

## Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

### **Can Acts of the Will be Contingent?**

*(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 8-13)*

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**by C. Michael Holloway**

*(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 our fifth meeting.

Let's briefly review what  
we've talked about in our previous four classes.

We're studying a book by Jonathan Edwards,  
which is usually called *Freedom of the Will*,  
although its full title is some 30 words longer.

Edwards published this book  
in 1754 when he was a missionary to Indians  
in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Since we're talking about freedom of the will,  
it is important to know what we mean  
by "will" and "freedom",  
among other things.

**What is the will?**

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.

Last week  
we saw that some people believe  
that this definition for freedom  
is incomplete,  
because it leaves out 3 essential components.

What are those supposedly missing components?

Self-determination,  
indifference,  
and contingency.

We discussed the first two of these last week  
and saw that,  
at least according to Edwards,  
self-determination is self-contradictory,  
and  
indifference is impossible.

We talked about how  
Edwards' purely intellectual argument against  
self-determination was incomplete —  
in a way that he himself identified,  
although unknowingly —  
but we noted that  
we'd study in future weeks  
the Biblical argument that shows  
that the idea is false.

As for indifference  
we saw how Edwards' contrary argument  
was sufficient.

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

Before we delve into the main lesson today,  
I want to spend a couple of minutes  
talking a little more about  
a question that was raised  
at the end of class last week.

To paraphrase a bit,  
the question was this:

In criticizing the Arminian notion of the freedom of the will,  
is Edwards,  
or more importantly perhaps,  
are we,  
saying  
that Arminian theologians,  
and normal Arminians  
(who certainly make up the majority  
of professing Christians today),  
are  
somehow especially stupid?

I gave a partial answer to the question  
last week,

in which I tried to distinguish  
between theologians and normal people,  
and I think that distinction is  
generally valid,  
but it provides  
only an incomplete answer to the question..

Here's a more complete answer.

No, we are not saying that  
Arminians are especially stupid;  
instead we are saying that  
the subject of the will,  
Is one of their blind spots —  
that is,  
one of the areas in which  
the lingering effects of sin  
continues to affect their reasoning.

We all have these areas.

**We all have blind spots,**  
which is why I titled the second section  
of your outline,  
“the ubiquity of absurdity.”

Everyone of us,  
no matter how mature,  
no matter how intellectual capable,  
has areas in which our beliefs  
are absurd,  
that is,  
contrary to  
good and necessary consequence  
from the Scripture.

Think of Martin Luther,  
a remarkable man,  
blessed by God with remarkable insight  
In many areas,  
but a man who went to his grave  
not recognizing  
the inconsistency of his views on the Lord's Supper.

“This is my blood”  
must mean the wine becomes blood;  
but “I am the vine”  
doesn't make Christ a plant,  
according to Luther.

Think too of R. L. Dabney,  
another remarkable man,  
a man whose insights into education  
are quoted by millions today;  
but a man who continued to defend

southern slavery until,  
as best as I can tell,  
his death,  
not recognizing  
the inconsistency of southern slavery  
with Biblical law and principles.

The blind spots of these men are clear,  
probably to all of us;  
but we must never fail to remember  
that we have blind spots, too,  
even though we remain —  
by definition —  
blind to them.

This shouldn't keep us  
from pointing out inconsistencies  
in the beliefs of others,  
but it should keep us humble  
while we do so.

Others have errors in their thinking,  
which I can see;  
but I have errors in my own thinking,  
which I cannot see.

**Does everyone understand this?**

Let's now move on to discuss Part II, Sections 8-13.,  
We're not going to discuss everything  
in those sections, of course,  
just as we've not fully covered  
any of the previous sections either.

We will have to move quickly  
to finish all that I want to cover today.

**How many of you read all of Sections 8-13?**

**How many read at least one full section?**

**How many read at least one full sentence?**

The main objective of these sections  
is to argue against the  
idea of  
**contingency**  
being a necessary condition  
for freedom.

Edwards begins section 8 with these words:

**It is chiefly insisted on by Arminians,  
in this controversy,**

as a thing most important and essential  
in human liberty,  
that volitions,  
or the acts of the will,  
are contingent events;  
understanding contingency as opposite,  
not only to constraint,  
but to all necessity.

Therefore I would particularly consider this matter.

And, First, I would inquire,  
whether there is  
or can be  
any such thing,  
as a volition  
which is contingent in such a sense,  
as not only to come to pass  
without any necessity of constraint or coercion,  
but also without a necessity of consequence,  
or an infallible connection  
with anything foregoing.

Secondly,  
whether, if it were so,  
this would at all help the cause of liberty.

Before we look at Edwards' arguments,  
let's be sure that we understand  
what he contends that Arminian theologians  
mean by contingency.

This meaning *is not*,  
according to Edwards,  
the same as the normal meaning  
of the word,  
which Edwards described this way  
back in Part I:

Anything is said to be contingent,  
or to come to pass by chance or accident,  
in the original meaning of such words,  
when its connection  
with its causes or antecedents,  
according to the established course of things,  
is not discerned;  
and so is what  
we have no means of foreseeing.

And especially is anything said  
to be contingent, or accidental,  
with regard to us,  
when it comes to pass  
without our foreknowledge,  
and besides our design and scope.

### What's this mean?

In its normal meaning  
contingent is simply  
a synonym for accidental,  
or unforeseen.

Edwards explains  
the contrasting,  
special meaning asserted  
by some Arminian theologians this way:

But the word contingent  
is abundantly used  
in a very different sense;  
not for that whose connection  
with the series of things  
we cannot discern,  
so as to foresee the event,  
but for something which  
has absolutely no  
previous ground or reason,  
with which its existence  
has any fixed and certain connection.

### What's this mean?

Taken in this sense,  
an event is contingent  
only if it has no necessary connection  
to anything previous;  
having a connection that we do not know  
is not enough,  
rather there must  
*truly be*  
**no** connection at all.

### Does everyone understand this distinction?

Edwards gives two basic arguments  
why the special meaning given to contingency  
by Arminian theologians  
cannot be true.

In sections 8-10,  
he gives several variations of  
the first argument, which is based on his  
previous arguments against  
self-determination  
and indifference.

In sections 11 and 12,  
he gives an argument from  
God's foreknowledge.

We'll look at both of these now.

The argument from the previous discussion begins like this:

... it has been already shown,  
that nothing can ever come to pass  
without a cause, or a reason,  
why it exists in this manner  
rather than another;  
and the evidence of this  
has been particularly applied to the acts of the will.  
Now if this be so,  
it will demonstrably follow,  
that the acts of the will  
are never contingent,  
or without necessity,  
in the sense spoken of;  
inasmuch as those things which have a cause,  
or a reason of their existence,  
must be connected with their cause.

In other words,  
we've shown that  
each act of the will  
has a cause,  
and thus each act of the will  
is necessarily connected  
to something previous,  
namely its cause.

Edwards goes on  
to expound this argument in detail,  
discussing in particular  
the connection of the will with the understanding,  
and the effect of motives on the will,  
but the essence of the argument  
is what I've just read and summarized.

In addition to presenting and explaining this argument  
in sections 8-10,  
Edwards also quotes from several Arminian theologians,  
and directly refutes some of their assertions  
related to the notion of contingency,  
and also self-determination and indifference.

We'll skip all that.

Are there any questions about  
this first argument against contingency?

Let's look now at Edwards'  
second main argument.

He begins section 11 as follows:

That the acts  
of the wills of moral agents  
are not contingent events,  
in such a sense,  
as to be without all necessity,  
appears by God's certain foreknowledge  
of such events.

In handling this argument,  
I would in the first place prove,  
that God has a certain foreknowledge  
of the voluntary acts of moral agents.  
Secondly, show the consequence,  
or how it follows from hence,  
that the volitions of moral agents  
are not contingent,  
so as to be without necessity  
of connection and consequence.

He then spends the rest of section 11  
demonstrating that God does indeed  
have a certain foreknowledge of the acts of people,  
and devotes section 12  
to discussing the consequences  
of this foreknowledge.

In beginning his arguments for God's foreknowledge,  
Edwards states that he is  
supposing myself herein  
to have to do with  
such as own the truth of the Bible.

That is,  
he will assume that  
he is addressing those who believe in the Bible,  
and will argue directly from the Bible.

He then gives what he denotes as five arguments  
to show the certainty of God's foreknowledge.

Although I don't think there's anyone in here  
who denies the certainty of God's foreknowledge,  
I want us to look briefly at parts  
of two of Edwards' arguments,  
if for no other reason than  
to serve as an illustration  
of how we might argue if confronted  
with someone who denies  
God's foreknowledge.

The first argument is  
based on God's prediction of many events.

Edwards writes:

If God does not foreknow,  
he cannot foretell such events;  
that is,  
he cannot peremptorily  
and certainly foretell them.

If God has no more  
than an uncertain guess  
concerning events of this kind,  
then he can declare no more  
than an uncertain guess.

Positively to foretell  
is to profess to foreknow,  
or declare positive foreknowledge.

If God does not certainly foreknow  
the future volitions of moral agents,  
then neither can he certainly foreknow  
those events which are dependent  
on these volitions.

The existence of the one,  
depending on the existence of the other,  
the knowledge of the existence of the one  
depends on the knowledge  
of the existence of the other;  
and the one cannot be more certain than the other.

To be able to foreknow events,  
God must foreknow the choices that people will make.

Does that make sense to everyone?

Continuing in section 11,  
Edwards goes on to give a fairly extensive  
listing of various things that God predicted  
in the Scripture,  
many of which were directly,  
and clearly,  
dependent on the particular choices  
made by particular people.

To cite only one example,  
the children of Israel's  
going down into Egypt to dwell there,  
was foretold to Abraham (Gen. 15),  
which was brought about  
by the wickedness of Joseph's brethren  
in selling him,  
and the wickedness of Joseph's mistress,  
and his own signal virtue in resisting her temptation.  
The accomplishment of the thing prefigured  
in Joseph's dream,  
depended on the same moral conduct.

That's the first argument.

I want to read the second one to you in full,  
because it discusses something that I'm not sure  
many people consider.

If God does not foreknow  
the volitions of moral agents,  
then he did not foreknow  
the fall of man,  
nor of angels,  
and so could not foreknow  
the great things which are consequent on these events.  
Such as his sending his Son  
into the world to die for sinners,  
and all things pertaining  
to the great work of redemption;  
all the things which were done for  
four thousand years before Christ came,  
to prepare the way for it;  
and the incarnation,  
life,  
death,  
resurrection,  
and ascension of Christ;  
setting him at the head of the universe  
as King of heaven and earth,  
angels and men;  
and setting up his church and kingdom  
in this world,  
and appointing him the Judge of the world;  
and all that Satan should do in the world  
in opposition to the kingdom of Christ:  
and the great transactions  
of the day of judgment, etc.

And if God was thus ignorant,  
the following Scriptures,  
and others like them,  
must be without any meaning,  
or contrary to truth  
(Eph. 1:4) "According as he hath chosen us  
in him before the foundation of the world."  
(1 Pet. 1:20) "Who verily was foreordained  
before the foundation of the world."  
(2 Tim. 1:9) "who hath saved us,  
and called us with an holy calling;  
not according to our works,  
but according to his own purpose,  
and grace,  
which was given us in Christ Jesus  
before the world began."  
So (Eph. 3:11) speaking of the wisdom of God  
in the work of redemption,  
"according to the eternal purpose  
which he purposed in Christ Jesus."

(Tit. 1:2) "In hope of eternal life,  
which God that cannot lie,  
promised before the world began."  
(Rom. 8:29) "Whom he did foreknow,  
them he also did predestinate," etc.  
(1 Pet. 1:2) "Elect,  
according to the foreknowledge of God the Father."

If God did not foreknow the fall of man,  
nor the redemption by Jesus Christ,  
nor the volitions of man since the fall,  
then he did not foreknow the saints in any sense.  
Neither as particular persons,  
nor as societies or nations;  
either by election,  
or by mere foresight of their virtue or good works;  
or any foresight of anything about them  
relating to their salvation;  
or any benefit they have by Christ,  
or any manner of concern of theirs with a Redeemer.

In short,  
Edwards is saying  
that to deny God's foreknowledge  
is to deny the truth of Scripture,  
and to effectively deny  
the sufficiency of Christ.

As I said earlier,  
Edwards has more to say  
on this subject,  
but we're going to skip all that.

Any questions before we talk about  
the consequences of God's foreknowledge?

Edwards begins section 12 this way:

Having proved that God has  
a certain and infallible [foreknowledge]  
of the voluntary acts of moral agents,  
I come now, in the second place,  
to show the consequence;  
how it follows from hence,  
that these events are necessary,  
with a necessity of connection or consequence.

The chief Arminian divines,  
so far as I have had opportunity to observe,  
deny this consequence;  
and affirm,  
that if such foreknowledge be allowed,  
it is no evidence  
of any necessity

of the event foreknown.

He then makes three main observations,  
of which we'll only discuss the first and third.

The first is this:

It is very evident, that,  
with regard to a thing  
whose existence is  
infallibly and indissolubly connected  
with something,  
which already has,  
or has had existence,  
the existence of that thing is necessary. ...

What's that mean?

If one thing is definitely connected  
to another event,  
whose existence is known,  
the former thing must necessarily exist.

The third observation begins as follows:

To suppose the future volitions of moral agents  
not to be necessary events;  
or,  
which is the same thing,  
events which it is  
not impossible  
but that they  
may not  
come to pass;  
and yet to suppose  
that God certainly foreknows them,  
and knows all things;  
is to suppose God's knowledge  
to be inconsistent with itself.

For to say,  
that God certainly,  
and without all conjecture,  
knows that a thing will infallibly be,  
which at the same time  
he knows to be so contingent,  
that it may possibly not be,  
is to suppose his knowledge  
inconsistent with itself;  
or that one thing he knows,  
is utterly inconsistent  
with another thing he knows. ...

What's this mean?

If God foreknows  
that some particular event will happen,  
then it is not possible  
for that event to not happen;  
and  
if it is not possible  
for that event to not happen,  
then the event is necessary,  
and not contingent,  
and thus,  
the Arminian theologians' notion of  
contingency cannot be true.

Are they any questions or comments?

At this point in section 12,  
Edwards addresses one of the main points  
that you'll hear from Arminians —  
not just theologians,  
but normal people too — ,  
namely that foreknowledge is one thing,  
but decrees  
(or foreordination)  
are another thing altogether.

Please listen very closely  
to the following rather lengthy quote:

From what has been observed it is evident,  
that the absolute decrees of God  
are no more inconsistent with human liberty  
on account of any necessity of the event,  
which follows from such decrees,  
than  
the absolute foreknowledge of God;  
because the connection  
between the event and certain foreknowledge,  
is as infallible and indissoluble,  
as between the event and an absolute decree.

That is,  
it is no more impossible,  
that the event and decree should not agree together,  
than that the event and absolute knowledge  
should disagree.

The connection between the event and foreknowledge  
is absolutely perfect,  
by the supposition: because it is supposed,  
that the certainty and infallibility  
of the knowledge is absolutely perfect.

And it being so,  
the certainty cannot be increased;  
and therefore the connection,  
between the knowledge and thing known,  
cannot be increased;

so that if a decree  
be added to the foreknowledge,  
it does not at all increase the connection,  
or make it more infallible and indissoluble.  
If it were not so,  
the certainty of knowledge might be increased  
by the addition of a decree;  
which is contrary to the supposition,  
which is,  
that the knowledge is absolutely perfect. ...

There is as much impossibility  
but that the things which are infallibly foreknown,  
should be,  
or,  
which is the same thing,  
as great a necessity of their future existence,  
as if the event were already written down,  
and was known and read by all mankind,  
through all preceding ages.  
And there was the most indissoluble and perfect connection  
possible between the writing and the thing written.  
In such a case,  
it would be as impossible  
the event should fail of existence,  
as if it had existed already;  
and a decree  
cannot make an event surer  
or more necessary than this.

And therefore,  
if there be any such foreknowledge,  
as it has been proved there is,  
then necessity of connection and consequence  
is not at all inconsistent with any liberty  
which man, or any other creature, enjoys.

And from hence it may be inferred,  
that absolute decrees,  
which do not at all increase the necessity,  
are not inconsistent with the liberty  
which man enjoys,  
on any such account,  
as that they make  
the event decreed necessary,  
and render it utterly impossible  
but that it should come to pass.

Therefore,  
if absolute decrees are inconsistent  
with man's liberty as a moral agent,  
or his liberty in a state of probation,  
or any liberty whatsoever that he enjoys,  
it is not on account of any necessity  
which absolute decrees infer.

Do you understand what this means?

In short,  
foreordination by God  
does not in any way increase  
the necessity of events  
beyond what foreknowledge ensures;  
or to be even shorter,  
as far as necessity is concerned,  
foreordination  
and foreknowledge  
are identical.

In the rest of section 12,  
Edwards addresses some arguments  
that have been advanced  
against this assertion,  
and shows the invalidity of those arguments.

We don't have time this morning  
talking about any of that,  
nor will do we have much time  
talking about section 13,  
in which Edwards shows that  
even if the Armenian meaning was possible,  
the desired freedom of the will would not result.

I do want to read to you a little bit  
from the end of section 13, however,  
because this is another good illustration  
of Edwards dry wit,  
and of reductio ad absurdum as well.

In discussing the logical consequence  
of adopting contingency as a component of freedom,  
Edwards writes this:

Now let it be considered  
to what this brings  
the noble principle of human liberty,  
particularly when it is possessed  
and enjoyed in its perfection,  
viz. a full and perfect freedom  
and liableness to act altogether at random,  
without the least connection with,  
or restraint or government by,  
any dictate of reason,  
or anything whatsoever apprehended,  
considered, or viewed  
by the understanding;  
as being inconsistent  
with the full and perfect sovereignty  
of the will over its own determinations. —  
The notion mankind has conceived of liberty,  
is some dignity or privilege,  
something worth claiming.

But what dignity or privilege is there,  
in being given up to such a wild contingency  
as this,  
to be perfectly and constantly liable  
to act unreasonably,  
and as much without  
the guidance of understanding,  
as if we had none,  
or were as destitute of perception,  
as the smoke that is driven by the wind!

So,  
in sections 8-13,  
Edwards has shown that  
contingency,  
in the way it is defined by Arminian theologians,  
Is not a sustainable concept,  
and even if it were,  
the results would not be  
what Arminian theologians  
want it to be.

Are there any quick questions  
or comments before we end?

We will not meet for the next two weeks.

Originally, there were to be CWSC speakers  
for combined Sunday Schools both of the next 2 weeks.  
That's not going to happen next week,  
but because I've already made plans  
to be out of town,  
we still won't meet for this class;  
so you're invited  
to participate in the other class next week.

For July 13,  
there will be a CWSC speaker.

When we return on July 20,  
we'll begin our study of Part III.

If you have access to the book,  
please read Sections 1-3 of Part III,  
and as always,  
please also read  
Romans 8-11 multiple times.