

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will
Implications & Speculations

Conclusion

24 August 2003

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.

Well, this is our eleventh and last meeting;
this class may be a bit disjointed,
because there are several different
things I want to cover as we wrap up.

We've covered quite a bit of ground
in the past 10 classes,
as we've gone through
Jonathan Edwards' classic book,
Freedom of the Will.

The only section we have left to cover
is the conclusion,
which in some editions
is labeled section 14 of part IV,
while in others it is labeled
simply *Conclusion*.

Before we talk about that section, however,
let's review very briefly
some from our past classes.

When did Edwards publish the book? 1754

What was the question he answered in the preface?

Whether using labels, such as Arminian & Calvinist, is OK.

In Part I, what did Edwards primarily do?

Give definitions for various terms and phrases

What was his definition for the will?

The mind choosing

What is, according to Edwards, necessary for freedom?

The ability to do what you want to do.

Is this all that everyone thinks is necessary

for the will to be free?

No, many others think
that there are additional necessary attributes,
particularly
self-determination,
indifference,
and contingency.

What does Edwards primarily do in Part II?

Show that these additional attributes
do not make sense.

What does he do in Part III?

Show that these attributes
are not necessary to give legitimacy
to concepts such as
reward and punishment.

Finally, what does he primarily do in Part IV?

Enumerate and refute
various arguments given by Arminians
in support of their notion
of the freedom of the will.

In the final several pages of the book,
Edwards attempts to show
how the issue of the freedom of the will
lies at the root
of the disagreements
between Calvinists and Arminians;
in doing so,
he discusses briefly
how a proper understanding of the will
helps to lead to a proper understanding
of the "five points of Calvinism."

Before all that, however,
Edwards begins the concluding section
by speculating about how others
are likely to treat the arguments in the book.

WHETHER the things which have been alleged,
are liable to any tolerable answer in the way of calm,
intelligible, and strict reasoning,
I must leave others to judge:
but I am sensible
they are liable to one sort of answer.

It is not unlikely that some ...
will have their indignation and disdain raised

at the sight of this discourse,
and on perceiving what things
are pretended to be proved in it.
And if they think it worthy of being read,
or of so much notice as to say much about it,
they may probably renew the usual exclamations,
with additional vehemence and contempt,
about the fate of the heathen,
Hobbes's necessity,
and making men mere machines.

....

Or difficulties may be stated and insisted on,
which do not belong to the controversy;
because, let them be more or less real,
and hard to be resolved,
they are not what are owing
to anything distinguishing of this scheme,
from that of the Arminians,
and would not be removed nor diminished
by renouncing the former,
and adhering to the latter.
Or some particular things may be picked out,
which they may think
will sound harshest in the ears of the generality;
and these may be glossed and descanted on,
with tart and contemptuous words;
and from thence,
the whole discourse
may be treated
with triumph and insult.

Surely,
this is quite an accurate description
of much of what has been said and written
about the book and its arguments
by Arminians through the years.

Often the only arguments
given against the Edwardsian view
reduce to little more than
abusive name calling.

Sadly, however,
Calvinists seem no less prone
to this degenerate form of argument.

If anything,
we're probably worse,
since we tend to heap abuse
not only on Arminians,
but also on fellow Calvinists,
who differ from us on
any issue we think is important,
no matter how small it may be.

As I said earlier,
Edwards main purpose in the conclusion
is to discuss how the issue
of the freedom of the will
lies at the root of the disagreements
between Arminians and Calvinists.

We won't spend a lot of time on this,
because we have some other topics to cover
but I will read some brief excerpts,
and I'll also relate these
to the beliefs survey we did in week 1.

Edwards begins his discussion as follows:

It is easy to see,
how the decision of most of the points
in controversy between Calvinists and Arminians,
depends on the determination
of this grand article concerning
the freedom of the will
requisite to moral agency;
and that by clearing and establishing
the Calvinistic doctrine in this point,
the chief arguments are obviated,
by which Arminian doctrines in general
are supported,
and the contrary doctrines demonstratively confirmed.

He then goes on to discuss briefly
each of the so-called "Five Points of Calvinism";
we'll look quickly at three of these:
total depravity,
unconditional election,
and limited atonement.

The things which have been said,
obviate some of the chief objections of Arminians
against the Calvinistic doctrine
of the total depravity and corruption of man's nature,
whereby his heart is wholly
under the power of sin,
and he is utterly unable,
without the interposition of sovereign grace,
savingly to love God,
believe in Christ,
or do anything that is truly good
and acceptable in God's sight.

We've discussed this previously
in relation to the beliefs survey we did the first week,
showing how the Edwardsian answers to
questions 1 and 3 are

1.B To have faith, one must first be born again (regenerated).

3.B Without God's direct intervention, every person would certainly reject Christ.

These truths also lead
to the correct answer to question 7

7.A Everyone deserves an opportunity
to hear and respond to the Gospel.

or

**7.B No one deserves an opportunity
to hear and respond to the Gospel.**

I think it also gives the answer to 6,
although this one is perhaps a tad
more speculative than the rest:

6.A Sinning stops at death for everyone.

or

**6.B Sinning stops at death
only for God's people;
souls in hell continue to sin.**

In other works,
Edwards talks about this particular issue
in more detail;
it is a fascinating discussion,
but one we'll have to leave for the future.

Now, a good case can
be made a resolution of the issue of total depravity
leading to resolution of all the other doctrines,
including the freedom of the will;
in other words, rather than starting with the will,
and going to the other doctrines,
we could start with total depravity
and get to the others.

That doesn't mean that Edwards is wrong,
but only that there are probably multiple starting points.

Here's some more from Edwards about
how resolution of the issues regarding the will
help to resolve other differences
between Arminians and Calvinists:

The things which have been said,
do likewise answer the chief objections
against the doctrine of God's
universal and absolute decree,
and afford infallible proof of this doctrine;
and of the doctrine of absolute,
eternal,

personal election in particular.

From the beliefs survey,
this was illustrated in question 2:

- 2.A God chose for salvation those whom He was pleased to choose.**
or
2.B God chose for salvation those whose eventual faith He foresaw.

Question 5 also is related in some ways to this one:

- 5.A Unless a man's will is free,
he cannot justly be held responsible for his actions.
or
**5.B God justly determines the conditions
for holding a man responsible for his actions.**

The final quote I'll read from Edwards
on this general subject is this:

From these things it will inevitably follow,
that however Christ in some sense
may be said to die for all,
and to redeem all visible Christians,
yea, the whole world, by his death;
yet there must be
something particular
in the design of his death,
with respect to such
as he intended should
actually be saved thereby.
As appears by what has been now shown,
God has the actual salvation or redemption
of a certain number in his proper absolute design,
and of a certain number only;
and therefore such a design
only can be prosecuted
in anything God does,
in order to the salvation of men.

Question 4 on the beliefs survey addressed this point:

- 4.A On the cross, Jesus bore the sins of His people alone.**
or
4.B On the cross, Jesus bore the sins of everyone, including those who reject Him.

Except for a final quote at the end of the class
that's all I want to talk about directly
from Edwards' conclusion;
for the rest of the class,
I want to talk about
what I've called on your handout,
'Free will' today.

Before we do that, however,
does anyone have a question,
comment?

At the time Edwards' wrote *Freedom of the Will*,
Arminian notions were just beginning
to find a following in America;
a large majority of professing Christians
in the colonies were Calvinists.

This is certainly no longer the case;
now a days, Calvinists make up
only a small minority of professing Christians
in this country,
and the situation probably
isn't substantially different
across the world.

We could spend a great deal of time
discussing why this happened,
but we won't,
except that I'll say that
I believe a very strong case can be made
that the single greatest contributing factor
to the decline of Calvinism in the U.S.
was the widespread belief
in the presumptive regeneration
of believers' children,
an erroneous belief
that came to dominate
within many Calvinist churches.

Sadly in our day,
this error is making a come back,
and is being proclaimed
in respected reformed circles today.

But that's just an aside,
what I want to do now is
talk a bit about the results
from your homework to ask folks to define 'free will'.

If you recall when I first announced the homework,
I told you that I had two hypotheses
about modern notions of free will
that I wanted to try out.

At the time,
I didn't tell you what those hypotheses were;
both are partially written on your handout now.

The first hypothesis is this:
**Edwards' definition of freedom
covers many people's
stated definitions today.**

Recall these definitions submitted by folks ...

“Free will is a divine right given to us by God
in which God allows us to choose
and make decisions on our own ... “

“Free will is the God given right to choose freely”

“Man is free to do whatever he wills”

“Free will is man's ability to make choices
because he wants to”

“The ability to choose without coercion”

“Ability to make decisions on our own”

“Free will is the process of volition
that allows multiple courses of actions
to be considered and evaluated
and one selected”

“Free will is the ability to choose
according to rational thought.”

“Free will is the ability to make my own choices”

Everyone of these is consistent with Edwards' definition:
“Freedom is the ability to choose what you want.”

Now,
not many of the people who gave these definitions
intend to be consistent with Edwards,
because many of them are
clearly non-Calvinists
based on additional things they said.

Despite this,,
I think nearly everyone would answer, “yes”
to this question:
“If you are able to choose
what you want to choose
is your will free?”

Certainly,
anyone I've ever talked to about the subject
has answered affirmatively to this question,
or some equivalent variation of it.

Since many of these people
are adamantly anti-Calvinist,
why is it that they concur
with a Calvinist definition of free will?

Consider how people would answer
a follow-up question:
“Suppose there are constraints
on what you are able to want,
are you still free?”

The answer from most would be “No.”

In other words,
as my second hypothesis states:
**When people talk in terms of
unrestricted choices,
they are assuming they already have
unrestricted affections.**

If the affections are unrestricted,
then the will must also be unrestricted,
or otherwise we are not free to choose
what we want to choose.

It seems to me that most people today,
and perhaps most people throughout the ages,
think that Calvinists assert
that God’s predestination of the elect
means that someone who is not elect
cannot come to Christ,
even if he desperately
wants to,
with every fiber of his being.

That’s not what we assert, of course,
but that’s what people think we assert,
at least it seems so to me;
certainly in conversations that I’ve had
with professed anti-Calvinists,
beliefs like this are usually expressed.

So, I’m inclined to think,
that in our day at least,
that the main issue is not the will,
but rather the affections —
that is,
not what can I *choose*,
but rather,
what can I *want*.

Many people today will agree with Edwards
about the will being determined
by the strongest motive.
What they will not agree with Edwards about
is the impossibility
of that strongest motive ever being
to love and obey God,
without God’s supernatural intervention

in the soul.

Perhaps if Jonathan Edwards were writing today,
his book would have
the shortened title of
Freedom of the Affections.

Does this make sense to you,
any questions or comments?

Let's speculate a bit now
about what all this might mean
for how we approach
talking to others about these issues.

I'll begin the discussion by quoting
from the beginning of paragraph 8 of chapter 3
of the Westminster Confession of Faith:
"The doctrine of this
high mystery of predestination
is to be handled
with special prudence and care ... "

We need to be careful to heed this warning.

Much harm can be done
by forcing unwilling folks
into discussions about predestination
or free will,
whether those folks be believers
or unbelievers.

Perhaps some of you who didn't do the homework
didn't do so because
you didn't know how to do it
without forcing just such
an unwanted discussion
on others;
in which case,
you did well
to **not** complete the homework.

What are some other aspects
of prudence and care
besides not forcing the discussion on someone?

For a second characteristic we should exhibit,
I'll remind you of some of the discussion we had
the first week.

You may recall that we talked a bit about
historic Presbyterian arrogance.

It is one of the great ironies of history —

one of those things about which I often think
I want to ask God when I get to heaven —
that Calvinists tend to be on the whole
quite arrogant,
despite the fact
that our claimed theology
should drive us to deep humility.

Although we claim to believe
that there is nothing good in ourselves apart from Christ,
we often act as though
our nothing is a bit better than
the nothing of others,
who don't believe what we believe.

In this, we're like Winston Churchill
(some of you who know me well
have probably been wondering
when I'd get a Churchill quote in somewhere),
who once wrote:
"We are all worms.
But I do believe I am a glowworm."

Well,
when we're feeling like glowworms
is no time to be talking with others
about the freedom of the will,
or any other subject for that matter.

Suppose, however,
that you do have a humble attitude,
and there's someone who is interested
in talking with you about the subjects
we've been talking about in this class,
then I'll offer two suggestions.

The first suggestion
is to ask questions
rather than making statements.

Exactly what questions to ask
depends on many things,
including your relationship with the person,
what you know of his beliefs,
the circumstances of the conversation,
and lots of other things, too;
but here are some questions
that might be appropriate for
some circumstances.

Two that we've already mentioned:

"If you are able to choose
what you want to choose

is your will free?"

and

"Suppose there are constraints
on what you are able to want,
are you still free?"

Some others:

"What caused you to trust in Christ?"

"Why do you believe in Christ,
but [your brother] doesn't.?"

"Is God free to do what He wants?"

"Is God free to want anything at all?"

"Is there anything that God does not know?"

"Can God's plans be thwarted?"

"Why did God choose to make Israel His people?"

The second suggestion

is to encourage the person you're talking with
to read Romans through multiple times,
preferably the whole book,
but at least Romans 8-11.

I urge you strongly to resist the urge
to tell the person to read Romans 9 alone.
Romans 9 is, of course,
the chapter in which Paul
most directly discusses the relevant issues,
but it is best read, I think,
within the context of the wider discussion.

If we had more time
we would talk more about the dangers of "proof-texting"
and the importance of context,
but time is nearly up.

As we wrap up this class,
I thank you for your attention and participation
during these 3 months;
I've very much enjoyed
leading the class.

I'll end by quoting to you,
Jonathan Edwards' words
as he closed *The Freedom of the Will*,

with the slight alteration of
changing the translation
for the Scripture passages to NKJV.

The truth of the case is,
that if the Scripture plainly taught
the opposite doctrines to those
that are so much stumbled at,
[that is, if it taught]
the Arminian doctrine of free will,
and others depending thereon,
it would be the greatest of all difficulties
that attend the Scriptures,
incomparably greater than its containing any,
even the most mysterious,
of those doctrines of the first reformers,
which our late freethinkers have so superciliously exploded.
Indeed, it is a glorious argument
of the divinity of the Holy Scriptures,
that they teach such doctrines,
which in one age and another,
through the blindness of men's minds,
and strong prejudices of their hearts,
are rejected,
as most absurd and unreasonable,
by the wise and great men of the world;
which yet,
when they are
most carefully and strictly examined,
appear to be exactly agreeable
to the most demonstrable,
certain,
and natural dictates of reason.

By such things,
it appears that
"the foolishness of God is wiser than men."

(1 Cor 1:19-20)

For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing
the understanding of the prudent."

Where is the wise?

Where is the scribe?

Where is the disputer of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

And as it was in time past,
so probably it will be in time to come,
as it is also written:

(1 Cor 1:27-29)

"God has chosen
the foolish things of the world

to put to shame the wise,
and God has chosen
the weak things of the world
to put to shame the things which are might;
and the base things of the world
and the things which are despised
God has chosen,
and the things which are not,
to bring to nothing the things that are,
that no flesh should glory in His presence.”

Amen.