

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

What, Who, When, Where, Why, How?

1 June 2003

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*(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by Winston Churchill for his speech notes.
The HTML version doesn't show indentation but the PDF does.
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from
The New King James Version,
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Good morning.

This class will be studying Jonathan Edwards' book,
The Freedom of the Will;
if that's not what you want to be studying,
you should head back over to the auditorium.

We're passing out 4 different sheets of paper:
One sheet is the tentative outline for our 3 months,
one sheet is an outline for today's class,
one sheet is your first assignment
(which we'll do during class today),
and one sheet is your second assignment
(which I hope you'll do during the week).

Before we talk about any of these things,
or anything else for that matter,
let's pray.

Dear Father,
Please grant us Your grace this morning
to honor You in all that we say and do.
In Christ's name, I ask this, Amen.

Please look at the piece of paper
that has at the top:
What, Who, When, Where, Why, How?

This is [the outline for today's meeting](#).

The web site for the class is shown at the top.
It's also on the course outline page.

The full title of the book we're going study,
with the original capitalization and punctuation
from the first edition is shown on your sheet:

A careful and strict ENQUIRY
INTO The *modern* prevailing Notions
OF THAT *FREEDOM* of *WILL*,
Which is supposed to be essential
TO *Moral Agency*,
Virtue and *Vice*,

*Reward and Punishment,
Praise and Blame.*

It was published by Jonathan Edwards
in 1754,
when he was the pastor
of the church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

For reasons that are probably obvious to you all,
the title is usually shortened.

For reasons that are not obvious,
the shortened title is usually
Freedom of the Will.

Now, that's a rather misleading title,
but, because it is so common,
we'll go ahead and use it.

Using the shortened title
also lets me comment on the irony
that Martin Luther wrote a book
on the same subject,
and reached basically the same conclusions,
but his book is called
The Bondage of the Will.

This is the second class that I've led
studying a work by Jonathan Edwards;
in the Spring of 2001,
we studied *A Treatise on the Religious Affections.*

How many of you were in that class?

God, and our elders willing,
in a year or two from now,
I hope to lead another study
on an Edwards' book,
most likely, *Original Sin* —
as you may suspect,
that's the shortened title,
not the original one,
which was
*The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin defended;
Evidences of its Truth produced,
and Arguments to the Contrary answered.*

When we studied *Religious Affections*,
I gave you a fairly detailed summary
of Jonathan Edwards life.

I'm not going to give you as much detail this time.
If you're interested,
you can get the notes from

the web site,
which has a link
to the notes from the previous class.

For today,
we'll just mention a few
details about Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703
in East Windsor, Connecticut

From 1716 to 1722,
he was a student at Yale College,
although the college didn't officially have that name yet.

After receiving his MA in 1722,
he was Minister to a Presbyterian church in New York City.

It was during this time that
Mr Edwards began keeping notebooks
that became
"Resolutions",
"Diary",
"The Mind",
and "Miscellanies".

He continued writing in "The Mind" and "Miscellanies"
for the rest of his life.

It is in "The Mind" that he wrote
the definition of truth that
will be on this year's T-shirts
for the Christian Worldview Student Conference.

Does anyone know what that is?

Lightly edited for simplicity, it is:
"Truth is the consistency and agreement
of our ideas with the ideas of God."

In 1726 Edwards moved to Northhampton, Massachusetts,
as colleague of his grandfather,
Solomon Stoddard,
at a congregationalist church there.

About a year after moving to Northhampton,
Edwards married Sarah Pierpont,
with whom he eventually had 11 children.

In February of 1729,
he became full pastor of Northhampton
after the death of Stoddard,
where he remained until 1750.

During his time at Northampton,
Edwards began writing and publishing.

It was also during this time that
the Great Awakening took place,
and Edwards was a major participant in it.

In June 1750,
a council of churches voted to dismiss Edwards
as pastor of Northampton,
and he preached his Farewell Sermon on July 1.

Why he was dismissed
is a very interesting subject,
but one for which we have no time right now.

In 1751 he settled in Stockbridge, Massachusetts,
as local pastor and missionary to Indians.

He stayed in Stockbridge until 1758.

During this time, he continued to write.

Freedom of the Will was written during this time,
as a response to several books on the same subject
that were attracting attention.

As we said earlier,
it was published in 1754.

In January 1758, Edward left Stockbridge
to assume office as president of the College of New Jersey,
which is now called Princeton University.

On March 22, he died of a smallpox inoculation,
which he took with the goal
of encouraging others
that the inoculation was safe.

In this goal,
he undoubtedly failed.

That's all I plan to say this morning
about Edwards' life.

Does anyone have any questions?

Well, before we go any further,
I have some questions for you.

Included among the pieces of paper you have
is [a half sheet that has at the top](#)
"For each pair of statements below,
please circle the member of the pair

that most closely agrees
with your belief.”

I'd like for everyone to do this now.

It's not a test,
in that I won't grade it,
and hand it back to you.
The purpose is simply
to help me understand
what you all believe,
so I can make these classes
as useful as possible.

So please fill this out —
you don't need to put your name on it —
and put it up here at the end of the class.

I'll give you a couple of minutes to do this,
and then we'll continue.

OK, let's continue.
If you're not done,
please finish it at the end,
or while I'm talking now, if you prefer.

Something that I find rather amusing
about *Freedom of the Will* is that
it is possible to give a pretty accurate summary
of the book using fewer words
than are in the full title of the book.

One such summary is written on your outline:

**Must the will be free
for reward or punishment to be just?
No,
not only does the Bible
explicitly deny it,
but the concept
is nonsensical anyway.**

That's the question Edwards asks,
and that's the answer he gives,
as we'll see in the next 3 months.

We see here, also,
a basic technique that Edwards uses
in most of his writings.

He tackles most questions in two ways:

He explains the answer given
by the explicit teaching of the Scripture,

and

He explains that the same answer
is given by careful reasoning
based on the implicit teachings
and basic worldview
described by Scripture.

Edwards doesn't always
follow this order —
often he pursues the second prong first.

Perhaps for that reason,
this second prong of Edwards' argumentation
is frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Edwards does not,
as many claim,
attempt to reason from a naturalistic,
God-may-or-may-not exist, worldview
to
this-truth-of-the-Bible-is-confirmed-anyway.

Instead,
what he does, I believe,
is pretend as if the Scripture
made no explicit statements
about a particular subject,
and then attempt to reason,
based on all the other statements in the Scripture,
to the same conclusions as those
supported by the explicit statements
he pretended weren't included in the Bible.

Does everyone understand this distinction?

Now,
there are plenty of very smart people
who disagree with me about this,
so I could be wrong,
but I don't think so.

We've covered what, who, when, & where,
and to a lesser extent, why and how,
as applied to the writing of the book itself.

I want to talk now
a little bit about why and how
as applied to this particular Sunday School class.

Why should we study Edwards' book?

After all, it was written a long time ago,
and it isn't a particularly easy book to read,
why should we study it?

There are three particular reasons
that came to my mind.

First,
we should seek to understand
as much of God's truth as we can.

I trust there's no question
in anyone's mind about that.

Second, Edwards' book is one of the best
examinations of the subject of the will
that has ever been penned.

Perhaps some of you may
have a question in your mind
about this.

For now,
I'll simply say
that I'm by no means the only one
who thinks this.

R. C. Sproul has written that
Edwards *Freedom of the Will*
delayed the spread of Arminianism
in America for 100 years.

The famous politician Daniel Webster wrote:
"*The Freedom of the Will* by Mr. Edwards
is the greatest achievement of the human intellect."

The London Quarterly Review wrote about the book:
"His gigantic specimen of theological argument
is as near to perfection as we may expect
any human composition to approach.
He unites the sharpness of the scimitar
and the strength of the battle-axe."

I suspect that as we study the book
during the next 3 months,
you'll reach similar conclusions.

Either that,
or you'll really, really hate the book;
I doubt there will be many who will be ambivalent.

A third reason why I think its important

to study the book is that
a proper understanding
of the subject of the will
is an antidote to some problems
that plague the church today,
including
arrogance,
faction,
and
worry.

Let's talk about the first two of these for a bit,
because I think they are particularly
applicable to the reformed Christians today,
especially conservative Presbyterians.

If we selected a random group of Christians,
and asked them to list some characteristics
of conservative Presbyterians today,
I have no doubt that among the
most frequently listed characteristics
would be
arrogance
and
a proclivity for fighting.

People from modern,
broad evangelical churches,
rarely claim to be certain about anything,
and almost never use the word 'heretic'.

In contrast,
modern conservative Presbyterians
seem to be certain about absolutely everything,
and use the word 'heretic'
almost as often
as other people
use the word 'the'.

I suppose I'm being a bit unfair here,
because these aren't traits new to modern Presbyterians.
they're traits that have
characterized Presbyterianism
nearly from the beginning.

As a friend said a while back,
"There's nothing quite like
historic,
Presbyterian arrogance."

I suppose there is something
that comes fairly close.

I'll illustrate with a story,

a true story.

Many years ago,
Annette & I attended a church in Poquoson.

Once while I was visiting folks
who had visited the church,
we came to the particular home in Poquoson.

I introduced myself to a rather elderly lady there,
saying, "Hi, I'm Michael Holloway."

She said right away,
"Your last name may be Holloway,
but you're no Poquoson Holloway."

There was no mistaking that this meant
that I was, at best,
an inferior brand of Holloway,
or, more likely,
not even a real Holloway at all.

(Now it turns out
I'm not a real Holloway,
but that's a story for another time.)

Conservative Presbyterians often act like this lady,
although we don't always use the words.

"You may be a Christian,
but you're not a reformed Christian"

or

"You may be a Christian,
but you're not a sabbath keeping,
psalm singing,
baby producing,
postmillennial,
homeschooling Christian."

Or,
to say what we often really think,
"I suppose it is possible
that your name is written in the book of life,
but its written in much lighter ink
than my name is written in."

Only the most socially inept among us
ever say these things out loud,
but many of us think these things,
far more often than we'd like to admit.

What is very sad about this
is that, of all Christian groups,

we have the least reason to be arrogant.

According to the theology
articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith,
and so ably defended by Edwards
in the book we will study,
God chooses His people
for His own pleasure,
not because of anything we do,
or think,
or believe.

So there are no grounds whatsoever for arrogance.

Why do we tend to be so arrogant?

Someone might say that we aren't really arrogant,
but that we'll just perceived to be that way,
because we acknowledge that there exists
absolute truth,
while others do not.

For some people there might be some truth there,
but its not a full explanation,
because there are plenty of people
who also acknowledge the existence
of absolute truth,
while asserting the validity
of historic Presbyterian arrogance.

I have a theory —
it might be true,
or it might not be —
that many of us,
deep down,
believe that God's choice of us
is not entirely independent of us.

That is,
there must be something special about me
that caused God to choose me
instead of someone else.

There must be something special
that caused God to let me understand truths
that He has not let some others understand.

None of us would ever say this out loud,
but I think many of us —
myself included —
act like we believe it at times.

We shouldn't of course,
as we'll emphasize throughout this class,

but I'm afraid we do.

This leads to arrogance,
which in turn leads to fighting over minor matters,
which leads to factions,
and an absurd number of different
reformed denominations.

We'll talk more about these things in the coming weeks,
but we need to move on now.

Let's wrap up this morning's session
by talking a little bit about how
I'll conduct this class.

As those of you who have been in my classes before know,
I like to stimulate discussion,
and give you all
plenty of opportunities to talk.

Because of the nature of this introductory session,
we've not had a lot of these chances today,
but we certainly will in the coming weeks.

From time to time,
you may even have assignments to do during class,
(as you've already seen)
or during the week
(as you'll see shortly).

Of course,
I have no enforcement mechanism to ensure
you do these assignments,
so whether you do them is entirely up to you.

I'll be asking you lots of questions,
but whenever you have a question of your own,
please raise your hand,
or do whatever else is necessary,
and consistent with Christian ethics,
to get my attention.

Because my goal is to stimulate your thinking,
and not to simply fill you with information,
I do not like giving out notes in advance.

But I know that a lot of you like to have notes from the teacher,
so as you've seen,
I've decided on a compromise of sorts:
I'll hand out a sheet of notes,
but these notes will be not much more
than a framework for you to use
to write your own notes.

My full notes will be available on the web
a few days after each class at
the addresses that are listed on
the outline:
<www.logicteacher.com/fotw/> &
<www.calvaryrpc.org/SundaySchool/>

If you don't have access to the web,
but you'd like copies of the notes,
please let me know,
and I'll make copies for you.

Also, because we're in the summer,
and many folks will be missing classes
from time to time,
I'll post on the web site
the audio from the most recently completed
class,
and perhaps
(space permitting)
the one before that.

I've handed out an [outline of the tentative plan for the quarter](#),
I'm not going to go over it though,
unless someone has some specific questions

This is only a tentative outline,
because I'll change it
if that's necessary to ensure
that the class is most useful to you all.

The outline tells you what sections of the book
we plan to cover each week,
and gives you the number of pages
(from the Yale Edition).

It is not strictly necessary
that you read these sections yourself,
but I do recommend that you do so,
if you have access to a copy of the book.

There are several different editions of it in print,
and I've included links to these
on the web page.

The best,
but also by far the most expensive,
is the Yale University Press edition,
which is Volume 1 in
The Works of Jonathan Edwards series.

There also some free, but incomplete,
electronic editions on the Internet;
again, links to those are on the web site.

Finally, I've created a complete PDF edition,
which I'm not going to make available on the web,
but which I can send you if you're interested.

Are there any questions or comments
before I close?

Next week,
the plan is to discuss
the use and abuse of labels,
which is the subject of Edwards' Preface.

Your assignment for the week
is to read [this preface](#),
which I've copied for you,
and handed out.

As you read it,
think about the use and abuse of labels
in our own day.

That's all for today.