

## **The Freedom of the Will and its Limitations**

A Comparison of  
Jonathan Edwards and Martin Luther

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### **Introduction**

When God created man, he created him upright as an image bearer of Himself. Man as an image bearer means that he has a personality—affections,

understanding, a conscience, and a will, which by nature is free. Prior to the fall, these aspects of his image were to be used to glorify God. His actions were not externally forced, but freely flowed out of the character of the first man and woman. The image of God is two-fold: there is the inherent part that is not able to be lost (i.e. affections, understanding, a conscience, and a will) and there is the holiness, righteous, or the ethical part that can be lost. Even after the fall, man is still in the image of God, for he still possesses the inherent aspect (Genesis 9:6). After Adam's rebellion, the ethical aspect of the image was lost, which resulted in a bias to moral truth. What specific impact does this have on man's will? Is the will still free and capable of doing good? Or is the will a slave to sin? This paper will look at these questions as it compares the writings of Jonathan Edwards and Martin Luther on the topic.

## **Jonathan Edwards**

### **Introduction**

Jonathan Edwards is considered to be one of America's most brilliant minds by both secular scholars and religious evangelicals. In 1727, Edwards became the assistant pastor to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in Northampton, Massachusetts. He saw Northampton as spiritually dull and Arminianism was being spread through the region. In 1729, his grandfather died and he succeeded him as pastor. He preached five sermons on justification by faith alone to combat these obstacles which resulted in a revival. He continued his ministry in Northampton until a controversy occurred, which ended in his removal from that pastorship. He preached good theology and spoke against the false, and he fought dead orthodoxy by talking about the Christian experience, though not at the expense of good theology. He confronted Enlightenment ideas of self-interest from an ethical basis and insisted on true godly virtue. He spoke of seeking God's interests first by confronting false ideology and preaching truth as it addresses the heart.

### **Man Was Created Upright**

Edwards claimed that man was created upright in the image of God and proceeded from "the eternal, immutable, unchangeable, perfect being of God Himself" (Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. II, Page 237). Man, having been created in the image of God, possessed a moral image which was lost in the fall. After the fall, man still possessed the image of God. Man was created body and soul, with the soul possessing both understanding and a will (Schreiner, Page 291).

Having been created good makes one wonder how man could have become sinful. Many claim that man by his free will chose to rebel against God, and that

is why he is a sinner. This ideology is correct, but it is far from demonstrating why man rebelled in the first place. Edwards addresses this issue in his "Miscellanies," for he writes:

If it be enquired how man came to sin seeing he had no sinful inclinations in him except God took away his grace from him that he had been wont to give him and so let him fall I answer there was no need of taking away any thing that had been given him, but he sin'd under that temptation because God did not give him more. He did not take away that grace from him while he was perfectly innocent which grace was his original righteousness, but he only withheld his confirming grace given now in heaven grace as shall surmount every temptation... (Miscellany 290).

Gerstner points out that there are problems with this explanation. Edwards states that God "did not have to take away that grace...original righteousness, but he only withheld confirming grace." In other words, God did not give Adam more grace to sustain him from falling. Gerstner says that God was willing to give this grace to Adam if he had asked, but this is the issue—man did not trust God and ask for more grace. Gerstner explains, "Edwards was saying that man did not meet the temptation not to ask for more because God 'did not give him more.' That is, man needed more grace to ask for more" (Gerstner, *Mini-Theology*, Page 36). The grace Adam had was inadequate to give him the grace to ask for the grace to sustain him in temptation. God did not create man fallen, but Edwards believed that man was created "almost fallen" (Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. II, Page 237).

### **Sin Was Not Without an Effect**

Prior to the fall, man's understanding and will was undefiled and his reason ruled his will; after the fall, man's understanding and will were defiled and therefore his will was ruled by his reason that was now infected with sin. Edwards held that all men are born with original sin, which he defines as the "innate sinful depravity of the heart." Original sin has two aspects according to Edwards. The first aspect is that human nature is depraved. In the disposition of the heart lies all uprightness or wickedness of all moral qualities. Edwards points out that the heart has a "true tendency" that proceeds from its disposition. Edwards concludes that fallen man has a natural inclination to sin; this 'tendency' is natural to the "natural man." For Edwards says:

...if there be any thing in the nature of man whereby he has an universal unfailing tendency to that moral evil which, according to the real nature and true demerit of things as there are in themselves, implies his utter ruin, that must be looked upon as an evil tendency or propensity (Winslow, Page 227).

The heart has a moral depravity and therefore man has a tendency to sin. "Then may it be said, man's nature or state is attended with a pernicious or destructive tendency in a moral sense" (Winslow, Page 228).

The second effect of original sin is the imputation of Adam's sin to all his progeny. Edwards uses many passages of Scripture to support this doctrine of the universal sinfulness of mankind. Biblical support for this is Romans 3:10-18, which states that no one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks God, and that all have turned away, and no one does good, and etc. Edwards concludes that this sinful tendency of mankind is given to him from the imputation of Adam's sin to the entire human race.

Edwards illustrates original sin and its impact on the human will. He writes, "At the very same time that wicked men are tempted to commit some sin, and their reason tells them that it will expose them to the eternal wrath of God, and that it will therefore be a dreadful folly for them to do it, yet they will do it" (Winslow, Page 245). And he continues saying that many may wish to be converted and "pray to God to convert them, and seek for conversion," but when conversion is offered to them they are not willing to come "for they love their sins too well" (Winslow, Page 246). And regarding Christ he writes, "At the same time the natural man seem to wish, and pray, to strive to come to Christ, they are in their hearts bitter enemies to Him; and there is no such thing as a sincere willingness to accept of one towards whom at the same time we are bitter enemies" (Winslow, Page 247). In the next section, what determines one's own choices will be discussed.

### **Motivation of the Will**

In Edwards' discussion on the freedom of the will, he describes how the will determines what it desires. He writes, "By 'determining of the will,' if the phrase be used with any meaning, must be intended, causing that the act of the will or choice should be thus, and not otherwise: and the will is said to be determined, when, in consequence of some action, or influence, its choice is directed to, and fixed upon a particular object" (Sproul, Page 158). The will determines its choices not based on an "indifferent will." "To talk of the determination of the will, supposes an effect, which must have a cause," says Edwards. He continues, "If the will be determined, there is a determiner. This must be supposed to be intended even by them that say, the will determines itself. If it be so, the will is both determiner and determined; it is a cause that acts and produces effects upon itself, and is the object of its own influence and action" (Ibid.). According to Edwards, this principle is that for every cause there is an effect and vice versa. The will is the determiner in the sense that it makes choices, but it is determined in the sense that the will makes choices that are grounded and influenced by the strongest motive in the mind of at that time.

Man was created as a dichotomy of both body and soul. The soul is also a dichotomy of understanding and will. Edwards defined the will as “that which the mind chooses to any thing” (Winslow, Page 197). For Edwards, the will does not choose to do or not do something, but rather it is the faculty of the mind. The choices that one makes are decided by what one *thinks* is best. Since the mind makes choices, an exercise of the will is the same as an exercise of choice. Edwards says that it is the result of motive that determines the will. By motive, Edwards explains “the whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things conjunctly” (Winslow, Page 201). Motive may be influenced by only one thing or by many. Edwards speaks of those weaker and stronger motives. Weaker motives are those things that have a lower degree of moving the will to volition, and stronger motives are those things that have a higher degree to move the will to action. The thing that has the highest degree to move the will or induce choice is the strongest motive. Edwards writes, “...the will is always determined by the strongest motive” (Winslow, Page 202-203). Choices that are made are always based on what seems best to the person. The individual makes those choices that are based on certain notions, concerns or interests that are weighty and give him incentive as is befitting to him. Choices are always rooted in the weight of all competing possibilities, and that which seems best to the individual is what motivates the will to volition. When Edwards speaks of the “strongest motive” it is that which seems best to the understanding of the person. This motive that seems best to the mind is in no way ‘good’ in a truly ‘good’ and pleasing way to God, since we are most pleased by doing what is not moral. Our depraved hearts have the inclination to sin, which is affecting the choices of the will. Sproul makes the point that “volition acts according to that which appears most agreeable to the person. That which is most pleasing may be deemed as pleasure. What entices fallen man to sin is the desire for some perceived pleasure” (Sproul, Page 160).

### **Moral Necessity and Moral Inability**

Edwards also speaks of a moral necessity and inability. Moral necessity, as defined by Edwards is “the necessity of connection and consequence, which arises from such moral causes, as the inclination, or motives, and the connection which there is in many cases between these, and such certain volitions and actions” (Winslow, Page 213). Moral necessity is the habits and dispositions, inclinations and motives of the heart that lead to volition. Moral inability consists of the “want of inclination” or the “strength of a contrary inclination” or the “want of sufficient motive” to push the will to act (Winslow, Page 216). This means that one cannot will that which is contrary to one own heart’s inclination.

How does this apply to fallen man and what is the impact on the human will? Edwards spoke of man having a moral necessity that reflects the condition of the heart by its choices. But man’s moral inability is his lack of sufficient motive or inclination to will morally good thoughts, behavior or words. He illustrates this by

many examples. He says: a woman who has high morals will not prostitute herself; a child who loves his father cannot come to kill his father; or a drunk who is unable to restrain from drinking (Winslow, Page 216). With a moral inability, man is not truly free even though the will always acts freely to choose for itself according to the strongest motive or inclination. The will is free to choose according to its strongest inclination, but not against it. The will cannot choose what it does not desire to choose. In a sense the will is free, but in another sense it is not.

### **The Need for the Holy Spirit**

Edwards held that if man were to change in his motivation towards the good, it would be a work of God. When the Holy Spirit resides in a person, repentance—a change of mind—takes place. To Edwards, conversion was a turning to God from sin, which he also attributed to the work of God alone, but man could not will himself to such an act (Gerstner, *Mini-Theology*, Pages 61-62). This change of mind is willing to do good because “those controlled by the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires” (Romans 8:8).

### **Conclusion**

Edwards held that because of original sin, man’s inclinations are bent towards sin, and man cannot of his own free choice, choose what is contrary to his desires. Sinful man desires sin. Romans 8 tells us that “those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires” and that “the sinful mind is death...the sinful mind is hostile (enmity) to God. It does not submit to God’s law nor can it do so.” This passage describes the inability of the fallen human will to choose good, and it does speak of the ability to choose; its choices are always evil. The will of man is free to choose according to its own inclinations and when those inclinations are sinful and depraved, the will cannot choose contrary to itself and therefore choose good, but only more wickedness. So the will is not free in the absolute sense to choose equally good or evil, but only according to its ability.

It must be pointed out that the condition of the natural man is hopeless in himself. For salvation is of the Lord and man is dependent on God’s grace for salvation. For unless man is filled by God’s Holy Spirit to change his inclinations, he will never choose Godliness, but when God does fill one with His Spirit, he will always choose God in regard to salvation because his nature is changed. Boice uses an illustration to explain this point of which we will now turn:

In the animal world there are animals which eat nothing but meat: carnivores. There are other animals which eat nothing but grass or plants: herbivores. Imagine then that we have a lion, who is a

carnivore, and place a beautiful bundle of hay or a trough of oats before him. He will not eat the hay or oats. Why not? Is it because he is physically unable? No. Physically, he could easily begin to munch on this food and swallow it. Then why does he not eat it? The answer is that it is not in his nature to do so. Moreover, if it were possible to ask the lion why he will not eat the herbivores meal and if he could answer, he would say, "I can't eat this food; I hate it: I will eat nothing but meat" (Boice, 213).

This illustration is what happens to natural man, for he is able since he has the natural ability to choose God for salvation, but he will not because of his moral inability. Man has the natural ability, but not the moral ability. Man cannot do something spiritual, when he is spiritually dead (Romans 7:14). He cannot come to God because he will not for natural man hates God and coming to God would not be pleasurable to him. What is most pleasurable to natural man is the rejection of Him (Romans 8:7-8).

## **Martin Luther**

### **Introduction**

Luther, wanting to please his father, began studying to be a lawyer, though he preferred to be a monk. While traveling back to Law school after a brief visit home he was nearly struck by lightning and thrown off his horse. He cried out for help and said, "St. Ann, I will become a monk." He went home and gave away all of his law books and joined the Augustinian Hermits, which was the most strict and rigorous order. He was under the idea that the stricter the order, the closer to God one could get. He joined the monastery to save his own soul, for the ideology of the day was that if one was to be serious in their relationship with God, he must be a monk.

Luther struggled with *anfectungen*—spiritual anxiety. He could not get over the fact that he was a sinner. He was known to spend hours everyday in confession and it gave him no rest for his soul. Taking the advice of his advisor he pursued his doctorate in theology and learned of the "doctrine on which the Church stands or falls." He is mostly known for his 'discovery' of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He was eventually excommunicated from the church and spent his days in numerous activities to reform the church by teaching, preaching, and writing. Luther thought of his *Bondage of the Will* as one of his most important books because it spoke of the issues that were the heart of the church (Sproul, Page 87). It is to this work that we now turn.

## **The Immutable Will of God**

The bondage (or freedom) of the will is an issue that puts man in a proper understanding of himself in relation to God. Luther presses this issue with the concept of God's sovereignty. For Luther, God is omniscient and knows all that man does and has a complete knowledge of all that happens or could happen. God knows not just what man has done, but what man *will* do or *could* do in the future. The Psalmist says that God knows what we are going to ask, even before we ask it (Psalms 94:11). Luther writes:

Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means" (Rupp, Page 118).

Here Luther says that God knows "nothing contingently" and foresees and purposes all things. From the starting point of the immutability of God's will, Luther says that if God's will is an attribute of His foreknowledge, then His foreknowledge is eternal and unchanging because that is its nature; or if God's foreknowledge is an attribute of His will, then his will is eternal and unchanging because it is its nature (Rupp, Page 119). It is clear that everything that happens is in regard to the immutable will of God. The will of God is "effectual and cannot be hindered" because it is the "power" of the nature of God (Ibid.). If God's will cannot be hindered, than nothing can change it, including man's will. From God's perspective there is no chance or contingency because His will is immutable, but from a human perspective, change and contingency exist because our will is mutable.

## **The Necessity of God's Will**

Luther then speaks of "necessity" (although he did not like this word) "for it suggests a kind of compulsion, and the very opposite of willingness" while the current topic does not imply this meaning. "For neither human nor divine will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire, as with freedom; and yet the will of God is immutable and infallible, and it governs our mutable will...and our will, especially when it is evil, cannot of itself do good" (Rupp, Page 120). Luther held firmly to the notion that the certainty of God's will, will to come to pass. He claims that the Christian faith, His promises and the Gospel are completely dependant on the foreknowledge of God and the necessity of that which is to come to pass. For this is what gives Christians hope in trials—to know that God does all things immutably, does not

lie, and that His will cannot be altered or changed in any way (Rupp, Page 122). Luther again points out that if one doubts or reject the fact that God “foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe in his promises and place sure trust and reliance on them?” (Ibid.). This is the mystery of God’s sovereignty and providence that God brings his will to pass immutably without violating the freedom of choice made by a moral agent; man is not a puppet, for God works through, with, around, and despite the choices made by man.

Luther also held that the clarity and truth of Scripture should be spoken openly, for the Apostle Paul says regarding this matter that God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and he will harden whom he wants to harden (Romans 9:18). Luther questions Erasmus by asking if the words of God depend on the choices of men? Luther replies that the “Scripture says that all things stand or fall by the choices and authority of God” (Rupp, Page 135). Man in his fallen condition is inclined towards sin and evil and would never come to God on his own for he does not have the moral ability even though man’s choices are never forced or under compulsion (John 6:44). Man’s choices reflect his character and nature; they are not independent from his condition. For Luther wrote:

Now, by “necessarily” I do not mean “compulsory,” but by the necessity of immutability (as they say) and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by the scruff of his neck and forced to it, like a robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will (Rupp, Page 138).

He continues saying that the will cannot by its own power change and will become resentful to any external compulsion that forces any deviation. Luther points out that “this would not happen if it had free choice.” He goes on to point out that in order for man to desire God, man has to change. Peter 5:5 says that God gives grace to the humble—those who weep over their sinful condition—and this cannot be done until he knows that salvation is out of his power and ability and depends completely on the “choice, will, and work of another”—God. As long as someone believes he can do the least to help himself in salvation and keep some of his self-confidence and does not completely despair over himself before God, he is not fully humble. But when man does not doubt, but knows that salvation depends on the will of God, then he will be fully humble and despise himself, then he comes close to grace and then he can be saved (Rupp, Page 137).

## **The Need for the Holy Spirit**

God must work in us and change the will by His Holy Spirit, and the will of man wills and acts willingly and in accord with its own inclination. For the will is not forced under compulsion, and it cannot turn away even by the gates of hell and it goes on delighting in loving the good as it did delight in evil. The natural man is under the god of this world (Satan) and is held captive by his will (2 Timothy 2:26) so man wills nothing but what Satan wills (Rupp, Page 140). Christ said that if a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand. This is true of the Kingdom of Satan as well as the Kingdom of God. So the unregenerate (those without the Spirit of God) do the will of Satan under no compulsion or force, but willingly according to their own nature. This is why Jesus said, "You belong to your father the Devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire (John 8:44). Luther writes concerning this, "If God rides it (the will), it wills and goes where God wills...If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills" (Rupp, Page 140). Luther points out that the will is not at all free without the grace of God, but is unchangeably enslaved to evil because it cannot on its own do good.

Luther did not like the term "free choice" because "we do nothing of free choice," we do everything by necessity. This term is to be associated only with God and not man because only God is truly free (Rupp, Page 142). He says that man in regard to his free choice and doing or not doing as he pleases is always under the control of the free choice of God who does as He pleases. In regards to eternal salvation, the Apostle Paul tells us that God has revealed truth about man, Himself, and the Gospel through His Holy Spirit. This means that unless the Spirit of God reveals truth to man, no man would have any knowledge of it or could he will himself to seek it. For Jesus asked the disciple, "'Who do people say the Son of man is?' They replied, 'some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.' 'But what about you?' He asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answer, 'You are the Christ, the son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven'" (Matthew 16:13-17). Erasmus' definition, "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them" (Rupp, Pages 169-170) is clearly wrong because the human will does not possess the power or ability to embrace anything that belongs to eternal salvation without the Holy Spirit enabling man to will or desire true faith required for salvation.

## **The Use of the Law**

Furthermore, Luther makes the point on the contrary to Erasmus that the law of God was given not so man could obey and be saved of his own free choice, but rather to show man his inability to obey and his need for Christ. For Luther writes regarding the Law of God, "...to lead us by means of the law to a knowledge of

our impotence...” and that this is why God gives laws...“For human nature is so blind that it does not know its powers, or rather its diseases, and so proud as to imagine that it knows and can do everything; and for this pride and blindness God has no readier remedy than the propounding of his law...” (Rupp, Page 185). For further support, Luther demonstrates that the Commandments are not written in the imperative, but as a future indicative. This means that the law was given not to confirm the notion of free choice, but to educate the mind as to its impotence; for this reason Paul writes, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20).

## **Conclusion**

Luther held that God knows “nothing contingently” and foresees and purposes all things and that the will of God is “effectual and cannot be hindered.” Man in his fallen condition is inclined towards sin and evil and would never come to God on his own for he does not have the moral ability even though man’s choices are never forced or under compulsion. Man’s choices reflect his character and nature. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, but does it willingly. The will cannot by its own power change; God must work in us to change the will by His Holy Spirit and then the will of man acts willingly of its own inclination to do good.

## **Comparison of Views**

Edwards claimed that man was created upright in the image of God and proceeded from immutable being of God Himself and that God did not give Adam adequate grace; Adam did not have the grace to ask for the grace to sustain him in trials. This concept is contrary to Luther and has its problems. The starting point of Edwards is the fact that man was created with understanding and a will. And that the will is ruled by man’s reason. But Luther’s starting point is God’s sovereign and immutable will. His ideology is that God’s will cannot be changed by anything including man’s will.

A point of similarity is that the choices made are determined by some motive. Edwards says that fallen man’s understanding and will was defiled and therefore his will (which is ruled by reason) was now infected with sin. And Luther says that neither human nor divine will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire.

Edwards and Luther agree to the passing down of original sin to all Adam’s progeny and as the source of the infection in the human will. This is the mystery of God’s sovereignty, that God brings His will to pass immutably without violating

the free choice of a amoral agent, for man is not a puppet, and God works through, with, around, and despite the choices of man.

They both hold that man in his fallen condition is inclined towards sin and evil and would never come to God on his own, for he does not have the moral ability, even though man's choices are never forced or under compulsion. Man's choices reflect his character and nature; they are not independent from his condition. They both conclude that man does not have free choice, but that man's will is incapable of willing good apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in them to change the nature of man. They both hold that man's will is in one sense free and in another sense it is not free.

### **Conclusion**

This topic of the "Bondage of the Will" is a hard concept to grasp. As it was a topic of debate in both Luther's and Edwards' day, it is one in our day as well. This is an important topic because it puts the power of salvation in either man's hands or God's. If man's will is free or able to will "good," then salvation depends on man and his ability rather than the work of the cross; but if the human will is in bondage to sin and is impotent to will "good," then man is in desperate need for the grace that comes from the work of the cross.

There many points of similarity between Edwards and Luther while there some points of difference. They both held to the view that sin has corrupted the nature of man and that the nature of man desires sin and is incapable to come to God for grace or will any "good" by His standard. For man's will is held captive to his nature, as Romans 8 says, "those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires, but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." Man is desperate for the work of the Holy Spirit to give him a new nature to desire and will the "good" to please God.

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