say at his service. But I hope it is not that we should all just get over it, because it was a part of God's plan. When religious teachers and leaders, or regular folks of churches look at heartbreaking tragedies in life and suggest that God is behind everything, they are not doing Christianity any favors! And they are probably in violation of the actual truth about God! How many people, in the face of terrible tragedies, have been told "Well, we don't understand the ways of God." And how many of those people have said "Well, then I don't want anything to do with this God!"? How many people have been chased away from God by stupid things that *other people say about God?*

I have a suggestion here on July 4th: I suggest that we start teaching and believing a concept of free will and responsible faith! We use imagery of a parent-child relationship regarding God and ourselves. We are the children, and God is the Parent. OK. But do children ever grow up? I have a Mom and had a Dad, but I'm 62! Hopefully I am an adult child. I really believe that God created us to become *adult children* as well. To be an adult child is to choose, to face the hard things of life without taking a pass by saying that everything is God's will. And to be an adult responsible child of God means that we don't sit back and wait for God to fix our mess! It says that God gave us DOMINION. If we are in fact, hurting our own world by our pollution, if we are responsible for things, could it be that God has given us the wisdom and the free will to address our own situations that we face? Or does God want us to act like we're 5

and sit back and say “*Well, God does control everything, so how dare we think we can make a difference?*” Or, we pray for God to fix everything, including the problems that we humans have in fact created!

I look at the story of Creation and it seems to me that God makes the world and then hands it to us and says “*I’m putting you in charge! I’ll be watching! I will be just behind you, following you to check on you.*¹ But here are the keys.*”

Is that dangerous of God? Probably. But think about it from the standpoint of a parent: If you could take away the freedom of your child, and guarantee that they have no troubles in life, would you do it? Would that be much of a life? Or would we grant them freedom, knowing that they will make painful mistakes, but that hopefully they will grow and learn? I believe in THAT God. Because God is love, and love is willing to risk and not to control. I believe that God gives us radical freedom, and that often God hurts from that choice. But when we make good choices, and grow into noble people who reflect God’s very image, then God does a little happy dance. **God says “Those are my kids! Aren’t they something?”** Responsible Faith. Responsible **Free Will.** **Growing into responsible adult children! Happy July 4th! Amen!**

¹ The idea that God is following us is courtesy of my good friend Dave Jaecken. :-)

