

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

Use & Abuse of Labels

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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.
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<< Begin with prayer >>

This is the second
of what will eventually be 11 meetings.

Let's briefly review what we talked about last week.

First,
what are we studying?

The book *Freedom of the Will*,
and the issues it raises.

Anyone remember the full title?

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.

Who wrote it?

Jonathan Edwards

When was Edwards born, and when did he die?

Born on October 5, 1703;
died on March 22, 1758.

When did Edwards write the book?

1754.

Where was he when he wrote it?

Stockbridge, Massachusetts,
as a missionary to the Indians.

What's a brief summary of the

main thesis of the book?

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.

Why is studying Edwards' book a good idea?

I mentioned 3 reasons last week:

- (1) we should seek to understand
as much of God's truth as we can.
- (2) Edwards' book is one of the best
examinations of the subject of the will
that has ever been penned.
- (3) 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.

Are there any questions about any of this before we move on?

Your assignment for this week
was to read [the preface](#),
and
to think about
the use and abuse of labels
in our own day.

Some of you might have been thinking
"Why are we going to spend
a whole week on the preface?
That doesn't seem like
a wise use of the short time we have."

Well,
if
all
we were going to do today
was talk specifically
about Edwards' preface,

It probably wouldn't be the best use of time.

But that's not quite what we're going to do,
as you'll see as we go along.

Edwards begins the preface this way
(I'm reading from the Yale Edition —
you'll notice some minor differences from
the text that I copied for you for the assignment):

Many find much fault
with the calling professing Christians,
that differ one from another
in some matters of opinion,
by distinct names;
especially
calling them by the names
of particular men,
who have distinguished themselves
as maintainers and promoters
of those opinions:
as the calling some professing Christians
"Arminians,"
from Arminius;
others
"Arians,"
from Arius;
others
"Socinians,"
from Socinus,
and the like.

Before we go any further,
let's be sure that everyone knows
who these 3 men Edwards mentions were.

Someone tell me when Arminius lived,
and for what he's primarily known.

Jacobus Arminius was born in 1560;
he died in 1609;
so the first English settlers at Jamestown
arrived while he was still alive.

He is most well known
for his opposition to
Calvin's views concerning salvation.

In fact,
it was in response to the writings of Arminius
and his followers that the succinct summary
of the reformed view of salvation
known today as TULIP was developed.

More on that in a minute.

How about Arius,
roughly when did he live,
and for what is he known?

Arius was born around 250
and he died in 336.

He is known for denying the divinity of Jesus.

Finally, Socinus.

Faustus Socinus was born in 1539;
he died in 1604.

He is known for denying the Trinity,
and as a result is generally considered to be
the founder of Unitarianism.

Let's return for a moment to TULIP.

I'm sure most of us know what those letters stand for.

What's T?

Total depravity – the idea that every part of man's being
fell when Adam fell – there's nothing unaffected by sin,
and as a result man is unable to please
God by his own efforts.

How about U?

Unconditional election —
God chooses His children
based on His own good pleasure,
not on anything in the people.

L?

Limited atonement —
Christ died only for the sins of His people.

I?

Irresistible grace —
Those who the Holy Spirit calls to salvation
will inevitably come to salvation

P?

Perseverance of the saints —
God's children can not lose their salvation,
nor can they permanently fall away.

We'll be touching on most of these issues
as we proceed during the 11 weeks of the class.

So that's TULIP.

How many of you have ever of DAISY?

I made it up,
in an attempt to come up with a flowery
description of the Arminian view.

It stands for
 Diminished ability,
 Anticipatory election,
 Infinite atonement
 Seducing grace,
and
 Yielding of some saints.

We don't really have time this morning
to talk about this in any more detail,
but we will in the coming weeks,
and I'll mention it again briefly
this morning in a bit.

Most of the statements from the beliefs survey
that we did last week expressed either
a TULIPian view,
or a DAISYen view.

If there's time at the end I'll give you some details
about the results, but for now,
I'll simply say that
not a single person
gave the DAISYen answer for every question,
although there were several folks
who did so for at least one of the questions.

Alright,
that's enough of a diversion,
let's return to the specific subject
Edwards addressed in his preface —
using names (his word)
or labels (my word)
to identify people who have certain beliefs.

Edwards suggests that
those who find fault with this practice
do so on the basis of several objections..

What is one of the objections that he suggests?

One objection he gives is that some people
think that identifying someone

by a label associated with a particular person
suggests (quoting Edwards):
that the persons marked out by these names,
received those doctrines which they entertain,
out of regard to,
and reliance on
those men after whom they are named;
as though they made them their rule:
in the same manner,
as the followers of Christ are called “Christians”;
after his name,
whom they regard and depend upon
as their great Head and Rule.

In other words,
if I call, for example,
Annette a Calvinist,
It must mean that I think
that she believes what she believes
because that’s what John Calvin believed.

What’s the answer to this objection?

Basically,
it simply isn’t true –
that’s not what is meant by using a label.

In calling Annette a Calvinist
I’m saying nothing more than
she and Calvin share certain similar beliefs,
not that he is the cause of her beliefs.

What’s another objection that Edwards mentions?

That people will suppose
that there are greater differences
between two people
who are given different names
than actually exist.

So for example,
someone labeled a Calvinist
and someone else labeled an Arminian
may well agree about more things
than they disagree about,
but by using the labels,
we emphasize the differences,
and hide the agreements.

And not only that,
but, as Edwards suggests the objection goes,
this emphasizing the differences may well
arise from an uncharitable, narrow,
contracted spirit;

which, they say, commonly inclines
persons to confine all that is good
to themselves and their own party,
and to make a wide distinction
between themselves and others,
and stigmatize those that differ from them
with odious names.

How does Edwards respond to this objection?

First, he admits that it is plausible,
but suggests that the objection
is carried too far.

Yes,
sometimes we use labels in a derogatory way,
and with an uncharitable spirit,
but that doesn't mean that this is
the only way we use labels:

... distinguishing persons
of different opinions in religious matters,
may not imply,
nor infer any more than
that there is a difference,
and that the difference
is such as we find we have often occasion
to take notice of,
and to make mention of.

That which we have frequent occasion to speak of
(whatever it be,
that gives the occasion)
this wants a name:
and 'tis always a defect in language,
in such cases,
to be obliged to make use of a description,
instead of a name.

Despite having these reasonable answers
to the objections to using labels,
Edwards,
according to the Preface,
considered not using labels
in the book –
in particular,
he considered not using the label "Arminian".

Why did he ultimately reject this idea?

In his words:

But I soon found I should be put to great difficulty by it;
and that my discourse would be
so encumbered with

an often repeated circumlocution,
instead of a name,
which would express the thing intended,
as well and better,
that I altered my purpose.

In other words,
not using the label "Arminian"
would make the text
unnecessarily complicated
and wordy.

Think of what it must have taken
for Jonathan Edwards to consider
something unnecessarily wordy.

In summary,
Edwards acknowledges
that some people don't like the use of labels,
and that there are some potential problems
with using them;
but he believes that the advantages
outweigh the disadvantages,
so he'll use the appropriate labels,
and do so without intending
to demean anyone by the label.

To Edwards,
labels are a necessary shortcut.

Are there any questions
or comments about what Edwards says here?

Let's talk now a bit
about the use of labels today.

Edwards concentrated on labels
based on the names of people,
but I want us to broaden the scope
to include any sort of label that we use
as a shorthand to describe what
someone believes,

What are some labels that we use today,
beginning with theological matters?

<< list on the chalk board >>

How about labels that aren't necessarily directly theological?

<< list on the chalk board >>

Now,
it is quite possible to use most of these

in a legitimate way —
that is,
as a shortcut to facilitate discussion.

But it is also possible
to abuse many of these labels, too.

There are three particular
abuses of labels that I want us to consider,
although there are certainly other abuses, also.

Anyone want to suggest what one of them might be? ...

One way in which we abuse labels
is simply by **using them carelessly**.

For example,
we reformed folks have a tendency
to call anyone who doesn't subscribe
to all of TULIP
an Arminian.

But that's not an accurate label,
unless the person subscribes to all of DAISY.

And today,
not a whole lot of people subscribe
to all of DAISY.

Certainly the vast majority
of non-reformed Baptists
do not,
because they do not believe
that someone may lose his salvation:
once he becomes a believer
he's always a believer.

So at most,
they subscribe to DAIS,
and we shouldn't call them Arminian.

Another way in which abuse labels today
corresponds to one of the objections Edwards mentioned,
namely,
to demean those who do not agree with us.

Now,
as Pete mentioned in his sermon today,
talking harshly about "wolves" is OK.

That is,
it's acceptable to demean, in a sense,
those who are heretics,

those who are enemies of Christ,
just as Jesus did while he was on earth.

But far too often,
I think,
we are just as quick to speak harshly about,
and to demean
the sheep,
as we are the wolves,
simply because
some of the sheep don't agree with us
on some particular point.

One particularly egregious example of this
is the tendency of many post-millennialists
to label the views of all non post-millennialists
as "pessimistic",
even often going so far as to lump
amillennialists and pre-millennialists
into the single category of
pessi-millennialists.

Now,
doing these things may get laughter
amidst a friendly audience,
but they do nothing whatsoever
to further discussion,
because they simply demean those with different views.

Does anyone have another example
of abusive use of labels?

The third way in which we abuse labels today
is by using them,
whether intentionally or not,
to obscure the real issues.

In the example I gave earlier,
not only is the label "pessimistic" demeaning,
and in many cases, apparently intentionally so,
but it also obscures the important issue.

The issue is not pessimism versus optimism;
the issue is what the Bible teaches about the end times,
whether that teaching is
"optimistic" or "pessimistic"
according to someone's opinion
is irrelevant.

Eschatology is just one area in which this is done;
worship is another.

Please listen very carefully

to what I'm going to say now,
because if you don't,
you'll think I said something different
from what I really said.

It is fairly common to hear
proponents of the regulative principle of worship
refer to opponents of this principle
as supporting
"man-centered worship."

Doing this is clearly demeaning,
but it also suggests that the issue
is whether God or man
should be the center of worship.

And that's not the issue at all.

The issue is:
What does the Bible teach
about how worship should be conducted?

If the Bible teaches the regulative principle —
that is,
whatever is not commanded
is prohibited —
then that's what we should do.

If the Bible teaches something else —
such as,
whatever is not prohibited
is allowed —
then that's what we should do,
and that's what constitutes
"God-centered worship."

Very few opponents of the regulative principle,
and certainly no conservative, reformed opponents,
oppose it because they believe
worship should be man centered.

Rather they oppose it
because they believe the Bible does not teach it,
and if the Bible does not teach it,
then to follow it
is to follow the rules of man,
Instead of the commands of God,
and if this is true,
then the regulative principle itself
promotes
"Man-centered worship."

Proponents of the regulative principle
would do themselves,

and the Christian community,
a great service
if they would confine their arguments
to what the Bible teaches,
and stop the abusive,
and issue-muddying practice
of falsely labeling their opponents.

Please understand,
I'm not saying here
that the regulative principle is wrong;
I'm simply saying that the way
many of its proponents try to defend it
is at best, ineffective,
and at worst, outright wrong.

Calling non-regulative worship
"Man-centered"
can be a legitimate **conclusion**,
but it is not a legitimate **argument**.

Lest anyone think that I'm non-orthodox here,
let me say that I agree fully with what
WCF Chapter 21 says on this subject:

the acceptable way of worshiping the true God
is instituted by himself,
and so limited by his own revealed will,
that he may not be worshiped
according to the imaginations and devices of men,
or the suggestions of Satan,
under any visible representation,
or any other way
not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Similar sorts of things go on
in other areas, too, of course:
parenting is certainly one
In which arguments often
are little more than
abusive name-calling:
"I raise my kids God's way,
how do you raise yours?"

Let's quickly summarize what we've said this morning:

Labels are not inherently bad;
they can provide a convenient shortcut.

But we need to be careful how we use them,
lest we mislead,
or inappropriately demean others,

or obscure the real issues.

Edwards uses labels in the book,
but he is careful not to abuse them.

<< If time, talk about the results from beliefs survey:

Q1 23 more rights than wrongs

Q2 37 more rights than wrongs

Q3 39 more rights than wrongs

Q4 25 more rights than wrongs

Q5 37 more rights than wrongs

Q6 21 more rights than wrongs

Q7 29 more rights than wrongs

>>

Are there any questions
or comments
before I talk about your assignments
for next week?

Next week,
we'll try to cover all of Part I,
which is the part in which
Edwards defines the terms
that he'll use in the rest of the book.

If you have access to the book,
please read all of Part I,
which is not terribly long,
on the order of 35 pages.

Also, for next week,
please read Romans chapters 8-11.

We won't be talking about those chapters
directly next week,
but I'd like for you to read them
at least once a week
until we do.