

REFLECTIONS ON JONATHAN EDWARDS' VIEW OF FREE WILL

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Introduction

Is the human will bound or free? Can man choose freely between each and every option presented to him? Is man's will neutral or has it been internally affected in such a way so as to influence his choices? How far did man fall when he sinned? Was it a mere stumble, or was it total? If it was total and we are unable to incline ourselves toward anything righteous, then how can we be responsible for our unrighteousness? In my opinion, there is no better theological contribution to this issue than that of Jonathan Edwards. His rigorous yet clear articulation of the issue sheds tremendous light on a thorny and controversial topic. It is his contribution that I want to briefly reflect on. But before I do, I want to take a brief look at how this issue first arose in its most prominent form.

A Brief History

There does not seem to be any record of a major controversy concerning man's freedom in the decision-making process prior to the Pelagian controversy of the 5th century. To be sure, there were debates concerning "free will" prior to the Pelagian controversy (Chrysostom, Origen, Jerome, and others opposed determinism), but none that took center stage the way the Pelagian controversy did.

Pelagius, a British-born monk who resided in Rome before it fell in 410, was "roused to anger by an inert Christendom, that excused itself by pleading the frailty of the flesh and the impossibility of fulfilling the grievous commandments of God. [Pelagius] preached that God commanded nothing impossible, that man possessed the power of doing the good if only he willed, and that the weakness of the flesh was merely a pretext".¹ This frustration with the church of his day led Pelagius to the conclusion that man's chief problem is not his inability to do what God commands in and of himself, but rather his refusal to do that which he *is* capable of doing, namely, righteous works. Man can achieve in and of himself, according to Pelagius, whatever is required of him in morality and religion. Human nature remains uncorrupted and the natural will free to do all good. He was unable to see how responsibility could reside in us without free will.

¹ Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, part 2, book 2 trans. James Millar (1898; New York: Dover, 1961), pg. 174

In fact, for Pelagius, there is no need for a Redeemer-Christ, for what is it that we need redemption from if we can do all things righteous on our own? This position led Pelagius to eventually deny the universality of sin, for which he was condemned in 418 AD at the Council of Carthage.

It was St. Augustine who, at this time, rose to challenge the position of Pelagius and argued fiercely for the bondage of the will. Augustine was undoubtedly Pelagius' most outspoken opponent and he stressed that grace is an absolute necessity from beginning to end. Sin has, according to Augustine, so affected our nature that we are naturally inclined toward sin and sin only. "It was by the evil use of his free will that man destroyed both it and himself", said Augustine. Man is truly "dead in his trespasses and sins", and in a desperate situation. Apart from grace, according to Augustine, no one can be saved, much less, do that which is righteous before God. For Augustine, it was an undermining of the gospel to say that man has the power in and of himself to incline himself godward. Justification is entirely of God.

In defending these views, it was Augustine who won the day, but the issue did not go away. It comes up again and again throughout church history. In 1525, Martin Luther wrote *Bondage of the Will* in response to Erasmus' book entitled *Diatribes Concerning Free Will*. Luther echoed Augustine by asserting that if one holds to a view that sees the will as completely free and able, in and of itself, to choose that which is righteous, then man is able to take partial credit for his salvation. Does God get all the glory or just some of it? Luther vehemently argues that unless sovereign grace intervenes we can do nothing righteous before God in and of ourselves. We are hopeless!

The other Reformers (Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, Knox) were one with Luther in these convictions and went on themselves to articulate it further, most notably Calvin in his *Institutes*. And while many of the Puritans, one and two hundred years later, agreed with and held to the view that man's will is bound by sin so that sin affects his decisions, there was none who articulated it better than Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards' Background

Born in 1703 into a pioneer family on the frontier of East Windsor, Connecticut, Jonathan Edwards was the only son of twelve children. His father, Timothy, was a pastor. At the age of thirteen, Edwards went to Yale College and graduated in 1720. After a few years of teaching in New York and at Yale, he became an assistant pastor to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, at a Congregational Church in Northampton. After Stoddard died, Edwards became the pastor. A series of conversions took place at his church, which coincided with the conversions taking place under the preaching of George Whitefield, an English evangelist, in the same area. Conversions began to sweep the area and

a spiritual revival like none other took place. We know it today as the First Great Awakening.

It has been said of Jonathan Edwards that he produced one of the most thorough and compelling bodies of theological writing in the history of America. More commonly asserted is the statement that Edwards was “the greatest intellect that America has ever produced”. Perhaps this is seen best in his book *Freedom of the Will*.

Freedom of the Will

A glancing at the title might lead some to think that Edwards and Luther differed. This is not so, essentially. The title illustrates Edwards’ thesis that *we are free to choose that which we most desire*. The truth, though, according to Edwards, is that because by nature we are dead in our trespasses and sins, we desire only sin. Our natural inclination is not toward righteousness, but toward sin. All mankind, according to Edwards, are “by nature in a state of total ruin, both with respect to the moral evil of which they are the subjects, and the afflictive evil to which they are exposed, the one as the consequence and punishment of the other”.²

According to Edwards, proof of original sin is easily demonstrated. Aside from the supernatural biblical proof found in Romans 1, 3, 5 and Ephesians 2, there is plenty of natural proof as well: All people sin! All of human history testifies to this. And we have more proof today, following two World Wars and one Cold War, than Edwards had in his day. Because we are free to choose that which we most desire, and because what we most desire is to destroy ourselves, *it is our freedom that turns out to be our greatest enemy*.

The Will as the Mind Choosing

Edwards defines the will as “the mind choosing”. This is unique for the simple reason that up until this point, nobody had bothered to refine a careful definition of the will. Everyone assumed that “will” was self-defining. Our choices, according to Edwards, are not determined by the will itself but by the mind. *Our choices are determined by what we think is most desirable at any given moment*. But why does the mind choose one thing over another? This is where Edwards introduces the idea of “motives”. We choose one thing over another because our mind chooses what it thinks is best. John Gerstner sums up Edwards’ point well:

Your choices as a rational person are always based on various considerations or motives that are before you at the time. Those motives have a certain weight with you, and the motives for and against reading a

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 10th ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh/Carlisle, Penn: Banner of Truth, 1979, 1:1)

book, for example, are weighed in the balance of your mind; the motives that outweigh all others are what you, indeed, choose to follow. You, being a rational person, will always choose what seems to you to be the right thing, the wise thing, the most advisable thing to do. If you choose not to do the right thing, the advisable thing, the thing that you are inclined to do, you would, of course, be insane. You would be choosing something that you did not choose. You would find something preferable that you did not prefer. But you, being a rational and sane person choose something because it seems to you the right, proper, good, advantageous thing to do.³

This is precisely the point that Edwards makes with regard to motives. We choose according to that which we desire most. The problem, however, as we noted earlier, is that because the fall was total and not partial, and as a result we are all dead in our trespasses and sins desiring only sin by nature, what seems to us to be right, proper, and good is often wrong, improper, and bad. Sin has made us God-haters at the core of our souls so that we are all by nature at enmity with God. In order for us to do what God would have us to do, we need to be who God wants us to be. And in order for us to be who God wants us to be, we need new natures. And because we cannot change our own nature, no more than we can push a bus while we are riding in it, we are in need of the sovereign hand of grace to change it for us. *We cannot do what pleases God because we will not do what pleases God. And the reason we will not is because we don't want to.*

“Natural Inability” and “Moral Inability”

We remember that what plagued Pelagius was the paradox of human responsibility to follow God's holy commands and human inability. According to Pelagius, the fact that God commands us to obey him implies that we are able to obey him. If inability reigns, than God would be unjust to command our obedience. This problem, as we have seen, eventually led Pelagius to deny the universality of sin. He was unable to deal with the paradox. Edwards' contribution to this issue is perhaps his most profound. Edwards distinguished between what he referred to as “natural inability” and “moral inability”. “We are said to be naturally unable to do a thing, when we can't do it if we will, because what is most commonly called nature doesn't allow it... Moral inability consists in the opposition or want of inclination”.⁴ In other words, I am said to be naturally unable to do a thing, no matter how hard I desire it, if nature doesn't allow it, such as flying or walking on water. In this sense, we are all naturally able to do what is right. After all, we have all of the natural capacities to understand the law of God. We have a mouth that is physically capable of uttering praises to God. We have

³ John H. Gerstner, *A Primer on Free Will* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982) p.4-5

⁴ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, pg.159 as quoted in Sproul, *Willing to Believe*, pg.162

a will that enables us to choose to do what we want to do. *Original sin does not eradicate our humanity or ability to make choices.* The natural ability remains intact. God has endowed us with the natural ability to do what he requires of us. What we lack, however, is the moral ability. What was lost in the fall is the want or inclination to do that which is righteous. We have no desire to obey God. We have, in fact, no desire for God at all. *Fallen man has the natural ability to choose God but he lacks the moral ability to do so.* For this reason, God can justly command our obedience (because we have the necessary faculties of choice), and at the same time hold us responsible for the choices we make. A.W. Pink says, “By nature [man] possesses natural ability but lacks moral and spiritual ability. The fact that he does not possess the latter does not destroy his responsibility, because his responsibility rests upon the fact that he does possess the former”.⁵ Without a righteous inclination to do good, no one can choose good. Our decisions follow our inclinations. Sin has rendered us hopeless, according to Edwards, but this is precisely what makes the gospel so great.

The Greatness of the Gospel

“For Edwards, the greatness of the gospel is visible only when viewed against the backdrop of the greatness of the ruin into which we have been plunged by the fall. The greatness of the disease requires the greatness of the remedy”.⁶ As someone once said, “The worst word about us as sinners is not the last word”. It was the gospel that Edwards was interested in, not some theoretical debate. He knew that what made good news good was that it was preceded by bad news. Our fallen nature due to sin is bad news. Our natural inclination to sin is bad news. Our inability to incline ourselves godward is bad news. Our self-destruction as a result of our sin is bad news. The grace of God in redeeming man from this desperate state and changing his nature so that he will be free to serve God is not just good news, its great news.

Conclusion

In summary of Edwards’ view of free will, he believes that man is free in that he can and does choose according to his strongest inclinations — his desires. But because of original sin and the resulting corruption of humanity, no one is naturally inclined godward. In fact, we hate God by nature. We have the natural ability to please him but we lack the moral ability. Our nature has to be changed if we are to seek God and do what he pleases. And only God can liberate the sinner from his captivity to that which is destroying him, namely, his freedom! This is nothing more and nothing less than the gospel that Edwards so committed his life to.

⁵ A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984) pg. 154

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1997) pg. 148