The Will in Conversion: Protestant Rationalism versus Lutheran Adherence to Scripture

By T. R. Halvorson

A recurring issue in Christian conversations is: What is the role of man's will in conversion.

Some say this is no better than arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. This issue really matters, however. It is a question of whom we trust, God or ourselves, and the blessings and curses that follow trust. What could be more opposite to trusting God than trusting man? What could be more opposite to faith than trusting ourselves? What could be more lethal to salvation than unbelief?

> Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord. . . . Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is in the Lord. . . . The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:5, 7, 9)

Fallen man's will is a slave to sin, yet it fancies itself free. This fancy is a trait of being lost, blind, proud, at enmity against God, and dead.

In this article we will see:

- some of the common ways this issue is discussed
- the proper role of reason and the error of rationalism
- what rationalism in this context actually is
- how the Lutheran teaching is nothing else than scriptural simplicity

To begin, much of American Christianity views this as a conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism. They have the impression that the universe of ideas about free will is completely embraced in those two isms, oblivious to Lutheran thought.

For all the ferocity of the dispute between Calvinism and Arminianism concerning free will, here is a key thing: the structure of thought is the same in both. Only Lutheranism has a different structure of thought. We will see this as we trace how each of them deals with two cases concerning the will of man.

Calvinism, Arminianism, and Lutheranism all must deal with the two cases:

- the case of the saved
- the case of the lost.

What is the role of man's will in the case of the saved? What is the role of man's will in the case of the lost?

Calvinism first takes up the case of the saved. From Scripture, Calvinism reads that the saved are saved by the will of God. While reading Scripture, it uses reason to see what Scripture says. The use of reason by itself is not rationalism because what is feeding reason is the text. Reason is not feeding itself.

Calvinism then proceeds to the case of the lost. It reasons from the case of the saved – see what happened there, not from the text of Scripture but *from the case of the saved* – to the case of the lost. It reasons that since the saved are saved by the will of God, therefore the lost are lost by the will of God.

The key is that, whereas in the first case, Calvinism reasons from the text of Scripture, in the second case, Calvinism reasons from its conclusion about the first case. Structure means, reasoning from where? Reasoning from the fruit of reason – making reason's conclusions the feeder of the next round of reason – is where rationalism sets in.

Arminianism follows the same structure, but just happens to begin with the opposite case, the case of the lost. That changes the conclusions, but the structure is the same. Realizing this error of structure will help us see our way to the truth when we reach the Lutheran teaching.

From Scripture, Arminianism reads that the lost are lost by their own will. While reading Scripture, it uses reason to see what Scripture says. So far, so good.

Arminianism then proceeds to the case of the saved. It reasons *from the case of the lost* rather than from the text of Scripture to the case of the saved. It reasons that, since the lost are lost by their own will, therefore the saved are saved by their own will.

Just like Calvinism, when Arminianism comes to the second case, it reasons from its conclusions about the first case rather than backing up to begin the second case at the text of Scripture. This structure of rationalism is the same as the structure of Calvinism. The two differ only in starting with opposite cases first.

Calvinism	Arminianism
Text of Scripture	Text of Scripture
Reason	Reason
Case of the Saved	Case of the Lost
Rationalism	Rationalism
Case of the Lost	Case of the Saved

Of course, both Calvinism and Arminianism cite Scriptures in support of their teaching about their respective second cases. Procedurally, however, that was accomplished by backfilling proof texts. Rationalism, not the text of Scripture, forced the view of the second case.

Luther does not follow that structure. In each case, Luther backs up to the text of Scripture and starts there. He uses reason, but he reasons *from the text,* not from conclusions reason generated in a prior round of thought. Consequently, it does not matter whether he begins with the case of the saved or the case of the lost. He can begin with the case of the saved, as Calvinism does, or he can begin with the case of the lost as Arminianism does, and his conclusions will be the same.
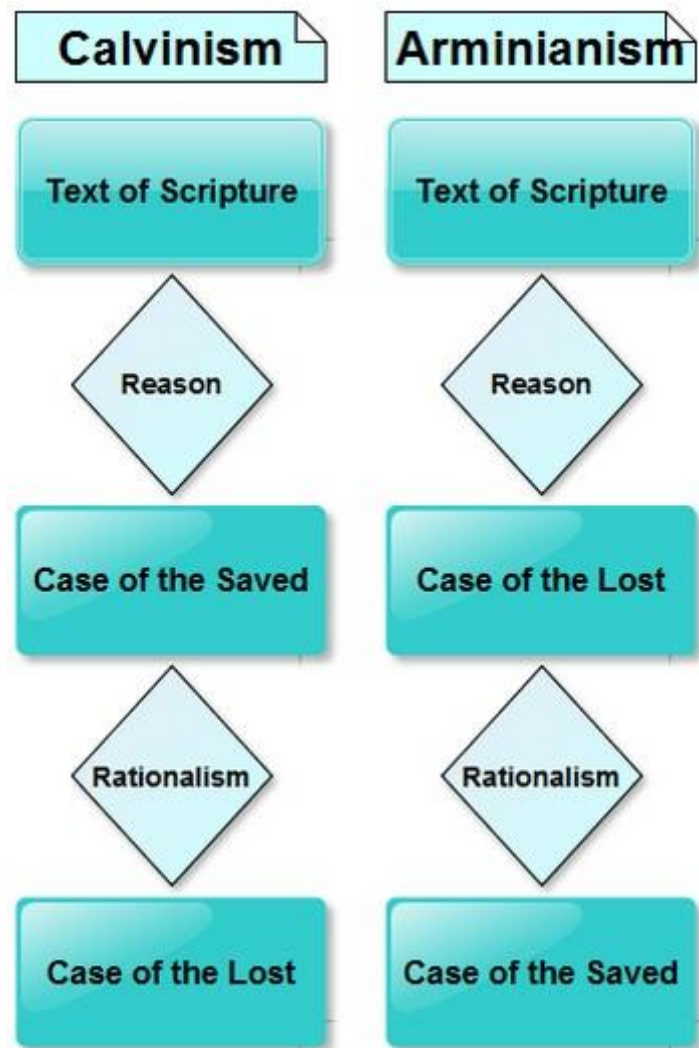
His conclusions for the second case to be considered are not controlled by which case was considered first and which case is considered second. His conclusions are controlled by the text. Let's trace Luther's steps and see how this is so.

For the case of the saved, Luther begins at the text of Scripture. He sees that Scripture says the saved are saved by the will of God. But he does not let the reasonable reading of Scripture about the case of the saved control his thinking about the case of the lost. He does not begin *from there*, as Calvinism does, and reason to the case of the lost.

Instead, he backs up to the text of Scripture and he sees that it says the lost are lost by their own will. While reason is used in reading the text of Scripture, Luther does not fall into rationalism because what feeds reason always is Scripture. In Luther, all conclusions are children, not grandchildren, from the text of Scripture.

Calvinists love to accuse of Luther of being inconsistent because he says the saved are saved by the will of God while the lost are lost by their own will. When they say inconsistent, they mean *rationally* inconsistent. To that we may gleefully admit because that frees us to be *scripturally* consistent. What we confess about both the saved and the lost is consistent with Scripture.

But if we must speak of rational consistency, we can compete on that ground. Can you think of anything more different than saved and lost? Why, then, is it rational to presuppose that two such opposite things must be alike? Who is being irrational? Doesn't it make sense that the case of the saved and the case of the lost, being as opposite as can be, would work differently?

The saved are born by the will of God, not by the will of man.

> As many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become
> children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not
> of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
> (John 1:13)

"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13)

The lost resist grace by their own sinful wills.

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those
> who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children

together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34)

"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit." (Acts 7:5)

Man is not to credit for salvation, and God is not to blame for damnation. We see this from Scripture, and this reading of Scripture is rational. But when reasons starts to feed itself premises for the next round of thought, it becomes rationalism, and falls into grievous error.