

The damning word in the phrase “free will”

The damning word in the phrase, “free will,” is not the word “will,” but the word “free.” Many who believe in the sovereignty of God make the mistake of obliterating the human will. Be careful. We do have wills. Don’t you make hundreds of decisions every day?

When arguing for the truth of God’s complete control over His creation, it is helpful to begin by telling people, “Of course you have a will.” This seems to comfort folks. I mean, why send someone off the deep end right away? Not even I, Martin Zender, do that.

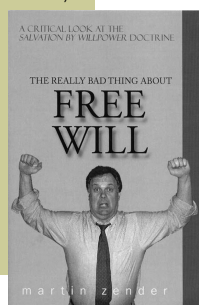
Just when my challenger begins to think that maybe none of the things they’ve heard



about me are true, I quickly follow up with, “But of course, none of your willing is free.”

I have now at least intrigued my challenger, who generally looks at me like, *What do you mean?* I follow with: “To be free means to be independent of influence. Therefore, not even God can influence a free will. Or Satan. If a human will is influenced, even a little bit, by anything at all, then that will cannot, by definition, be free.”

This quiets my challenger long enough for me to hand them a copy of my book, *The Really Bad Thing About Free Will*—and then scam. ■



Martin Zender's Clanging Gong News

“If I know all mysteries and all knowledge, but have no love, I am a clanging gong” --1 Cor. 13:1-2



Two out of three isn't bad.

Free will and the infamous Kent Debate

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for a Scripture-type person, however young, to scale the battlements of tradition, however formidable, with the intent of dissolving the strangleholds of falsehood, however hoary, then that Scripture-type person, however underrated, must assume his unalienable duty.

Are you with me so far?

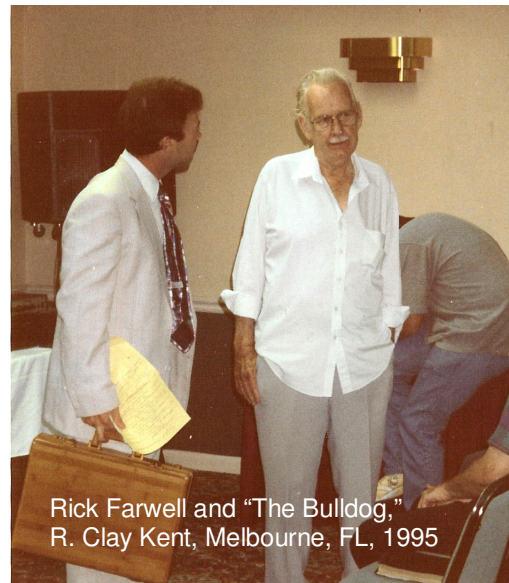
I was minding my own business one fall day back in 1997 when Rick Farwell, pastor of the Pauline Church of Christ in Fairview, South Carolina, called and said, “Pastor Clay Kent of Palm Bay, Florida has issued a challenge for a debate. And guess what? You’re the first person I thought of.”

I was beginning to feel flattered until Rick said, “Basically, you’re the only one I know of crazy enough to take on someone like Kent on the topic of human free will.”

Li'l ol' me vs. The Bulldog

R. Clay Kent was pastor of the Grace and Truth Chapel in Palm Bay, Florida. Affectionately known as Roscoe, he was, at 75, a scriptural bulldog. I had only known him three years, having spoken three times at his annual conference in nearby Melbourne. But I was impressed with Kent’s fervent spirit, his sense of humor, and the way his shirttail occasionally hung out. I mean, here was a man after my own heart.

And yet, Pastor Kent was also forty years my elder. He had come through the Grace Movement the same year I had come through strained carrots. I was mastering wheelies on a Schwinn Sting Ray while Kent was embracing the salvation of all. But let this encourage the young reader: truth, among those old enough to read their own Bibles, is no respecter of persons. While we can’t match our elders on every point of living (try getting a senior citizen’s discount at Denny’s), we can be as wise as they in some things, wiser in others. That’s grace for you. Blessing young people with mature truth is God’s way of flexing His grace muscles.



This divine practice encourages the young people and keeps the elders watching their backs. So remember what Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12) and let no one despise your youth.

Gnat Man

There were only two major scriptural points pastor Kent and I disagreed on: the relationship between Christ and Deity, and the free will of man. If you will allow me to compare myself to a gnat for a moment, I will tell you something else.

Every year at Clay’s conference, beginning in 1995, I became like, well, sort of like a gnat. I was the only one bold enough (some would say foolish enough), to challenge The Bulldog. Mind you, I was a respectful gnat. I was a gnat that raised its little gnat hand before jumping into your eye.

But whenever Pastor Kent spoke of a God Who was “too big” for the details of life; and Who surrendered those details to the untrammelled human will; and Who then made adjustments to counteract the inevitable mistakes; and Who never, Himself, made any vessel good or evil against its will—well, I swarmed. The subject was simply too important for me to sit on my little gnat chair and smolder.

...free will and the infamous Kent Debate

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Pastor Farwell proposes

Anyone who knows anything about debates knows that, in order to have a debate, you must have a proposition. The proposition is the thing you agree to argue about. The proposition Pastor Rick Farwell devised for this debate was a grand one:

MAN'S WILL CAN OPERATE
INDEPENTLY OF GOD.



To me, that proposition was a beautiful thing. I had never seen free will so nakedly displayed. Here, for all to sniff, was the heinous doctrine boiled to its essence. By golly, Rick had exposed the scum at the bottom of the free will barrel: *independence from God*. There was no way, however, that Clay Kent would agree to argue in favor of this.

Wrong! Pastor Kent told Rick over the phone that, indeed, he would argue the affirmative side of this proposition. *Unbelievable*, I thought. Thankfully, I'd be arguing from the "no way possible" angle.

It felt good to be on the scriptural side of the proposition.

Think about that proposition, reader. "Free," by definition, means, "exempt from interference or control." If any beings are truly free, then nothing, not even God, can influence them. To be free *is* to be independent of God.

If you are truly free, then today's weather can't influence you; the pull of the moon can't influence you; not even your own mortality—which, along with these other things, exists apart from human choice—can interfere with or influence your decisions; if you are free, then not even God can influence you without your consent. *Hello? Man's will can be independent of God? Lordy*. Rick had put the scum on the table.

Which is precisely why I called him a week into my preparation. Suddenly, I couldn't believe that anyone—let alone a mature pastor who believed in the salvation of all—would try to prove and defend man's independence of the Deity.

Do you hear that phone ringing? That's me calling Pastor Farwell! ■



Man? Independent? Of God?

"Hello—Rick? Zender here. I'm getting worried. Kent *couldn't* have agreed to this proposition." I repeated the proposition slowly, word for word. "Are you sure this is what he agreed to?" Rick assured me that it was. "And he's going to argue the affirmative?" "He sure is," said Rick in his redneck drawl. "At least that's what he said." And so, for the three weeks prior to the debate, I arranged my case around those seven naked words.

A night to remember

Saturday, October 25, 1997, 6:50 p.m. Darkness had just settled upon the Pauline Church of Christ in Fairview, South Carolina. Outside, the earth cooled beneath the cornstalks and pines. Inside, the warmth from the overhead lights, the coffee maker, and the bustling congregants, lent the evening the intimacy and excitement of a prize fight.

At 6:53, I began writing the proposition on a whiteboard at the front of the church. My strategy was to hold Kent to this proposition; I would press him for evidence of man's independence of God. In the back of my mind, I still wondered how he would defend it. I was not altogether comfortable

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What a Revelation!

THE APOSTLE OF GRACE TOOK NAMES

Why mention Pastor Clay Kent's name? Why not just start my article with, "A pastor I once knew challenged me to a debate on human free will..." I am following the example of Paul.



Hymeneus

Whenever anyone challenged vital truth, Paul was quick to name them. In 2 Timothy 2:17, Paul warned Timothy about two men, Hymeneus and Philetus, "who

swerve as to the truth, saying that the resurrection has already occurred." This was major doctrinal error that was subverting the faith of many. Paul detected it, fingered its proponents, and instructed Timothy to stand aloof from it.



Philetus

In the same book (1:15 and 4:9), Paul named Phygellus, Heremogenes and Demas as some who had turned from him. "Don't be like *them*," is the clear admonition to Timothy.

Demas photo not available

You may run into the videotape of the Kent/Zender debate some day, associate the name "Kent" with human free will, and be forewarned. But wait; I forgot; Rick Farwell *burned* that video tape—he honest-to-God did. And next week, you will find out why! ■

FREE WILL
DETHRONES
GOD ...does anyone care?



Pauline Church of Christ, Fairview, SC

Rants & Stuff

The Apostle Paul says we should not murmur (Philippians 2:14). Therefore, I shall rant.

Gag 'em with all patience



Not everyone is cut out to be a full-orbed evangelist. A full-orbed evangelist is one who follows the three-point charge given evangelists by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:2—

“Herald the word. Stand by it, opportunely, inopportunely, expose, rebuke, entreat, with all patience and teaching.”

“Expose, rebuke, and entreat.” Most evangelists I know entreat only. A few of them expose. Not many do all three. It’s easy to entreat. All one has to do is tell folks what is right. Exposing is harder, requiring an explanation of what is wrong. Rebuking is harder yet, as one must take down the false teachers. That is, one must name names.

Folks assume that an administration of grace is an administration of nice. Not so. This is why our heralding fails: we’re wimpy. We so wish to avoid offense that we tiptoe through the tulips. When we’re finished, people wonder what the heck we were trying to say. Since strength is often mistaken for arrogance, teachers avoid strength. The first order of business, for many, is to avoid offense—*then* they’ll press God’s points. The result is a lukewarm presentation to be spit from the mouth.

“But Martin. In this same passage, Paul also urges patience.” He certainly does. Let’s



watch the master in action as he patiently exposes and rebukes the folly of those who would dare mix law with grace. Here is Paul in Titus 1:10-11—

“For many are insubordinate, vain praters and imposters, especially those of the Circumcision, who must be gagged.”

Hey. No charge for the evangelism clinic.

Whoever would attack the glorious attributes of my God, attack—at the same time—the glorious attributes of my Father. Many would rise to defend their earthly fathers, but they allow their Heavenly Father to be defamed. God *can* take care of Himself, but He chooses to appoint those who defend His Name. It is a glorious privilege.

It also pisses a lot of people off. ■

...Man? Independent? Of God?

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as I sat down in front of my microphone at the long table in front of the church. It was 6:58 p.m. The chair to my left, placed before a second microphone, was yet unoccupied.

And then, he came. Seven o’clock sharp, up the north aisle. Walking slowly, pressing his cane before him, caressing his books: R. Clay Kent.

My mind had been on my notes, but I couldn’t help now but watch him approach. Though wracked with arthritis, he came with purpose, wearing gray slacks, a white shirt, and a blue blazer. I stared at his Vincent Price-like hair, his tanned forehead, his white mustache,

and the lips that always seemed ready to either crack a sarcastic grin, or open in disbelief at whatever stupid thing you would probably, with a trembling voice, say to him.

I swallowed hard.

As he reached the table, I waited for him to maneuver and take his chair. But he didn’t do that. Instead, he stopped abruptly, pressed his cane into the carpet and looked at me. Then, moving his eyes only, he looked at the whiteboard.

What happened next was something that no ear, celestial or terrestrial, had been tuned to hear. This debate, set atop the cooling Carolina earth, was about to crash and burn. ■

...to be continued next week.

