

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

Can the Will be Self-Determining?

(Part II. Wherein It Is Considered, whether There Is, or Can Be Any Such Sort of Freedom of Will, as That wherein Arminians Place the Essence of the Liberty of All Moral Agents; and Whether Any Such Thing Ever Was, or Can Be Conceived of — Sections 1-7)

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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, copyright 1982, 1980, 1979 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

Let's begin with prayer.

This is the fourth
of what will, Lord willing,
eventually be 11 meetings.

As is my custom,
let's briefly review what
we've talked about in our previous classes.

We're studying a particular book,
which was written by a certain New England Puritan:
what's the book and who wrote it?

Freedom of the Will by Jonathan Edwards.

When was the book first published?

1754.

When was Edwards born, and when did he die?

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

Edwards was in Stockbridge, Massachusetts
when he wrote the book;
where was he before he went to Stockbridge?

Northampton, Massachusetts,

What did Edwards think about
using labels (such Arminian & Calvinist)
as a short hand to describing certain beliefs?

It is okay, so long as the labels are not abused.

We talked a bit about how labels
are sometimes used abusively today;
in particular we mentioned three ways:
What were the 3 we mentioned?

(1) Using labels carelessly,
for example calling someone an Arminian
who does subscribe to all 5 major points
of Arminian theology of salvation.

(2) Using labels to demean others.

(3) Using labels to obscure the real issues.

Last week
we discussed definitions for various
terms that are important for our subject.
In particular,
I gave you short versions
of Edwards definitions for three terms:
the will,
determining the will,
and freedom (or liberty).

What is the will?

The will is the mind choosing.

What determines the will?

The will is determined by the
motive
that is
strongest
to the mind.

What is freedom?

Freedom is
opportunity to do what you will.

As we said last week,
these aren't the only definitions Edwards gives
in Part I, but they are
the most important ones
(at least in some sense)
and all we had time
to discuss in detail
in one class anyway.

**Are there any questions
about anything we talked about in the past three weeks?**

This week we will discuss Part II, Sections 1-7.

But before we do that,
I want to take just a minute
to talk briefly about
a practical implication of the definition of

the will as the mind choosing.

How many of you have ever heard it said,
in relation to child rearing,
that one of the things that
a good Christian parent must do
is to
“break the child’s will” ?

When we remember
that
the will means “the mind choosing”
and
notice that
break means, in part,
“weaken or destroy” or
“render useless or inoperative”,
we see
what an awful phrase
it is.

God certainly does not want Christian parents
is render useless or inoperative
our children’s ability to choose!

One of the *last things* we want to do
is cause our children
to be unable to make choices.

We want to teach them
to make
wise choices,
that is choices that conform
to God’s revelation in Scripture.

To call that “breaking the will”
is, at best, nonsensical,
and, more likely,
extremely misleading
and downright dangerous.

Parents who actually set out to break the will
usually,
although not always,
end up with children
who appear to be angels
when they’re little,
but
who end up like demons
when they grow older.

Of course,
many parents who use the phrase
aren’t actually trying to do what the phrase implies;

instead they are really trying to do
what they ought to do —
teach their children to conform
their wills to God's will —
and that's good,
but it would be even better
if they'd stop using the wrong phrase
to describe their right actions.

That's my mini-tirade for the day;
now let's move on to Part II, which is titled
*Wherein It Is Considered,
whether There Is, or Can Be
Any Such Sort of Freedom of Will,
as That wherein Arminians
Place the Essence of the Liberty of All Moral Agents;
and Whether Any Such Thing Ever Was,
or Can Be Conceived of.*

Your assignment was to read
the first 7 sections of this part.

How many of you read
all 7 sections of Part II?

How many read at least one page of it?

In Part II Edwards examines
three aspects of freedom
that he asserts are included
in non-Calvinist notions of the idea.

He actually introduces these notions near
the end of Part I,
in a paragraph that I didn't quote last week.

Listen to that paragraph now.

What has been said
may be sufficient to show
what is meant by liberty,
according to the common notions of mankind,
and in the usual and primary
acceptation of the word:
but the word,
as used by Arminians,
Pelagians,
and others who oppose the Calvinists,
has an entirely different signification. —
These several things belong to their notion of liberty.

1. That it consists in
a self-determining power in the will.
Or a certain sovereignty the will has over itself

and its own acts;
whereby it determines its own volitions,
so as not to be dependent
in its determinations
on any cause without itself,
nor determined by anything prior to its own acts.

2. Indifference belongs to liberty
in their notion of it,
or that the mind,
previous to the act of volition,
be *in equilibrio*.

3. Contingence is another thing
that belongs and is essential to it;
not in the common acceptation of the word,
as that has been already explained,
but as opposed to all necessity,
or any fixed and certain connection
with some previous ground or reason of its existence.

They suppose the essence of liberty
so much to consist in these things,
that unless the will of man be free in this sense,
he has no real freedom,
how much so-ever,
he may be at liberty
to act according to his will.

What does this mean?

According to some people,
especially non-Calvinists,
man is free only if three conditions hold.

First,
his will must be able to determine itself.

Second,
he must be able to choose
even when there are no motives
on which to base the choice.

Third,
he must be able to choose
without any connection
to anything previous.

Our to be even more succinct,
the preconditions for freedom include
self-determination,
indifference, and
contingency.

In Part II,
Edwards shows the absurdity
of each of these conditions;
we'll talk about the first 2 today,
and the third one next week.

This part is the most technical
in the book,
I think,
and the most difficult to follow,
especially if you're not accustomed
to reading dense philosophical material.

Perhaps an argument can even be made
that the book might be more effective
without this part,
particularly since it is largely
devoid of explicit references to Scripture,
unlike Parts III and IV,
which are much more distinctly scriptural.

I gave some thought to skipping this Part entirely
when I was planning the class,
but I eventually decided to not skip it,
but to go through it more quickly
than some of the other parts.

If you find this Part particularly difficult
or even uninteresting,
please hang in there,
because we're only going
to spend two weeks on it.

My main motive for not skipping this part
is that I think that it provides
some examples of the application
of the principle from Proverbs 26:5 —
Answer a fool according to his folly,
Lest he be wise in his own eyes.

That is,
what Edwards does in this Part
is try to show that if we assume
that the non-Calvinist notions
of freedom are true,
we end up in contradiction
or absurdity.

This particular technique —
known to philosophers,
logicians,
and mathematicians as
reductio ad absurdum —
can be quite powerful,
and seems to be increasingly applicable today.

Let me give just one quick personal example.

There's this certain place near where I work
that has a hallway of quotes
leading to several rooms
that are used for certain types of meetings,
particularly focus groups,
brainstorming sessions,
and management get-togethers.

Most of the quotes are quite silly,
but the silliest of all is one that says,
"Everything everyone tells you is true.
They are simply explaining
their version of reality."

Once I happened to be in this hallway
near this particular quote
when one of the people who works in the place
walked by
(these people are called,
with unintentional, but delightful irony
"knowledge workers").

I said to the fellow,
pointing to the quote,
"That's false, you know."

<< pause >>

Edwards does basically the same thing in Part II,
which you can perhaps see in
his title for Section I:
Showing the manifest inconsistency
of the Arminian notion of liberty of will,
consisting in the will's
self-determining power.

After a brief introduction to the whole Part,
Edwards writes the following:

And first of all,
I shall consider the notion
of a self-determining power in the will,
wherein,
according to the Arminians,
does most essentially
consist the will's freedom;
and shall particularly inquire,
whether it be not plainly absurd,
and a manifest inconsistency,
to suppose that
the will itself determines
all the free acts of the will.

Then he immediately shows
that he's trying to be as fair as possible
to those with whom he disagrees,
by excusing their poor choice of words:

Here I shall not insist
on the great impropriety
of such phrases, and ways of speaking, as
"the will's determining itself";
because actions
are to be ascribed to agents ...
and not properly to the powers of agents.
(as we discussed at the end of class last week).

But I shall suppose
that the Arminians,
when they speak of
the will's determining itself,
do by the will mean
"the soul willing."

I shall take it for granted,
that when they speak of the will,
as the determiner,
they mean the soul
in the exercise of a power of willing,
or acting voluntarily.

I shall suppose this to be their meaning,
because nothing else can be meant,
without the grossest and plainest absurdity.

Having noted the abuse of terms,
he's going to go ahead and use those terms
in the way that they are commonly used.

I'll give Edwards' main argument
in his words,
and then we'll talk about it.

Listen closely.

... if the freedom of the will consists in this,
that it has itself and its own actions
under its command and direction,
and its own volitions are determined by itself,
it will follow,
that every free volition
arises from another antecedent volition,
directing and commanding that.

And if that directing volition be also free,
in that also the will is self-determined;
that is to say,
that directing volition
is determined by another
going before that;

and so on,
till we come to the first volition in the whole series.

And if that first volition be free,
and the will self-determined in it,
then that is determined
by another volition preceding that.

Which is a contradiction
because by the supposition,
it can have none before it,
to direct or determine it,
being the first in the train.

But if that first volition
is not determined by any preceding act of the will,
then that act is not determined by the will,
and so is not free
in the Arminian notion of freedom,
which consists
in the will's self-determination.

And if that first act of the will,
which determines and fixes
the subsequent acts,
be not free,
none of the following acts,
which are determined by it,
can be free.

Edwards repeats
this same basic argument
in several different forms in this section.

Can someone explain succinctly
what the argument is?

How about this:
... according to this notion of liberty,
the will must choose before it chooses,
in order to determine what it will choose.

That's from Edwards, too,
but from an unpublished article.

(quoted in Yale edition, p. 30, as being from "Miscellaneous Observations Concerning the Divine Decrees in General, and Election in Particular," No. 22; in Worcester ed., 5, 370-1).

This is clearly a contradiction,
so this notion of liberty cannot be correct.

Does everyone understand this argument?

If not, what part do you not understand?

Does this form of argument
remind you of anything else
that you've heard before?

It has the same form
as the "first mover" or "first cause"
style of arguments
for the existence of God.

In Section III of this part,
Edwards discusses directly these forms
of arguments for the existence of God.

We could get into a lengthy discussion
about that section,
but we're not.

Instead I'll ask you this:
Is there anything wrong
(besides its being unnecessarily wordy)
with the argument
that Edwards has given
against a self-determining will?

The answer to this question
depends on whether Edwards
has correctly defined what self-determining means.

As the editor of the Yale Edition
of *The Freedom of the Will* writes:
"Edwards succeeds in refuting self-determination
if this means that
in a *preceding* action
the soul determines to determine
or
chooses to choose.
The Arminian cannot escape by contending
that self-determinism involves
no preceding *act*,
since the only way to determine
to choose is by *acting* voluntarily."
(p. 24)

But there is a possible escape,
one which Edwards himself mentions in Section 2:

[Suppose] it should be said,
that ... there is no need
of supposing this act
to be prior to the volition determined,
but the will or soul
determines the act of the will
in willing.

It determines its own volition
in the very act of volition;
it directs and limits the act of the will,
causing it to be so and not otherwise,
in exerting the act,
without any preceding act to exert that.

He then gives 3 possible interpretations
of what this could mean.

If any should say after this manner,
they must mean one of these three things:
either,

(1.) That the determining act,
though it be before the act determined
in the order of nature,
yet is not before it in order of time.

Or, (2.)
That the determining act
is not before the act determined,
either in the order of time or nature,
nor is truly distinct from it.
But that the soul's determining the act of volition
is the same thing with its exerting the act of volition.
The mind's exerting such a particular act,
is its causing and determining the act.

Or, (3.)
That volition has no cause,
and is no effect;
but comes into existence,
with such a particular determination,
without any ground or reason
of its existence and determination.

Edwards then gives refutations
of each of these three possible meanings.

His refutation of views 1 and 3
seems beyond reproach,
but his refutation of view 2
amounts to little more than
"No! No! That just won't do."

This leads the Yale edition editor to write:
"Thus we owe to Edwards himself
the suggestion of a type of self-determination
which may be able to withstand the onslaught
of his own attack;
and which he was better able
to formulate as an objection
than his opponents were able
to advance as a contention." (p. 25)

Does this mean that Arminians are right about the will

and Calvinists wrong?

No, of course not,
it simply means that
Edwards has not succeeded
in demonstrating beyond doubt
that self-determination
is an inherently absurd notion.

This failure
doesn't mean that self-determination
is a biblical concept,
nor does it mean
that , even if it is a biblical concept,
that the Calvinist view of freedom
is wrong.

Recall that Edwards asserts
that the Arminian view of freedom
has 3 components;
self-determination is just one of the 3.

We've now covered
all that I intend to cover of the first 5 sections
of Part II.

Are there any questions or comments?

I also asked you to read sections 6 and 7
for this week.

These sections talk about the second
of the 3 components of the Arminian view of freedom,
namely, indifference.

We'll talk about this only briefly.

Edwards begins Section 6 as follows:

A great argument for self-determining power,
is the supposed experience we universally have
of an ability to determine our wills,
in cases wherein no prevailing motive is presented.

The will, as is supposed,
has its choice to make
between two or more things,
that are perfectly equal in the view of the mind;
and the will is apparently,
altogether indifferent,
and yet we find no difficulty
in coming to a choice.

The will can instantly determine itself to one,
by a sovereign power which it has over itself,
without being moved

by any preponderating inducement.

He then spends the rest of this section,
and all of section 7
arguing why this idea of indifference,
although it may have some intuitive appeal,
is nonsensical.

We'll discuss only one of his arguments,
which is actually one of the weaker ones,
but one which is probably the easiest to understand.

Edwards starts this way:

... supposing I have a chessboard before me
and because I am required by a superior,
or desired by a friend,
or on some other consideration,
I am determined to touch
some one of the spots or squares
on the board with my finger.

If there are any situations
in which the will is indifferent,
surely this is one of them:
who possibly cares which square is touched?

Edwards shows, however,
that the will cannot actually be indifferent
even in this situation —
or to be more precise,
although we may be indifferent
about the final result,
we cannot be indifferent
about each of the specific choices
necessary to produce a result.

Here are several steps of the mind proceeding
(though all may be done, as it were, in a moment).

The first step is
its general determination
that it will touch one of the squares.

The next step is
another general determination
to give itself up to accident,
in some certain way;
as to touch that which shall be most in the eye
or mind at that time,
or to some other such like accident.

The third and last step is
a particular determination
to touch a certain individual spot,
even that square,

which,
by that sort of accident
the mind has pitched upon,
has actually offered itself beyond others.

Now it is apparent that
in none of these several steps
does the mind proceed in absolute indifference,
but in each of them
[it] is influenced
by a preponderating inducement.

Edwards then explains
specifically what these inducements are.

So it is in the first step:
the mind's general determination
to touch one of the sixty-four spots.
The mind is not absolutely indifferent
whether it does so or no;
it is induced to it,
for the sake of making some experiment,
or by the desire of a friend,
or some other motive that prevails.

So it is in the second step,
the mind determining to give itself up to accident,
by touching that which shall be most in the eye,
or the idea of which shall be most prevalent
in the mind, etc.
The mind is not absolutely indifferent
whether it proceeds by this rule or no;
but chooses it,
because it appears at that time
a convenient and requisite expedient
in order to fulfill the general purpose.

And so it is in the third and last step,
which is determining to touch that individual spot
which actually does prevail in the mind's view.
The mind is not indifferent concerning this;
but is influenced
by a prevailing inducement and reason;
which is,
that this is a prosecution
of the preceding determination,
which appeared requisite,
and was fixed before in the second step.

Are there any quick questions
or comments before we end?

Next week,
we'll finish our discussion of Part II.

Please read the remaining sections of the Part,
sections 8 -13,
which will be the longest reading of the quarter.

On the course outline from week one,
I called next week's class,
"Can the Will be Indifferent?"

But what we'll really be talking about primarily will be
"Can Acts of the Will Be Contingent?"

Also please read again
Romans 8-11.