

UNDERSTANDING OUR ABILITY TO ENDURE TEMPTATION: A THEOLOGICAL WATERSHED

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One of the most familiar and comforting of Biblical passages is 1 Cor 10:13 with its promise that God will not permit the believer to be tempted beyond his ability to endure. This seemingly uncontroversial text contains a theological watershed, as there are only two ways to understand the promise it presents, one that fits Arminianism and the other Calvinism. The Arminian understanding requires a categorical interpretation of ability, an interpretation central to what Arminian thinkers like to call "real freedom" or "significant freedom."¹ The Calvinist understanding requires a hypothetical interpretation of ability, a conception tied to a view of free will that goes by a variety of names, of which probably the most common is "compatibilism."² I will argue that the Arminian understanding of this promise has some surprising implications that are inconsistent with both Scripture and human experience. I will show that the Calvinist understanding escapes these inconsistencies and that it does what the Arminian understanding cannot do: It provides a plausible account of the believer's response to temptation. All these arguments taken together will make a case for the claim that the Calvinist understanding of the believer's ability to endure temptation is the correct one.

I. PHILOSOPHICAL PRELIMINARIES

The presence of the apparently innocent little concept of "ability" is what turns God's promise in 1 Cor 10:13 into a theological watershed. The Arminian's "significant freedom"—the property of human beings that renders them morally responsible for their actions—is a categorical or two-way ability. A person is free with respect to action *x* only if he is able to

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¹ As an example, consider this statement by W. L. Craig: "The principal Reformers did deny to man significant freedom, at least in his dealings with God. Luther and Calvin were prepared to grant to man only spontaneity of choice and voluntariness of will, not the ability to choose otherwise in the circumstances in which an agent finds himself." "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?", *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (ed. C. H. Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 142.

² The term "compatibilism" is used to denote the view of free will that regards determinism as compatible with human freedom. It is a commonplace in contemporary philosophical literature. I will have more to say about compatibilism—and its relation to Arminian "significant freedom"—in the first section of this paper.

perform x and able to refrain from performing x .³ If the Calvinist wishes to speak in terms of human freedom he is more comfortable with an alternative notion that defines free will as acting on the basis of desire. A person is free with respect to action x if he performs it because he wishes to perform it.⁴ When the Calvinist needs to translate his view of freedom into the language of ability, he must say something like this: A person is free with respect to action x if he is able to perform x —that is, if he wishes to perform x and has the opportunity to do so, then he will perform x . This, in rough form, is the Calvinist's hypothetical interpretation of ability. There is, then, a conceptual connection between ability and free will in that one of the two traditional definitions of free will is expressed in the language of ability and the other can be translated into that language.

Although both traditional definitions can be expressed in terms of the concept of ability, they have little else in common and are in fact logically inconsistent with each other. This fact is signaled by the contrasting names they are given: the Calvinist definition is often called compatibilism (freedom and determinism are compatible), while the Arminian definition is often called incompatibilism (freedom and determinism are incompatible). Making use of the language of desire, which he prefers, the Calvinist-compatibilist defines a free choice as follows: "A person, P , freely chooses to do x only when his (P 's) character and circumstances are such that he desires x more than any other option he has at that time." In sum, the compatibilist says that desire determines choice or that what you are will always determine what you do. In contrast the Arminian-incompatibilist can use the language of desire to define a free choice this way: "A person, P , freely chooses to do x only when he (P) has, in addition to x , at least one other option that he desires, and when his character and circumstances do not determine that he prefer x to his other option or options." In other words the incompatibilist denies that what you are (your character) will always determine what you do. At the end of this section I will return to the language of ability, giving fuller definitions than I have so far done of the hypothetical (Calvinist-compatibilist) and categorical (Arminian-incompatibilist) senses of freedom. But first I will present a review of some philosophical ideas about ability and inability that will be useful in constructing those fuller definitions and in applying them to the believer's ability to endure temptation.

When discussing the abilities of human beings it is useful to distinguish natural abilities (and inabilities) from moral abilities (and inabili-

³ This sense of freedom was first presented in detail during the theological debates about freedom and predestination in the sixteenth century. The leading exponent of the view was L. de Molina, whose ideas about freedom are explained by A. Freddoso in L. de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)* (ed. A. J. Freddoso; Ithaca/London: Cornell University, 1988) 9–29.

⁴ This contrast between the Arminian and the Calvinist approaches to freedom corresponds to the general course of historic philosophical discussion of free will. Some philosophers define freedom in terms of ability, and some define it in terms of desire. See A. J. Kenny, *Will, Freedom, and Power* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976) 122.

ties).⁵ A natural ability or inability is a function of a person's mental and physical condition. A person might, for instance, be naturally able to do arithmetic and to walk up a flight of stairs and be naturally unable to do differential equations or to leap over a fifteen-foot wall. A moral ability or inability is a function of a person's character, of his beliefs and values. Someone might be morally able to criticize his misbehaving friend but morally unable to kill his friend's pet dog in an act of revenge.

Although this distinction between natural and moral ability may be too neat and may leave some questions about human ability unanswered, it does seem to express something important about human beings. Sometimes a person fails to do something because he was naturally unable to do it (Bill cannot swim and was therefore [naturally] unable to rescue the drowning child). On other occasions he will fail to do something because he was morally unable to do it. In other words, he was disinclined to do it.⁶ Perhaps Bill hates his neighbor Sarah and so found himself (morally) unable—disinclined—to help her in her time of need. What is important here is the difference between our normal assessment of cases such as these. In the first case we do not blame Bill for failing to rescue the drowning child. In the second case we blame him for failing to help his neighbor because his moral inability is a "would not" disguised as a "could not." His moral inability tells us much more about him as a person than does his natural inability.

Sometimes a moral inability is a settled disinclination, so much a part of the person that there is little if any hope for change. Paul presents a dramatic case of this when he writes that "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom 8:7–8 NASB). Those who are "in the flesh" are morally unable to please God; this is their settled inclination. In general terms, their inability to do x guarantees their nonperformance of x .

Another useful distinction is that between general ability and particular ability. A general ability is a skill or competence a person possesses over an extended period of time. Someone may, for instance, have the general ability to swim and may have this ability for many years. To say that he is able to swim is to affirm that, given the opportunity, if he tries to swim he will likely succeed in swimming. A particular ability is the ability to make use of a skill or competence at a particular time and in a particular situation. Suppose Sarah has had the general ability to swim for ten years. Today, however, she is sitting by her pool with both her legs in plaster casts (she is recovering from an auto accident). We would say that today she has the general ability to swim but she does not have the particular ability to swim. In other words,

⁵ This philosophical distinction is an old one, and it has figured in the history of theology. Cf. e.g. J. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (ed. P. Ramsey; New Haven/London: Yale University, 1957) 156–162.

⁶ See the discussion of this in A. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1970) 197–199.

she is a person who is able to swim (general ability) but who at present cannot exercise that ability (particular inability).⁷

Another way to increase our understanding of the concept of ability is to note that it is related to the concept of possibility. To say for instance that Sarah has the ability to swim is to say that it is possible for her to swim, since ability is a form of possibility. The case is more complex than this, however, because several senses of the term "ability" are forms of several senses of the term "possibility." I will mention four of these. (1) Logical possibility: Something is logically possible if it does not contradict itself ("nine can be divided by three" is logically possible; "the part can be greater than the whole" is not). Every case of human ability, of whatever sort, is a case of the logically possible. (2) Physical possibility: Something is physically possible if it involves no violation of the operating principles of the physical universe ("the cow can jump over the fence" is physically possible; "the cow can jump over the moon" is not). Every case of human ability that involves the operations of the physical universe is a case of the physically possible. (3) Circumstantial possibility: Some things are possible in certain circumstances but not in others. For instance it is circumstantially possible today for healthy Bill to jump into his pool and swim; it is circumstantially impossible for Sarah to do so, because she has a cast on both her legs (hence particular abilities are cases of circumstantial possibility). In the case just given, the circumstantial impossibility of Sarah's swimming is also a clear instance of a physical impossibility. (4) Volitional possibility: Something is volitionally possible for a person (P) if, given P's character, it is something he might actually choose to do. Something is volitionally impossible for P if, given his character, it is not something he might actually choose to do. Hence moral abilities are volitional possibilities and moral inability is volitional impossibility. Also, volitional possibility and impossibility can be either general or particular, corresponding to general and particular abilities and inability.⁸

One more way of increasing our understanding of the concept of ability is to review its relation to the concepts of free will and moral responsibility. I have already noted that the Arminian-incompatibilist conception of free will is expressed in the language of ability and that the Calvinist-compatibilist conception can be translated into that language. What I have not yet noted is the reason behind the selection of the language of ability to express the notion of free will. The traditional understanding of free will, both compatibilist and incompatibilist, is that free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Most philosophers who believe in free will have made the claim that if a person could not have done otherwise than he did, then he was not free in the sense requisite for moral responsibility.⁹ Incompatibilists are particularly fond of this slogan ("he

⁷ For a fuller discussion of this distinction—one that uses terminology somewhat different from my own—see A. M. Honore, "Can and Can't," *Mind* 73 (October 1964) 463–479.

⁸ Two useful discussions of these and related distinctions are Kenny, *Will* 122–144; R. Taylor, "I Can," *Philosophical Review* 69 (January 1960) 78–89.

⁹ For a representative statement by a philosopher see C. A. Campbell, *In Defence of Free Will and Other Philosophical Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967) 27–28.

could have done otherwise") because they believe that the most natural way to understand it is in terms of their view of free will: "P could have done otherwise" understood as "P did x , but P was able to do, and might actually have done, y instead" or as "P did x , but P was able to refrain, and might actually have refrained, from doing x ." Compatibilists have responded in two ways. (1) They have offered hypothetical interpretations of the slogan along this line: "P could have done otherwise" understood as "P did x , but he was able to do y instead, and he would have done y if he had preferred to do so" or as "P did x , but he was able to refrain from x , and he would have refrained if he had preferred to do so." (2) More recently they have challenged the slogan itself, arguing that "P could have done otherwise" does not express a condition for moral responsibility.¹⁰

This second compatibilist response to the slogan attempts to invalidate the requirement that free will be expressed in terms of ability. As such it is not available to the interpreter of 1 Cor 10:13, a verse that uses the language of ability. What I will do now is to provide those fuller definitions of the Arminian-incompatibilist and Calvinist-compatibilist views of free will, expressed respectively as categorical ability and hypothetical ability.

As I have noted, various senses of ability are forms of various senses of possibility. The sense of ability involved in the notion of free will is best expressed as a volitional possibility—that is, the possibility of choosing to do something. Such a possibility may be either general (existing over an extended period of time) or particular (existing at a given time). But as choices are always made at a given time, I will reword my definition of volitional possibility as follows: "A choice (x) is volitionally possible for a person (P) at time t if P's character and circumstances at t are such that P might actually choose x at t ."

The categorical ability of P to choose x at t is a two-way ability, easily expressed as "P might choose x and P might not choose x ." In other words if we believe that P has this categorical ability with respect to x , then we must be prepared for either eventuality: his choosing x , or his not choosing x . We are not entitled to reject either the claim that P might choose x or that P might refrain from choosing x , since we regard both as volitionally possible. All this points to the following definition: "A person (P) has categorical ability with respect to choosing x at t if it is volitionally possible for him to choose x at t and it is volitionally possible for him to refrain from choosing x at t ."

The easiest way to express the hypothetical ability of P to choose x at t looks like this: "P can choose x if he wants to." This is not a two-way ability, because in it desire determines choice so that only one option (choosing x or refraining from choosing x) is volitionally possible. If we have a good understanding of P's desires, then we may be entitled to predict, say, that P will refrain from choosing x . Of course we may not have a good

¹⁰ As an example of the first response see R. Young, *Freedom, Responsibility, and God* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975) 144–168; for the second response see D. C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge/London: MIT, 1984) 131–152.

enough understanding of P's desires or of his circumstances so that, epistemically speaking, we would have to say, "As far as we know, P might choose *x* and P might refrain from choosing *x*." The limitations of our knowledge, however, would have no effect on the case itself. Given P's actual character and circumstances at *t* he will prefer one option over the other, and the one he prefers is the one he will choose. It will be volitionally impossible for P, being P, to choose the other option. Hypothetical ability, then, can be defined in this way: "A person (P) has hypothetical ability with respect to choosing *x* at *t* if, given his character and circumstances at *t*, one option (choosing *x* or refraining from choosing *x*) is volitionally necessary for P at *t* and the other option is volitionally impossible for P at *t*."¹¹

There is one final piece of philosophical business I must attend to before turning to the Biblical text. At the beginning of this paper I said that there are only two ways to understand God's promise that he will not allow the believer to be tempted beyond his ability to endure (1 Cor 10:13). What I had in mind should now be clear: This promise turns on the concept of human ability, a concept that must be understood either categorically or hypothetically. There is no way to split the difference between these two understandings, since they contradict each other. Given his character and circumstances at *t*, P either could have done otherwise (the categorical understanding) or he could not have (the hypothetical understanding). Whatever else we may learn about God's promise in 1 Cor 10:13, it will remain true that we must interpret its references to ability either categorically or hypothetically.

II. THE PROMISE IN CONTEXT: 1 COR 9:24–10:22

The context of 1 Cor 10:13 falls into three paragraphs. The first, 9:24–27, is an apostolic directive to the Corinthians to live the Christian life—"to run"—as those who are determined to win the eschatological prize. In vv. 26–27 Paul applies some of his imagery to himself, thereby giving an indirect warning to his Corinthian readers that they themselves may risk failing to win the prize. He implies that if an apostle needs to exercise self-control, then surely they do as well. In the second paragraph, 10:1–12, Paul illustrates his warning with the case of the Israelites who, like the Corinthians, had great spiritual privileges (vv. 1–4) but who presumed on those privileges, fell into idolatry and lost the promised prize (vv. 5–10). Paul concludes the paragraph with a stern warning: "Therefore

¹¹ Note that this definition of hypothetical ability opens up the possibility of a terminological confusion. It permits us to say that at *t* P may be both able and unable to choose *x*. He is hypothetically able to choose *x*—that is, he can choose *x* if he wants to. P's choosing or failing to choose *x* is a function of his own preferences. But, as my definition of hypothetical ability allows, his character and circumstances at *t* may be such that choosing *x* is volitionally impossible for him, that at *t* P is morally unable to choose *x*. If P then refrains from choosing *x* at *t*, we could say both that "he could have done otherwise" (if, contrary to fact, he had preferred to) and that "he could not have done otherwise" (given the state of his character and circumstances at *t*).

let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). In the third paragraph, 10:14–22, Paul addresses those Corinthians who are in danger of suffering the judgment incurred by the Israelites due to their insistence on engaging in idolatry in the form of attending the cultic meals in pagan temples (8:7–13; 10:19–22). He argues that their practice is utterly inconsistent with the Christian faith (vv. 20–21) and completely unacceptable to God (v. 22). To avoid the judgment of God and so escape the fate of the Israelites they must "flee idolatry" (v. 14).

This brief review of the context gives a clear indication of the apostle's occasion for presenting the promise contained in 1 Cor 10:13. Calvin puts it well: "I myself think that this was written to encourage them, so that, after hearing such dreadful examples of the wrath of God, as Paul has just mentioned, they might not be disturbed, and so lose heart."¹² Paul has issued warnings so grim that he feels it necessary to remind the Corinthians about what he had said earlier (1:4–9): The true ground of their hope of attaining the prize is nothing less than the faithfulness of God. So he says to them, "God is faithful" (10:13).

Even though the context gives the occasion for Paul's presenting the promise of 1 Cor 10:13 it gives little help in understanding the meaning of that promise. This probably accounts for Gordon Fee's claim that "it is almost always cited in isolation from its present context."¹³ Fee believes that the practice of citing 1 Cor 10:13 out of context arises from the verse's awkward position in the text. As he says, "it is difficult to see how it fits into the scheme of the present argument, since v. 14 follows vv. 1–12 so nicely."¹⁴ Although Fee may be partly correct, and although some people may cite this verse in isolation because of its difficult position in the context of Paul's argument, I think it more likely that we cite it on its own because of its clear message. The temptations undergone by the Corinthian believers, including the temptation to idolatry that is Paul's particular concern in this context, gave the apostle an opportunity to present a perfectly general promise about God's faithfulness to believers who need his help as they undergo temptations of whatever kind. The very generality of the promise makes it possible to understand it independently of its context.

III. THE PROMISE ITSELF: 1 COR 10:13

As I have suggested, the text of this promise is familiar because of its clear and comforting message: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide

¹² J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 213.

¹³ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 460.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 460. Fee does think, however, that sense can be made of Paul's placing this verse where he does: "The best solution seems to be to regard it as functioning in two directions at once, both as a continuation of the warning in vv. 1–12 and as a word of assurance leading to the prohibition to 'flee idolatry' in v. 14."

the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13 NASB). The comfort of this message finds its source in the apostle's proclamation of the faithfulness of God. The believer's confidence in the face of temptation rests not in his own finite abilities but in the promise of the faithful God that nothing he encounters will be too much for him to handle. Through the apostle's words God assures the believer that the threats to his faith will be in proportion to his ability to meet them.

As the opening words of 1 Cor 10:13 make clear, the apostle is presenting what I have called a perfectly general promise about the believer's experience of "temptation" (*peirasmos*). The promise applies to all experiences that can be properly classified as *peirasmoi* and to those experiences alone. In the paragraph above I assumed that *peirasmos* was a broad enough term to cover not only what we normally call temptations but also any experience that poses a threat to the believer's faith. Certainly *peirasmos* can mean either "temptation" in the sense of a seduction to sin or "trial" in the sense of a test of faith.¹⁵ It does not follow from this that any particular use of the term, such as its use in 1 Cor 10:13, actually bears both meanings at once. Sometimes the context of the term indicates that one particular meaning is intended, as in Jas 1:13, a text that clearly refers to seductions to sin. At other times the context may permit the term to be used with a double meaning. F. W. Grosheide believes this to be true of its use in 1 Cor 10:13, remarking: "In our verse there is a twofold reference, both to trial and temptation, as the context bears out."¹⁶

I agree with Grosheide—but for a reason rather different from his. I appeal to the term itself rather than to the context. Unless a passage makes one particular sense of *peirasmos* so clear as to exclude the other, as in Jas 1:13—which, by the way, employs the verb *peirazō* rather than the noun—then the most sensible thing to do is to take the term in its double meaning. This is nothing more than a recognition of the logic of the concept that the Greek conveniently expresses with the single word *peirasmos* rather than with two different words. Any trial of faith functions as a temptation to sin—since there is always the temptation to fail the test—and any temptation to sin functions as a trial of faith. The promise of 1 Cor 10:13 is, then, a very general one, a promise about the ability to endure all sorts of trials and temptations, anything that might pose a threat to the believer's faith and so raise doubt about his winning the eschatological prize (9:24).

All the *peirasmoi* in the life of the believer are *anthrōpinos* ("common to man"). They are within his ability to endure. This may be taken either generally or specifically. In the general sense it refers to temptations that are human in scope and intensity, experiences that ordinary human beings can be expected to endure, "what humans in general can bear."¹⁷ In

¹⁵ This is an exegetical commonplace, cf e.g. *ibid* 460 n 49

¹⁶ F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 227

¹⁷ For an example of the use of *anthrōpinos* in its general sense see Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.9.28–30. In this passage it is natural to translate the term as "the lot of man."

other words the text of 1 Cor 10:13 rules out the experience of any temptation that would require superhuman ability to endure. This is extremely important, for any temptations that exceeded the capacity of human beings would overwhelm them, stripping them of their moral agency.¹⁸ In the specific sense—which of course presupposes the general sense—it refers to temptations that are adapted to the capacity of a specific human being, in other words what a particular individual can bear.

For two reasons it is preferable to take *anthrōpinos* in 1 Cor 10:13 in its specific sense. (1) Some individuals are weaker than their fellows and are not able to endure what human beings in general can endure. For such individuals a general promise to the effect that God will keep their temptations within the range ordinary humans can bear might not be very encouraging. It would be crucial for them to know that God will limit their temptations to what their unusually meager abilities can handle. (2) The text of the verse—particularly the use of the article with *peirasmos* and with *ekbasis* (“but with the temptation will provide the way of escape”)—suggests that God provides a particular *ekbasis* for a particular *peirasmos*.¹⁹ In other words God makes sure that each time a believer encounters a particular temptation he can count on it falling within his own ability to endure. For the believer, even the weakest believer, there is always a way of escape. This understanding of the significance of *anthrōpinos* allows the promise of 1 Cor 10:13 to comfort the weak and the strong alike.

In sum, then, the text of 1 Cor 10:13 presents a perfectly general promise about the believer’s divinely-guaranteed ability to endure all the trials and temptations he will encounter while running the race of faith. Because of its clear message it can be understood easily enough without reference to its context. And the message is clear: The faithfulness of God guarantees that no superhuman temptation will enter the life of any believer and that each believer’s temptations will be commensurate with his own ability to endure them.

This clear and comforting promise embodies the Calvinist-Arminian theological watershed. It does so, as I have already noted, because of the seemingly innocent concept of “ability.” To make this claim understandable I need to take the terminology I introduced in the first section of this paper and apply it to the promise of 1 Cor 10:13. A good place to begin is with Paul’s use of the word *anthrōpinos*, which can be philosophically translated in terms of natural ability. Since all the temptations the believer undergoes are within his natural ability to endure, should he fail to endure them he must attribute this to his own moral choices rather than to something external to himself. His natural ability in the face of temptation leaves his

¹⁸ That human agency extends only as far as human ability is a point that has been recognized since ancient times. Aristotle puts it this way: “For that which depends on him—and all turns on this—is what his nature is able to bear; what it is not, what is not under the control of his natural desire or reason, that does not depend on him” (*Eudemian Ethics* 2.1225a 24–26).

¹⁹ For commentators who argue for this see A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914) 209.

moral responsibility intact, making it impossible for him to say that it was logically, physically, or circumstantially impossible for him to endure. The pairing of a particular way of escape with a particular temptation can be philosophically translated in terms of particular ability. In other words, in any given case of temptation the believer has the particular ability to endure that temptation, at that time, in that set of circumstances. He cannot say that he wished to endure a particular temptation but that he failed to endure it because his (general) ability was suspended by special circumstances. In any case of temptation, then, the believer has both the natural ability and the particular ability to endure. If he fails to endure he has no one to blame but himself. The text of 1 Cor 10:13 can also be philosophically translated in terms of moral ability and volitional possibility, but not without controversy. To affirm for instance that in any case of temptation the believer is morally able to endure is to imply the categorical interpretation of ability. By contrast, to affirm that enduring a particular temptation might be volitionally impossible for a believer is to imply the hypothetical interpretation. Since the Arminian-incompatibilist view of free will is tied to the categorical interpretation and the Calvinist-compatibilist view of free will is tied to the hypothetical interpretation, and since there is no alternative to them, the text of 1 Cor 10:13 presents the interpreter with an intellectually unavoidable theological choice.

The farthest we can go in understanding the promise of 1 Cor 10:13 without addressing the Calvinist-Arminian question is to say that God gives the ability to endure temptation but that he does not give the endurance itself.²⁰ This is safely uncontroversial but less than fully satisfying. Even someone with no particular interest in the traditional disputes between Calvinists and Arminians might want a fuller understanding of the believer's ability to endure temptation. To seek that fuller understanding requires the application of the categorical and hypothetical interpretations to the Biblical text.

IV. THE CATEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

The categorical interpretation of ability locates the person's moral responsibility in the conviction that he might actually swing either way: "P might choose *x*, and P might not choose *x*." If P is under a moral obligation to choose *x* and if he fails to choose it then he can be held responsible for this failure on the grounds that he might actually have chosen *x*. Since P could have done otherwise he is morally responsible for what he did. Using other language, the categorical interpretation maintains that choosing *x* was volitionally possible for P. He is responsible for failing to act on that volitional possibility.

²⁰ The commentators I have read never go farther than this. Cf. e.g. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper, 1968) 229; Robertson and Plummer, *Critical* 209–210.

This is easily translated into the language of temptation. The believer has a two-way ability to endure temptation, since he might choose to endure it and he might choose not to endure it. If he fails to endure a particular temptation, then he is morally responsible for this failure on the grounds that he might actually have chosen to endure. Since he could have done otherwise he is responsible for what he did. It was volitionally possible for him to endure. He chose not to act on this possibility, and so he must bear his blame. Putting it more formally, the categorical ability to endure temptation *q* at time *t* if it is volitionally possible for *P* to choose to endure *q* at *t* and it is volitionally possible for him to choose not to endure *q* at *t*."

The categorical interpretation of the believer's ability to endure temptation is fatally flawed. I will argue that it has implications that are inconsistent with both Scripture and experience, implications so serious as to render it indefensible. My principal concern is with the Biblical teaching that there is a connection between what a person is and what he does (e.g. John 8:42; 1 John 2:18–19; 3:9). This is a necessary connection, for "a good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit" (Matt 7:18). It leads to my primary objection to the categorical interpretation, which is that it severs the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation. I will present two distinct forms of this objection. After reviewing them and considering a possible counter-objection, I will present three secondary objections.

The first form of my primary objection is this: If the categorical interpretation of the believer's ability to endure temptation is correct, then from the moment he comes to faith the believer might actually (1) invariably endure temptation, thus living from the outset like a perfected saint, or (2) invariably give in to temptation, thus living from the outset like an apostate. Given the categorical interpretation, both these extremes are volitionally possible for the believer. As this interpretation makes it volitionally possible for *P* to choose to endure any temptation he may experience, so it makes it volitionally possible for him to choose to endure every temptation he experiences. And since this interpretation also makes it volitionally possible for *P* to choose not to endure any particular temptation he experiences, it makes it volitionally possible that he choose not to endure any of those temptations. Categorical ability is, after all, two-way ability. The believer has two options: He may choose to endure, or he may choose not to endure. There is nothing in this interpretation of ability to prevent him from invariably choosing the same option. This extreme implication of categorical ability severs the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation since it permits the believer to live like a perfected saint or like an apostate without ever having had to develop into one.

The second form of my primary objection is this: If the categorical interpretation of the believer's ability to endure temptation is correct, then the believer who has developed into a perfected saint or apostate may at any time freely choose to begin living as though he had not. In other

words, the perfected saint may suddenly begin giving in to every temptation, and the apostate may suddenly begin enduring every temptation. The perfected saint may choose to live as though he is not what he in fact is, a person who loves God and hates the world; the apostate may choose to live as though he had the faith he no longer has. Neither of these extreme cases makes any sense because each one severs the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation, and yet each is volitionally possible on the categorical interpretation.

Although I know of no possible counterobjection to the first form of my primary objection, there is an at least initially plausible counterobjection to the second form. Suppose a believer has developed into a perfected saint. His very perfection will have rendered him immune to temptation. As he grew in faith, things that once tempted him gradually lost their appeal and those experiences that once tested his faith came to lose their power over him. Since he no longer experiences temptation, the perfected saint finds that he has no opportunity for exercising his categorical ability to endure it. Without the experience of temptation he never has a choice to make between enduring and not enduring temptation. Hence the perfected saint's categorical ability to endure temptation does not leave open the possibility of his choosing to live in a way that is inconsistent with his actual spiritual state.²¹

The argument is a successful counterobjection only on the assumption that the perfected saint is equivalent to the temperate man—that is, to the person who is immune to temptation because he has no evil desires. The temperate man may have, for instance, the opportunity to get drunk, but he will not experience the temptation to get drunk because the thought of getting drunk is not in the least bit attractive to him.

This assumption is not a plausible one. The perfected saint, if there be any such, and the mature believer, of whom there are many, are much more like the strong-willed man than like the temperate man.²² The strong-willed man is subject to various kinds of temptation, but he resists them, doing what he believes is right. For him, living in faith is a constant struggle. Paul presents himself as a strong-willed man in 1 Cor 9:26–27, implying that he struggles with temptation and is himself in need of the promise found in 10:13. Of course Paul did not regard himself as a perfected saint (Phil 3:12–14) but only as a mature believer (3:15). But the NT does present one unequivocal case of human perfection in the life of Jesus Christ. He is the model for everything a perfected saint could hope to be, and he is no temperate man. He is a strong-willed man, struggling with and overcoming all the sorts of temptation experienced by the rest of us (Heb 2:18; 4:15). Although the growing believer can expect changes in his desires—he will come to love the world less and to love God more—he will continue to experience the reality of temptation. He must set himself

²¹ A similar argument could be made about the apostate's being immune to temptation.

²² For Aristotle's classic treatment of moral strength and weakness, including an account of the "strong-willed man," see *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.

to live as a strong-willed man, fighting the good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12). Since neither the mature believer nor the perfected saint is a temperate man, the counterobjection fails.

My primary objection confronts the advocate of the categorical interpretation with an uncomfortable fact: He must be prepared for the possibility that he might encounter a new believer living from the outset like a perfected saint or an apostate, or a believer who has developed into a perfected saint or an apostate who suddenly begins to live as though he had not. If someone came to him and said, for instance, "I have been a believer for ten years and have never once given in to a temptation," he would have no theoretical grounds for rejecting this claim. Given the categorical interpretation, what this believer says might be the truth.

My first secondary objection is a natural response to the predicament in which the advocate of the categorical interpretation finds himself. His interpretation permits dramatic possibilities such as that of a believer who has never given in to a temptation, but we have experiential grounds for rejecting the volitional possibility of these extreme implications of the categorical interpretation. Our experience leads us to believe that there is a connection between a believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation, and since we are aware of our own and others' spiritual strengths and weaknesses we are not prepared to believe claims of the sort the categorical interpretation makes possible. If someone came to us with the claim that he had never once given in to a temptation during his ten years as a believer we simply would not believe him, even if we were unable to point to any particular spiritual failure in his life. Our experience of life would lead us to regard this believer's claim as volitionally impossible.

Another secondary objection is that the categorical interpretation cannot give an adequate account of why one believer chooses to endure a particular temptation while another believer chooses not to endure it. Suppose two believers, P and Q, are facing the same temptation at the same time and at the same place—say, a sexual temptation (P and Q have the opportunity to attend an X-rated movie). Suppose further that P chooses to endure the temptation by refusing to enter the theater. But Q chooses not to endure: He buys a ticket and sees the movie. According to the categorical interpretation, the only explanation one can give for P's and Q's actions is the completely unenlightening one that P exercised his volitional possibility to endure and Q exercised his volitional possibility not to endure. Why P endured rather than gave in, and why Q gave in rather than endured, are questions the categorical interpretation cannot address because it severs the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation. At the time of their respective choices P and Q each faced the same temptation, and for each of them it was volitionally possible to endure and volitionally possible not to endure.

An obvious rejoinder by the advocate of the categorical interpretation is to claim that I am begging the question when I call for an adequate account of the difference between P's and Q's responses to temptation. I am dismissing the categorical interpretation's explanation simply because it is

not the hypothetical interpretation's—that is, as a Calvinist-compatibilist I am refusing to accept as adequate the Arminian-incompatibilist's account of P's and Q's free choices. The categorical interpretation takes such choices as expressions of the mystery of (incompatibilist) free will in which there is no final accounting for differences such as P's and Q's contrasting responses to the same temptation.

On philosophical grounds, this is a fairly good counterobjection. The Arminian-incompatibilist's categorical interpretation of ability is logically consistent with itself and so might be correct, even if unenlightening to the mind of the Calvinist-compatibilist. But it exposes the categorical interpretation to my third secondary objection: The categorical interpretation cannot account for Biblical teaching about spiritual growth and maturity. Spiritual growth toward maturity is presented in a variety of NT contexts, generally in reference to a particular aspect of growth, such as growth in knowledge (1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18) or growth in love (Phil 1:9). The assumption throughout these texts is that the believer's degree of maturity will be reflected in the way he lives his life, with the ultimate result that the mature believer will be found to be "without blame" in the day of Christ (Phil 1:10; 1 Thess 5:23). This NT talk about growth raises the possibility that, for instance, P may be a more mature believer than Q and that this difference between them accounts for P's choosing to endure the temptation and Q's choosing not to endure it. Any appeal here to the "mystery of free will" misses the point and so deserves to be called unenlightening. The categorical interpretation provides no reason why any differences between P's and Q's spiritual maturity should result in their making contrasting choices when faced with the same temptation. It requires us to attribute the contrast between P's and Q's choices to happenstance, for on any given occasion of temptation each has the same two-way ability to choose to endure or not to endure, so that either outcome is volitionally possible for either believer. The more mature P was no more nor less likely to choose to see the X-rated movie than was the less mature Q. But this fails to square either with Biblical teaching or with our experience of life, both of which teach us that certain believers are more likely than others to resist particular temptations (cf. e.g. Phil 2:19–21) and that a believer who has grown in his faith will be less likely today to give in to certain kinds of temptation than he once was. These differences cannot be explained in terms of categorical ability to endure temptation.

V. THE HYPOTHETICAL INTERPRETATION

The hypothetical interpretation of ability locates moral responsibility in the connection between what a person is and what he does. To say that "P has the ability to choose *x*" translates as "if P wishes to choose *x* and has the opportunity to do so, then he will choose *x*." What P is is expressed by what P wishes, and what P wishes is expressed by what P chooses. If P chooses *x* he is morally responsible for the choice since it was an expression of his wishes, not because he might actually have chosen to refrain from *x*

(as the categorical interpretation requires). In fact P could not have chosen to refrain from *x*, since at that time "choosing to refrain from *x*" would not have been an expression of his wishes. As P then was, he preferred choosing *x*, and so he chose it. This was volitionally necessary for him, even as refraining from choosing *x* was volitionally impossible for him.

This is easily translated into the language of temptation. To say that the believer has the hypothetical ability to endure temptation is to say, roughly, that if he wishes to endure temptation he will endure it. If a believer chooses not to endure a particular temptation, then he will be morally responsible for his choice because it was an expression of his wishes, which are in turn an expression of himself. His status as a morally responsible agent does not require that he might actually have chosen to endure the temptation. In fact the believer could not have chosen to endure it, since at that time "choosing to endure" would not have been an expression of his wishes. As the believer then was, he preferred not to endure, so he gave in to the temptation. This was volitionally necessary for him, even as choosing to endure was volitionally impossible. It remains true, however, that if the believer had wished to endure the temptation, then he would have endured it. In other words, to say that he had the hypothetical ability to endure requires that he had the natural and particular ability to endure, so that his failure to endure was a function of his wishes only. His "could not endure" was a "would not endure." To put this interpretation more formally, the hypothetical ability to endure temptation is this: A believer (P) has the hypothetical ability to endure temptation *q* at time *t* if, given his character and circumstances at *t*, one option (enduring *q* or not enduring *q*) is volitionally necessary for P at *t* and the other option is volitionally impossible for P at *t*.

The hypothetical interpretation of the believer's ability to endure temptation escapes the fatal flaws of the categorical interpretation. It does this by affirming the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation. According to this interpretation, what a believer is will determine what he does. He has no two-way ability that permits extreme volitional possibilities inconsistent with both Scripture and experience. The believer's response to a particular temptation will be a function of his current spiritual condition, so that whether he exercises his natural ability to endure will depend on what matters most to him at the time.

The hypothetical interpretation provides a plausible account of spiritual growth and maturity. To an earnest, growing believer, God's "way of escape" will be attractive; to a weak, worldly believer it will be something to avoid. Since any believer is spiritually in process, there will be times when he will prefer to endure temptation and times when he will prefer not to endure it. As he grows, there will be more of the former and fewer of the latter. The behavior of the mature believer will be more consistently obedient to God than is the behavior of the immature believer, because the difference in their respective spiritual conditions will be such that the mature believer will prefer to endure temptation more frequently and more intensely than will the immature believer. At the zenith of spiritual

growth, the perfected saint would never again prefer giving in to temptation to enduring it. It would be volitionally impossible for him to do so.

These notions of volitional necessity and impossibility are essential to the hypothetical interpretation, and they may suggest to some minds that the Calvinist-compatibilist has purchased his immunity from the extreme implications of the categorical interpretation at too high a price. The price is nothing less than the belief that every choice we make is volitionally necessary and that every choice we do not make is volitionally impossible. Given his spiritual condition at the time, the believer who fails to endure a temptation really (volitionally) could not have endured it. Conversely, the believer who endures a temptation really could not have failed to endure it. To some minds this amounts to a fatalism that strips the believer of his moral responsibility and reduces to an empty sham his ability to endure temptation.

These charges against the hypothetical interpretation find their basis in the venerable philosophical division between compatibilists, who understand free will in a way that fits the hypothetical interpretation, and incompatibilists, who understand free will in a way that fits the categorical interpretation. To the Calvinist-compatibilist the hypothetical interpretation seems perfectly consistent with moral responsibility. To the Arminian-incompatibilist the hypothetical interpretation appears clearly inconsistent with moral responsibility. There seems to be no philosophical way to settle this dispute, or else philosophers would have discovered it by now. But there may be a Biblical or theological way of settling it in favor of the Calvinist.

The Calvinist-compatibilist's hypothetical interpretation can be defended by showing that its notions of volitional necessity and volitional impossibility are consistent with Biblical teaching. The text of 1 Cor 10:13 gives us no help here, since it can sustain either the hypothetical or the categorical interpretation. But other texts will help. When Paul describes those whose minds are set on the flesh (Rom 8:5-8) he presents them as being morally unable to do what is pleasing to God. Moral inability is equivalent to volitional impossibility, so Paul is implying that volitional impossibility is no bar to moral responsibility. In other words, it is consistent with Biblical teaching to say that a person can be morally responsible to do what he finds it volitionally impossible to do: to live in a way pleasing to God. When the writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as tempted and yet without sin (Heb 4:15) he implies that moral responsibility is consistent with volitional impossibility and volitional necessity. At least this is the case if the traditional understanding that Jesus was impeccable is correct, for impeccability must be understood in volitional terms. It was volitionally impossible for Jesus to give in to temptation; it was volitionally necessary for him to endure it. This means that it is consistent with Biblical teaching to say that a person can be morally responsible for doing what he finds it volitionally necessary to do.

The foregoing arguments from the Biblical text show that the hypothetical interpretation is consistent with Scripture. They may be supplemented by an appeal to my earlier arguments about the hypothetical

interpretation's affirmation of the connection between the believer's spiritual condition and his response to temptation and by its plausible account of Biblical teaching about spiritual growth and maturity. All these arguments taken together show that the hypothetical interpretation is consistent with Biblical teaching and so might be the correct account of the believer's ability to endure temptation.

But this is not enough. Showing that the hypothetical interpretation is consistent with Biblical teaching cannot settle the dispute between the Calvinist-compatibilist and the Arminian-incompatibilist. Although it may be helpful to see that the hypothetical interpretation can give a plausible account of the believer's response to temptation, it leaves the dispute intact. An advocate of the categorical interpretation might argue that his view, too, is consistent with Scripture. To settle this dispute it is necessary to show that one interpretation is inconsistent with Biblical teaching. This I have done in my review of the categorical interpretation, arguing that the Arminian-incompatibilist's view is inconsistent with both experience and Biblical teaching. Since it is a logical truth that ability must be either categorical or hypothetical, to show that one of these interpretations is inconsistent with Biblical teaching is to guarantee that the other interpretation must be the correct one. If my arguments are sound, the categorical interpretation is inconsistent with Biblical teaching, and therefore the hypothetical interpretation is the correct one. This would settle the dispute in favor of the Calvinist-compatibilist.