

The Four States of the Will

Introduction

In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo faced a controversy that still shapes how we talk about sin and grace today. Pelagius taught that human beings, by their own natural power, can choose righteousness without the help of God's grace. Augustine answered him by tracing how the human will has changed across four stages of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Augustine's four-fold state uses a simple Latin formula built on two words: *posse* ("to be able") and *peccare* ("to sin"). Each state answers one question: given the condition of the will at this point in redemptive history, is a person able to sin, unable to sin, able not to sin, or unable not to sin? This framework maps directly onto the Westminster Standards' teaching on free will (WCF 9).

Overview Table

State	Latin	Condition	Corresponds To
1	<i>posse peccare, posse non peccare</i>	able to sin, able not to sin	Adam before the Fall
2	<i>non posse non peccare</i>	not able not to sin	Fallen, unregenerate man
3	<i>posse non peccare</i>	able not to sin	The regenerate, under grace
4	<i>non posse peccare</i>	not able to sin	The glorified saint

State 1: *posse peccare, posse non peccare* — Able to Sin, Able Not to Sin

The Condition

This was the state of Adam in the garden before the Fall. His will was good, but he had not passed the probationary test. In that condition, he possessed a genuine, two-directional freedom: the real capacity to obey God and the real capacity to disobey him. Neither choice was necessary; both were possible. We can say Adam truly had free will.

WCF 9.2

Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom, and power, to will, and to do that which was good, and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Scripture

- **Genesis 2:16–17** "You may surely eat... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." (a real command implies a real ability to obey or disobey)
- **Genesis 3:6** Eve saw, took, and ate — the exercise of the power to sin
- **Ecclesiastes 7:29** "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."

State 2: *non posse non peccare* — Not Able Not to Sin

The Condition

When Adam fell into a state of sin and misery, humanity became enslaved to sin. Fallen human nature lost the ability not to sin. In this condition, we only have the power to sin, and retained only the power to sin. The will remains free from outward coercion, but it is bound by an inward necessity of nature. Apart from God liberating the will from its bondage, it cannot choose anything but sin.

WCF 9.3

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has completely lost all ability to choose any spiritual good that accompanies salvation. Therefore, an unregenerate man, because he is opposed to that good and is dead in sin, is unable by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself to be converted.

Scripture

- **Romans 3:10–12** “None is righteous, no, not one... no one does good, not even one.”
- **Romans 8:7–8** “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”
- **John 8:34** “Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”
- **Jeremiah 13:23** “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good, who are accustomed to do evil.”

State 3: *posse non peccare* — Able Not to Sin

The Condition

This is the state of the believer under grace, from regeneration through the rest of this earthly life. Grace does not instantly remove the capacity to sin, but it breaks sin's total dominion and restores the power through the Holy Spirit to defeat sin in this life. In this redeemed state, we return to something like Adam in the Garden.

WCF 9.4

When God converts a sinner and brings him into the state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage to sin, and by his grace alone he enables him freely to will and to do what is spiritually good. Yet, because of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly nor only will what is good, but also wills what is evil.

Scripture

- **Romans 6:14, 18** “Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace... having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.”
- **Philippians 2:12–13** “Work out your own salvation... for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
- **Galatians 5:16** “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh
- **Titus 2:11–12** Grace trains us “to renounce ungodliness... and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.”

State 4: *non posse peccare* — Not Able to Sin

The Condition

This is the state of the glorified saint. In the resurrection, the last remnant of corrupted nature is removed, and the will is confirmed in holiness forever. Augustine considered this the highest freedom of all, since it cannot be lost.

WCF 9.5

The will of man is made perfectly and unchangeable free to do good alone, only in the state of glory.

Scripture

- **Revelation 21:27** “Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false.”
- **Revelation 22:3** “No longer will there be anything accursed.”
- **1 John 3:2** “We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”
- **Jude 24** “Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory.”