

SOME PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS'
NOTION OF THE WILL

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Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* is among the greatest treatises ever written. The philosophical, metaphysical, theological, missional, and pastoral implications thereof have been widely explored, debated, promoted, and opposed for over two-hundred-fifty years now, and yet I suspect that the depths of his thought have yet to be plumbed. Having invested but a little time reflecting on his work, my mind is filled with questions, observations, objections, affirmations and applications, and yet given the constraints of this paper I must crystalize my response along some line or other.

Thus, I have chosen briefly to reflect on some pastoral implications of Edwards' notion of the will. Of course, in such a brief space, I can only sketch out a train of thought that will beg for further definition, explanation, and expansion. Be that as it may, what follows is a brief summary of Edwards' definition of several key terms, some thoughts on the definition of liberty, and some pastoral implications for the church I serve, Glory of Christ Fellowship (GCF) of Elk River, Minnesota.

Definition of Terms

While Edwards purposefully, and sometimes laboriously, defines many terms in his treatise, for the purposes of this paper I will summarize but five of them. First, Edwards argues that the will is simply that by which the mind chooses anything (Edwards,

137). The will does not have independent existence, but rather is a function of the mind, where mind is understood in a broad sense. Second, the determination of the will, then, is guided by the greatest apparent good in the mind of the moral agent, that is, the one making the determination (142). Third, moral necessity, in Edwards' own words, is the "necessity of connection and consequence, which arises from such moral causes, as the strength of inclination, or motives, and the connection which there is in many cases between these, and such certain volitions and actions" (156). That is, there is such a strong connection between desire and doing that in certain instances (Edwards would likely say all instances) our desire dictates our doing. Fourth, by way of contrast, natural necessity refers to those necessities which human beings are under by force of natural causes, for example, gravity, physical pain, or mathematical laws (156-7).

Having defined the latter two terms, Edwards offers several helpful clarifications about their relationship, only two of which I will summarize here. On the one hand, it must be noted that moral necessity may be as absolute as natural necessity. For example, it is a natural necessity for a person to be subject to gravity, even if they create some means by which they can fly. Gravity is a natural law, and our will is constrained by this law. Likewise, when the mind of a person is powerfully inclined in one direction, this inclination, for all intents and purposes, forbids him to will in the opposite direction. He may naturally be able to do so, but he is practically unable to do so.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that neither moral nor natural abilities are absolute. There is such a thing as moral and natural inability. Moral inability, then, is the internal opposition to, or want of, inclination to act in a certain manner. Moral

inability lies inside the will. Natural inability is the incapacity to make a certain choice due to forces of nature. Natural inability lies outside the will.

With regard to moral inability, an example may help clarify what is meant. We would all agree that a drunkard has the natural ability not to drink, that is, there is nothing in nature that is forcing him to drink. However, his faculty of choice, having been altered and constricted by the consequences of past actions, may essentially become incapable of resisting the urge to drink unless acted upon by some external force. Hence, moral inability is not the lack of ability to will but the lack of sufficient inclination to will.

With these important clarifications in mind, Edwards defines one more term that is important for the purposes of this paper, namely, liberty or freedom. Liberty is the power, opportunity, or advantage to do as one pleases. The opposite of freedom, whatever it is called, is any hindrance to doing as one pleases. Liberty, therefore, is simply the exercise of the will by a moral agent (163).

On the Definition of Liberty

Due to time constraints, I was unable to read the entirety of *Freedom of the Will* and thus it may be that Edwards touched upon the issues I raise in this section of my paper. One way or the other, the following train of thought emerged as I mused on Edwards' definition of liberty in light of my pastoral ministry.

First, our will is defined, restrained, and constrained by God's will since he is the infinite creator and we are his finite creation. No person can conceive of a higher good than that which God conceives as good. Therefore, to choose the will of God is to choose the highest actual good, and to do the will of God is to do the highest actual good.

We may say, then, that the highest form of freedom is the ability to choose the greatest actual good as God conceives and reveals it to be. The ability to choose and do the will of God from the heart is the highest form of liberty, and may be the only form of true liberty.

Second, it is beyond doubt that God has granted human beings a will, that is, an ability to choose, which implies some measure of freedom. However, in choosing against the highest good we do violence to our freedom to choose because any offense against the perfect holiness of God requires just punishment. Part of this punishment is what Edwards defines as moral inability. In other words, when we choose against the highest good we restrict our ability to choose the highest good, mainly because it alters our affections. Thus, the primary pastoral issue is not whether there be such a thing as free will, and if so to what extent it operates. Rather, the primary pastoral issue is whether persons who have sinned by choosing against the highest good have a will that is free.

Third, regardless of one's theological disposition, we must answer, no—a moral agent who has sinned against God is no longer free, in any and all circumstances, to choose the highest good. The misuse of the will constrains the freedom of the will. Hence, if a moral agent who has sinned against God is to be free, he or she must have a Savior—one who acts upon him or her from the outside to transform moral inability into positive moral necessity. And if God does not send such a Savior, the sinner will never be free. Indeed, the path to true freedom may only be trod if our hearts are acted upon by God. But praise be to God that he purposed, by the counsel of his will, to send Jesus Christ into the world so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life! Praise be to God that he imposes his will upon our will so that our will may be free in Christ!

God accomplishes this miraculous feat in two distinct and interrelated ways. On the one hand, he declares all who believe in Jesus Christ to be just. Justification is an eternal and inalterable act whereby a guilty moral agent is declared not guilty by virtue of the blood sacrifice of Christ, and is furthermore declared righteous by virtue of the perfect righteousness of Christ. This act is effected in the lives of those who believe by means of a mysterious and yet profoundly real union with Christ.

On the other hand, on the basis of our justification, God sanctifies those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Sanctification may be defined as the process by which God transforms us into the image of Jesus until we become holy as he is holy, until we always and only choose the highest actual good as does Jesus. Romans 12:1-2 gives us some insight into how the process of sanctification takes place, and herein we come more properly to the pastoral implications of Edwards' notion of the will.

Implications for Pastoral Ministry

The Apostle Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." I cannot comment at any length on this passage, but the meaning of it is obvious enough. If the will is to be free to choose the highest actual good, the mind must be transformed. And the only way that the mind will be transformed so that it accords with the will of God, is if it be saturated with the Word of God. This saturation takes place by the will of the Father, the finished work of the Son, and the indwelling

presence and power of the Holy Spirit, as he uses his people to infuse his people with the knowledge of his will and the desire to do it.

This process is often called discipleship which, like sanctification, may be defined as the process by which believing persons are transformed into the image of their Savior, Jesus Christ. At GCF, we seek to guide people through the process of discipleship in four distinct ways which we call proclamation, teaching, counseling, and equipping. By proclamation we mean that we declare the good news of Jesus Christ to those who do not believe, and thus included in this stage is local evangelism and mercy-ministry, as well as foreign missions. By teaching we mean that we seek to instruct new and seasoned believers to observe everything that Jesus commanded. By counseling we mean that we seek to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we may teach and admonish one another with all wisdom. Thus, counseling for us has a broad application to the life of the church which at times calls for more focused, personal, and intense attention. Finally, by equipping we mean that we seek to impart certain skills for particular ministries, so that each member of the body of Christ can play the part he or she was designed to play, by the will of God, for the glory of God, and for the edification of the church.

Although we have a process for discipleship at GCF, I must hasten to say that we do not trust in our process to bring about the desired effects, namely, the transformation of the minds and hearts of sinners so that they will grow into the fullness of what it means to be saints and, like their Savior, do the will of God from the heart. This is a work that can only be accomplished by the will of the Father, the finished work of the Son, and the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

But what Edwards has helped me to understand with more depth of insight is just how necessary the word and will of God are to the process of sanctification. If the primary pastoral issue facing the men and women in the church—including the pastors—is moral inability, then the primary solution is the regular, accurate, passionate, and authentic teaching and application of the Word of God to the life of the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And while I could write many pages about the pastoral implications I see in this one work of Edwards, I must say that the implications of his thinking for the place of the Word in the life of the church outweighs them all. We simply must have some practical means of renewing the mind so that the will can be free, and it seems to me that the Word of God administered by the Spirit of God is the primary means. Hence, this study has strengthened my resolve, as the Pastor for Preaching and Vision, to continue to make much of the ministries of worship, the Word, and prayer in the life of GCF.

REFERENCE LIST

Edwards, Jonathan. 1957. *Freedom of the Will*. New Haven: Yale University Press.