

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

Yes, But ... Then Sin is God's Fault

Part IV. Wherein the chief Grounds of the Reasonings of Arminians, in Support and defense of Their Notions of Liberty, Moral Agency, etc. and against the Opposite Doctrine, Are Considered — Sections 9-13

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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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Let's begin with prayer.

This is our tenth, and next to last, meeting.

Let's quickly review some of what we've talked about during the last 9 meetings.

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

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

During our study of the book,
we've learned how Edwards defined certain terms,
such as,
the will,
determining the will,
freedom,
moral inability,
and natural inability.

Of these,
the definition of freedom
(the ability to do what you will)
is controversial,
because a number of people,
particularly, although not exclusively,
Arminian theologians and lay people,
think that the definition is incomplete,
because it does not require
self-determination,

indifference,
or contingency.

We spent several weeks seeing how Edwards' argues
against both the necessity and the coherency
of these ideas.

For the past 2 weeks,
we've been looking at Part IV of the book,
in which Edwards describes
about 10 of the common Arminian arguments
for their view on the freedom of the will,
and then refutes each of these arguments.

So far,
we've considered the arguments
claiming that the Calvinist notion of freedom
goes against common sense;
and the arguments that I grouped together
as the Doris Day (Que Sera Sera)
arguments,
which assert that Calvinism
is fatalistic by making
all effort unnecessary.

Today, we will concentrate on the argument
that Calvinism makes God the author of sin,
which I've asserted is the strongest argument
there is.

Before we do that, however,
I want to read to you some of the answers
given to folks who've done their homework.

My attempts to shame you all into action
have apparently been successful,
because more people sent me stuff this week
than in any previous week.

Those of you who still haven't tried this homework
have one more week to redeem yourselves.

Here's a sampling from what was sent to me this week:

- "Free will is a divine right given to us by God
in which God allows us to choose
and make decisions on our own
(either apart from Him or in Him),
even after salvation.
Daily, we have to 'choose' to follow Him,
or not to follow Him."
- "Free will,
(or the God given right to choose freely),
is the means by which God

uses to enter and bless our lives
because God wants
to be loved willingly and not forcefully.
Though He made us,
He did not force us to love and serve Him.”

- “Man is free to do whatever he wills.
The catch is that there are some things
he cannot will to do.
Loving God is one of them
(apart from the work of the Holy Spirit).”
- “Free will is man’s ability to make choices
because he wants to,
not because he’s driven to by instinct
or external forces.”
- “Free will is a myth that we believe
in order to make sense
out of a senseless and random world.”

Now for a rather lengthy one:

- “Free will is an endowment of human beings
(probably unique to humans)
permitting unrestricted autonomy of thought and action.
Considered in an evolutionary context,
the key distinction from lower animals
is that the latter’s behavior (and ‘thought’?)
is thought to be governed by ‘instinct’
without the element of choice or autonomy
on the part of the animal;
humans possess the capacity
to override or modulate ‘instinct.’
In a philosophical or religious context,
the key point is that the morality
of thoughts and actions (good or evil),
is under complete control of the individual.
In a less ‘academic’ sense,
I believe free will is the ultimate gift from God.
Without it, I cannot see what the purpose of life
could possibly be.
It is also the essential mystery
of human existence,
because it is the crux of the issue
that drives many people to agnosticism--
if God is good and God created us,
why does He let evil exist in the world?
For me, the answer is
that free will makes evil possible,
but without free will
life would have no enjoyment or meaning.
The price we pay for a meaningful life
is the challenge of avoiding evil

and learning to be good.”

As I've mentioned before,
we'll talk about these and other definitions
a bit next week as we wrap up the class.

For the rest of this morning,
let's turn our attention to the
“Calvinism makes God the author of sin”
argument.

Are there any questions or comments before we do so?

Edwards opens his discussion of this argument
in section 9 like this:

'Tis urged by Arminians,
that the doctrine of the necessity of men's volitions,
or their necessary connection
with antecedent events and circumstances,
makes the first cause,
and supreme orderer of all things,
the author of sin;
in that he has so constituted the state and course of things,
that sinful volitions become necessary,
in consequence of his disposal.

Dr. Whitby,
in his *Discourse on the Freedom of the Will*, [footnote]
cites one of the ancients, as on his side,
declaring that this opinion
of the necessity of the will
“absolves sinners,
as doing nothing of their own accord
which was evil,
and would cast all the blame
of all the wickedness committed in the world,
upon God, and upon his providence,
if that were admitted
by the assertors of this fate;
whether he himself did necessitate them
to do these things,
or ordered matters so,
that they should be constrained
to do them by some other cause.”

And the Doctor says, in another place, [footnote]
“In the nature of the thing,
and in the opinion of philosophers,
cause deficiens,
in rebus necessariis,
ad causam per se
efficientem reducendaest.

In things necessary,
the deficient cause must be reduced to the efficient.
And in this case the reason is evident;

because the not doing what is required,
or not avoiding what is forbidden,
being a defect,
must follow from the position
of the necessary cause
of that deficiency.”

Concerning this,
I would observe the following things.

He then goes on to discuss four main points in some detail.

Before we talk about these four points of Edwards,
let's be sure that everyone understands the argument.

Would some one explain it for us?

The Arminians claim that
the Calvinist notion of God's decrees
and the subsequent necessity of events,
means that the blame for sin
must be placed squarely and primarily on God.

Of course,
Calvinists deny that this is the case.

For example, paragraph IV of Chapter V (Of Providence)
of the Westminster Confession of Faith says this:

The almighty power,
unsearchable wisdom,
and infinite goodness of God
so far manifest themselves in his providence,
that it extendeth itself even to the first fall,
and all other sins of angels and men;
and that not by a bare permission,
but such as hath joined with it
a most wise and powerful bounding,
and otherwise ordering, and governing of them,
in a manifold dispensation,
to his own holy ends;
yet so,
as the sinfulness thereof
proceedeth only from the creature,
and not from God,
who,
being most holy and righteous,
neither is
nor can be
the author
or approver of sin.

So, that which Arminians claim we assert,
we do not assert,
but they argue that we should

if we were being consistent in our beliefs.

(As an aside,
I am aware of some groups,
which claim to be Calvinistic,
that explicitly acknowledge
God to be the author of sin,
but these groups are certainly
well out of the mainstream,
as the paragraph from the WCF shows.)

Let's now talk about the four main points
Edwards makes in refutation of the truth
of the Arminian assertion.

The first one begins like this:

I. If there be any difficulty in this matter,
it is nothing peculiar to this scheme;
it is no difficulty or disadvantage
wherein it is distinguished
from the scheme of Arminians;
and, therefore,
not reasonably objected by them.

What's this mean?

That the same objection
(it makes God the author of sin)
can be raised just as well
against the Arminian view
as against the Calvinist scheme.

Or to be even shorter,
Arminianism does not solve the problem.

Edwards explains why this is true as follows:

if it will *follow at all*,
that God is the author of sin,
from what has been supposed
of a sure and infallible connection
between antecedents and consequents,
it will *follow because of this*,
[namely] that for God to be the author or orderer
of those things which,
he knows beforehand,
will infallibly be attended
with such a consequence,
is the same thing,
in effect,
as for him to be the author of that consequence.
But, if this be so,
this is a difficulty which equally attends

the doctrine of Arminians themselves;
 at least, of those of them
 who allow God's certain foreknowledge
 of all events.

For, on the supposition of such a foreknowledge,
 this is the case with respect to every sin that is committed:
 God knew,
 that if he ordered and brought to pass
 such and such events,
 such sins would infallibly follow.

As for instance,
 God certainly foreknew,
 long before Judas was born,
 that if he ordered things so,
 that there should be such a man born,
 at such a time, and at such a place,
 and that his life should be preserved,
 and that he should,
 in divine providence,
 be led into acquaintance with Jesus;
 and that his heart should be
 so influenced by God's Spirit or providence,
 as to be inclined to be a follower of Christ;
 and that he should be one of those twelve,
 which should be chosen constantly to attend him
 as his family;
 and that his health should be preserved,
 so that he should go up to Jerusalem,
 at the last passover in Christ's life.

And it should be so ordered,
 that Judas should see Christ's kind treatment
 of the woman which anointed him at Bethany,
 and have that reproof from Christ
 which he had at that time,
 and see and hear other things
 which excited his enmity
 against his Master,
 and other circumstances should be ordered,
 as they were ordered;
 it would most certainly and infallibly follow,
 that Judas would betray his Lord,
 and would soon after hang himself,
 and die impenitent,
 and be sent to hell,
 for his horrid wickedness.

Therefore,
 this supposed difficulty ought not to be brought
 as an objection against the scheme
 which has been maintained,
 as *disagreeing* with the Arminian scheme,
 seeing 'tis no difficulty owing to such a *disagreement*,
 but a difficulty wherein the Arminians share with us.

That must be unreasonably made an objection
 against our differing from them,

which we should not escape or avoid at all
by agreeing with them.

In other words,
the Arminian scheme does not get God off the hook
any more than the Calvinist scheme does.

This is true not only about the origin of sin,
but it is equally true about
the eternal destiny of each person.

No matter how much Arminians
want to absolve God of all responsibility
for anyone going to hell,
they cannot do so.

Suppose the Arminian view of the will is true,
suppose even that all Arminian theology is true,
God is still responsible for each person's birth,
which means that He willingly creates souls
who He knows will spend eternity
in hell.

He doesn't have to create these souls,
but He does,
knowing their eternal destiny.

Does everyone understand this?

The second main point that Edwards makes
is the importance of knowing precisely
what is meant by "the author of sin."

Here's what he writes:

II. They who object,
that this doctrine makes God the author of sin,
ought distinctly to explain what they mean
by that phrase, "the author of sin."
I know the phrase, as it is commonly used,
signifies something very ill.
If by "the author of sin, be meant
the sinner, the agent, or actor of sin,
or the *doer* of a wicked thing,
so it would be a reproach and blasphemy,
to suppose God to be the author of sin.

In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin;
rejecting such an imputation on the Most High,
as what is infinitely to be abhorred;
and deny any such thing to be the consequence
of what I have laid down.

But if, by "the author of sin," is meant the permitter,
or not a hinderer of sin;
and, at the same time,
a disposer of the state of events,

in such a manner,
 for wise, holy, and most excellent ends
 and purposes,
 that sin, if it be permitted or not hindered,
 will most certainly and infallibly follow:
 I say, if this be all that is meant,
 by being the author of sin,
 I do not deny that God is the author of sin
 (though I dislike and reject the phrase,
 as that which by use and custom
 is apt to carry another sense),
 it is no reproach for the Most High
 to be thus the author of sin.
 This is not to be the actor of sin,
 but, on the contrary, of holiness.
 What God doth herein, is holy;
 and a glorious exercise of the infinite excellency
 of his nature.
 And, I don't deny,
 that God being thus the author of sin,
 follows from what I have laid down;
 and, I assert, that it equally follows
 from the doctrine which is maintained
 by most of the Arminian divines.
 That it is most certainly so,
 that God is in such a manner
 the Disposer and Orderer of Sin, is evident,
 if any credit is to be given to the Scripture;
 as well as because it is impossible,
 in the nature of things, to be otherwise.

Edwards then lists some 28 Scripture passages
 to show that this is the case:

Exo 4:21; Exo 7:2-5; Exo 9:12; Exo 10:1,2; Exo 14:4; Exo 14:8; Gen 45:5,7,8; Psa 105:17; Deu
 2:30; Jos 11:20; 2 Kin 24:20; Jer 25:9; Jer 43:10,11; Jer 27:4-6; Eze 30:24-26; Jer 51:20; Lam
 3:37; Isa 14:4-6,12; Hab 2:5-12; Jer 50 and 51; 2 Sam 16:10,11; Acts 2:23; Luke 22:21-22; Acts
 4:27,28; Acts 3:17,18; Rev 17:17; Mat 18:7; 1 Cor 11:19

He then ends this discussion with these words:

Thus it is certain and demonstrable,
 from the Holy Scriptures,
 as well as the nature of things,
 and the principles of Arminians,
 that God permits sin;
 and at the same time,
 so orders things,
 in his providence,
 that it certainly and infallibly will come to pass,
 in consequence of his permission.

What's all this mean?

God does not sin, but He permits sin as part of His plan.

Edwards then puts forth his third main point.

III. That there is a great difference
between God being concerned thus,
by his permission,
in an event and act,
which, in the inherent subject and agent of it,
is sin
(though the event will certainly follow
on his permission),
and his being concerned in it
by producing it
and exerting the act of sin;
or between his being the orderer
of its certain existence,
by not hindering it,
under certain circumstances,
and his being the proper actor or author of it,
by a positive agency or efficiency.
And this, notwithstanding what Dr. Whitby offers
about a saying of philosophers
[which we mentioned earlier].
[There is as] vast difference [as there is]
between the sun being the cause
of the lightsomeness and warmth of the atmosphere,
and the brightness of gold and diamonds,
by its presence and positive influence;
and its being the occasion
of darkness and frost,
in the night,
by its motion, whereby it descends below the horizon. The motion of the sun is the
occasion
of the latter kind of events;
but it is not the proper cause, efficient, or producer
of them;
though they are necessarily consequent
on that motion,
under such circumstances:
no more is any action
of the divine Being the cause of the evil of men's wills.
It would be strange arguing,
indeed,
because men never commit sin,
but only when God leaves them to themselves,
and necessarily sin when he does so,
that therefore their sin
is not from themselves,
but from God;
and so,
that God must be a sinful being:
as strange as it would be to argue,
because it is always dark when the sun is gone,

and never dark when the sun is present,
that therefore all darkness
is from the sun,
and that this disk and beams must needs be black.

What's this mean?

Permission of sin and production of sin are greatly different.

What do you think of the sun analogy;
is it a good one?

Not really,
because the sun is not capable of preventing darkness
when it is not around,
but God is capable of preventing sin,
but chooses not to do so.

This analogy isn't one of Edwards' finer moments.

He returns to form with his fourth point, which begins like this:

IV. It properly belongs
to the supreme and absolute Governor of the universe,
to order all important events within his dominion,
by his wisdom:
but the events in the moral world
are of the most important kind;
such as the moral actions
of intelligent creatures,
and their consequences.

These events will be ordered by something.
They will either be disposed by wisdom,
or they will be disposed by chance;
that is, they will be disposed
by blind and undesigning causes,
if that were possible,
and could be called a disposal.

Is it not better,
that the good and evil which happen in God's world,
should be ordered, regulated, bounded,
and determined by the good pleasure
of an infinitely wise Being,
who perfectly comprehends
within his understanding and constant view,
the universality of things,
in all their extent and duration,
and sees all the influence of every event,
with respect to every individual thing
and circumstance,
throughout the grand system,
and the whole of the eternal series of consequences;
than to leave these things to fall out by chance,
and to be determined by those causes

which have no understanding or aim?

What's this mean?

God being in control
is far better than the alternatives,
even if we don't understand everything
about how He exercises his control,
but that's not the main point, quite yet.

Here's some more from Edwards on this subject.

... God may be,
in the manner which has been described,
the Orderer and Disposer of that event,
which, in the inherent subject and agent,
is moral evil;
and yet his so doing may be no moral evil.

He may will the disposal of such an event,
and its coming to pass for good ends,
and his will not be an immoral or sinful will,
but a perfect, holy will.

And he may actually, in his providence,
so dispose and permit things,
that the event may be
certainly and infallibly connected
with such disposal and permission,
and his act therein not be
an immoral or unholy,
but a perfectly holy act.

Sin may be an evil thing,
and yet that there should be
such a disposal and permission,
as that it should come to pass,
may be a good thing.

He then mentions
some things that happened to
Joseph & Jesus as specific examples.

Edwards follows this discussion with
one of the best passages in the whole book
(emphasis is mine):

I believe,
there is no person of good understanding,
who will venture to say,
he is certain
that it is impossible
it should be best,
taking in the whole compass and extent of existence,
and all consequences
in the endless series of events,
that there should be
such a thing

as moral evil in the world.
And, if so, it will certainly follow,
that an infinitely wise Being,
who always chooses what is best,
must choose that there should be such a thing.
And if so,
then such a choice is not evil,
but a wise and holy choice.
And if so,
then that providence,
which is agreeable to such a choice,
is a wise and holy providence.
Men do will sin as sin,
and so are the authors and actors of it:
they love it as sin,
and for evil ends and purposes.
God does not will sin as sin,
or for the sake of anything evil;
though it be his pleasure
so to order things,
that, he permitting, sin will come to pass,
for the sake of the great good
that by his disposal
shall be the consequence.

What's this mean?

**Because God always does what is best,
it must be better for sin to exist
than to not exist.**

That's not something that's easy to understand,
but it is certainly true;
otherwise, God would not be perfect.

Perhaps even more difficult to understand
is Adam's initial sin.

Here's a little bit of what Edwards writes about that first sin.

Nothing that the Arminians say,
about the contingency,
or self-determining power of man's will,
can serve to explain,
with less difficulty,
how the first sinful volition of mankind
could take place,
and man be justly charged with the blame of it.
To say,
the will was self-determined,
or determined by free choice,
in that sinful volition —
which is to say,

that the first sinful volition
 was determined by
 a foregoing sinful volition —
 is no solution of the difficulty.

It is an odd way of solving difficulties,
 to advance greater, in order to it.
 To say, two and two make nine,
 or, that a child begat his father,
 solves no difficulty:
 no more does it, to say,
 the first sinful act of choice
 was before
 the first sinful act of choice,
 and chose and determined it,
 and brought it to pass.

Nor is it any better solution, to say,
 the first sinful volition arose accidentally,
 without any cause at all;
 any more than it will solve that difficult question,
 How the world could be made out of nothing?
 to say, it came into being out of nothing,
 without any cause;
 as has been already observed.

And if we should allow,
 that the first evil volition should arise by perfect accident,
 without any cause;
 it would relieve no difficulty,
 about God laying the blame of it to man.

For how was man to blame for perfect accident,
 which had no cause,
 and which, therefore,
 he was not the cause of,
 any more than if it came by some external cause?

— Such kind of solutions are no better,
 than if some person,
 going about to solve
 some of the strange mathematical paradoxes,
 about infinitely great and small quantities —
 as, that some infinitely small quantities,
 are infinitely less than others,
 which yet are infinitely little —
 should say,
 that mankind have been under a mistake,
 in supposing a greater quantity
 to exceed a smaller;
 and that a hundred, multiplied by ten,
 makes but a single unit.

What's this mean?

How Adam came to sin
 is no less a problem for Arminians
 than it is for Calvinists.

This is the great mystery of Christianity,
a mystery that I do not think we will solve in this life.
On this point,
we must rest in Scripture,
knowing that God is perfectly wise,
and perfectly holy,
and that everything —
even Adam's sin —
is part of His great plan.

There's certainly more that can be discussed
about the subject —
perhaps one day I'll be able to lead a class
on Edwards' book, *Original Sin* —
but full understanding will not come even then.

God has given us a great capacity
to understand much about His truths and His ways,
but He has reserved some things to Himself,
and we do not promote truth,
nor bring glory to God,
if we refuse to believe
His revelation
because we do not understand it.

Any questions or comments?

Next week is our last class.

Please finish reading the book,
if you've been reading it;
continue the reading in Romans,
and ask people to define "free will"
if you've not already done so.