A Review of RC Sproul's Willing to Believe & Thoughts on Free Will

Published: Sunday 22nd of February 2015 00:23 by Simon Wartanian
URL: https://www.thecalvinist.net/post/A-Review-Of-RC-Sprouls-Willing-To-Believe-Thoughts-On-Free-Will



R.C. Sproul – Willing To Believe

The Controversy Over Free Will

Although read in Dutch[1] I've was motivated to get this work by watching RC Sproul's teaching series on the book called Willing to Believe[2]. It helped understand the issues surround the question of human freedom and sovereignty. I remember that it was not much later than that I was studying Jonathan Edwards' The Freedom of the Will, which was somewhat difficult.

In this great work this master theologian gives a historical theological study of important theologians throughout the history of the Christian church on the question of human freedom. He goes through some Christian heroes and giants of the faith like Augustine, Edwards, Luther and Calvin. Also some who were non-Christian and anti-Christian in their theology and thinking like Charles Finney and Pelagius. Lastly, theologians who belong more to the in house debate between Arminianism/Semi-Pelagianism and Calvinism, like Jacob Arminius himself.

The Pelagians

Pelagius was a British monk living in the fifth century and he is known to have a huge dispute with Augustine on the nature of man and free will. Pelagius reacted to a seemingly harmless prayer of Augustine which said: Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire. Harmless doesn't it? Well, that's not what Pelagius thought. He thought it outrages, because it showed man's total dependence on God to graciously grant the ability to obey Him. Pelagius believed that commandment presupposes ability. What many nowadays believe. He said that God would never command something that man was not able to do. Therefore, everything that God commands man is able to do. So, away with Romans 8:7-8.

He further taught that Adam was in no sense the federal head of the human race. Adam was created mortal and would have died even if he didn't sin. All men are born in the state that Adam was in. Adam gave man bad influence, not a sinful nature otherwise known as Original Sin.

He taught that the nature of man was basically good and that sinning didn't effect that basic goodness of man.

Man has a free will to do good or evil and to obey God in all things.

Jesus' death was not substitionary, but it was as an example for us.

People can live sinless lives, and in fact some have lived sinless lives.

The grace of God is important, but not essential. What I mean is that it would be awesome if one uses the grace of God for obedience, it will make things much easier, but it is even possible to obey without the grace of God.

This among other things are the things that he believed. I think, for any serious Bible student, they must conclude that this places him outside of Christian orthodoxy. Pelagius and his teachings were condemned in 418 and you would think that it will be the last thing heard of Pelagius, but then arises Charles Finney many centuries later in America.

Charles Finney

Charles Finney taught things very similar to Pelagius. In fact, he was more Pelagian than Pelagius.

He rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is the heart of the Gospel message.

He rejected the penal substitionary atonement of Christ in place of the believers. He posed the Governmental and Moral Influence theories of the atonement. He taught that all that was needed for conversion was good argumentation and persuasion. His influence is seen in the decisional evangelism/regeneration of our day, when people are told to make a "choice" for Christ. Or to make to choose Christ to be born again.

It is interesting to observe that this is the vision of the secular culture. That man is able to do anything possible. We think we are not bound by nature to anything. We think that we are the gods of our destinies.

The Semi-Pelagians/Arminians

After Augustine's sharp critique of Pelagius the church did not stay on the Augustinian position, it's not surprising seeing that man hates the fact that he's dependent on God for the good that he does and is unable to do that which he ought to do.

There came a position which was somewhere between Augustinianism and Pelagianism. Which rejected the Pelagian heresy, and out of concern for man's personal responsibility tried to elevate the freedom of the human will in the matter of salvation. They believed that man was badly wounded by the fall. Death is the punishment of the fall. Man's dispositions are inclined to evil. But there still is in man the ability to resist the grace of God. Although man is dead in sins and is a slave of sin, yet he is still able to resist the effective grace of God and thereby frustrate the plans of God.

Here RC introduces the difference between mongergism and synergism. Monergism is the teaching that there is One Power which is in work in us when regeneration happens, in that we are passive. Synergism on the other hand teaches that man and God cooperate to bring the salvation of man. Arminians may not like the word synergism, but it describes what they believe. They believe that God does everything that He can to bring men to Himself, and He wants all men to come, but yet some refuse to come. Therefore, the will of man is that which effectuates salvation. The Augustinians disagreed.

Jacob Arminius

Later in the 16th century came Jacob Arminius who studied in Geneva (Calvin's city) and was a Calvinist, but later came to doubt his Calvinism. He agreed with Calvinism about Total Depravity, but where he differed was the nature of grace. Many of the statements of Arminius about human depravity, could be amen'd by Calvinists, but not those about the nature of grace. Basically, he believed that grace was resistible. It was necessary, but not essential in the sense that for anyone to be saved he needs grace, yet grace alone can't do it, it must cooperate with man for its effectiveness. Man can resist the grace of God.

He also believed the common belief even of our day that the election of God was based on who would believe or not believe like the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians.

The Augustinians & the Reformed

This book was written to defend and clarify the Augustinian doctrine of free will, which is the Reformed doctrine of free will. Here I want to survey some of the theologians and their thoughts concerning free will. Let's start with Augustine.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine was the ardent opponent of Pelagius. He was the one who answered and challenged Pelagius and it was because of his prayer that Pelagius was outraged. They are so radically different from each other.

Augustine believed and taught the doctrine of Original Sin. The doctrine teaches that because of Adam's disobedience and because Adam was the representative of the whole human race (the root of the tree), therefore by his disobedience the whole human race was thrown into misery and sin. He stood in the place of those born of men and women. He believed that death (both spiritual and physical) was the punishment of the disobedience of our first parents.

He taught that all men have free will (liberum arbitrium). What they lacked was liberty (libertas). Augustine defined free will as the power to make free choices without any compulsion from the outside. In that sense every person has free will and is free to do as he pleases. What man in the Fall has lost is libertas. Augustine (and RC) understands libertas as the ability do that which is required of us. God commands man to be holy and obey Him, but since the Fall man has not been able to do that because he lost the libertas to will to that which is good. Because as Jonathan Edwards later would clearly say is that man choses according to his pleasure and desires, the only problem is that the Scriptures everywhere describe our desires as sinful. Man is free do all that he desires (liberum arbitrium), but in the Fall he has lost his desire to do good (libertas).

At this point RC introduces some helpful Latin phrases (I love the fact that he many times explains what words mean):

- Posse non peccare is the possibility not to sin. This is what Adam and Eve had when they were originally created by God.
- Posse peccare is the possibility to sin. This obviously Adam and Eve did.
- Non posse non peccare is the *im*possibility not to sin. These all the descendants of Adam until freed by Christ have.
- Non posse peccare is the impossibility to sin. This is what those in Christ will have in the eternal state.

Augustine like all Calvinists rejected Pelagius' foreknowledge view of election and taught that God predestined according to His good pleasure without "looking into the future." He predestined not because men believed, but He predestined so that men would believe.

Martin Luther

Some more than thousand years later there came a dispute between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther. Luther taught the Augustinian view of freedom and predestination and Erasmus was on the Semi-Pelagian side, only he seemed to think that this topic has no much significance for the average Christian. Luther responded by saying that how isn't it of any significance for people to know if they must do things for salvation or it comes wholly by the grace of God. For Luther, the subject of free will could not be divorced from Sola Fide and Sola Gratia and it is therefore important to understand. Luther taught the doctrine of Augustine, who taught the doctrine of Paul, who taught the doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luther strengthened the argument of foreknowledge in regards to free will. He said that if God knows all things, then there could be no choice B. Foreknowledge makes certain that our choices will happen. Luther taught that "God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will." As RC says about Luther's view: God wills what he foreknows and foreknows whatever he wills.

Luther taught about the necessity of choices. If God knows all things, doesn't that make our choices necessary and therefore somehow compulsory? Luther started his discussion of necessity in The Bondage of the Will by saying that "necessity" is a bad word. It gives the idea of compulsion and against one's will, which it not what Luther means by necessity. What he meant by "necessity" is that the choices are certain to happen because of God's perfect foreknowledge. He absolutely did not mean that the choices are against man's will. They're certain to happen.

One last thing about Luther, he didn't like the term "free will." He thought that it gave men a wrong notion of human freedom, what people often think when they say free will is the ability to do both the good and the bad. This Luther rejected. I also think that the term free will, if used it must be used with qualification. Perhaps moral agency or moral responsibility is a better term.

John Calvin

Now we come to the giant himself, whose name is mostly associated in the free will and predestination debate: John Calvin. RC observes that Calvin taught nothing that Luther did not about free will.

Calvin believed that free will meant the ability to freely choose without compulsion. He's in line with the Augustinians before him. He, like Luther had a distaste for the term "free will" and thought it a too high and lofty title for the reality. Because he believed that the will is determined by the nature of man, as sinful man can only sin because that is all that he desires, therefore to call it free is too high and lofty. Surely man has a desire for the good, but it's not the good that is defined by

God. Everyone wants a happy family, a good house and wants to be helpful to others, but not in the manner that God has prescribed. We want worldly good, but without the Spirit of grace we are unwilling to will spiritual good. We have no desire for God.

Calvin further taught that the Fall had also a huge effect on our intellect, he taught the noetic effects of the Fall. It's not only that we die and are alienated from God because of the Fall, but that the Fall of Adam had a huge impact on our thinking. To be sure, unbelievers can think correctly and invent great things, but we do not always think correctly or learn easily as that would've been had not man fallen. That's why the revelation of God about Himself is necessary for us.

Calvin taught that we sin freely, yet by necessity. He distinguished between moral and natural necessity as would Jonathan Edwards later clearly did. Moral necessity concerns the nature of the agent, for example God is necessarily good, He cannot be otherwise than good and holy. Man, after the Fall has been taken captive to sin and is a slave of sin and sins because he wills nothing but sin. People are quick to object by saying "that makes people robots and they cannot be held responsible," but they're not consistent in not ascribing glory to God. God is by necessity good and holy and we praise Him for that because He is good and cannot be bad or sin. But who would dare say that God is therefore not free? Are choices are determined by our desires. If our desires are evil we will make evil choices, if our desires are good we will make good choices. In Calvin's words "Therefore, if the free will of God in doing good is not impeded, because he necessarily must do good; if the devil, who can do nothing but evil, nevertheless sins voluntarily; can it be said that man sins less voluntarily because he is under a necessity of sinning? This necessity is uniformly proclaimed by Augustine, who, even when pressed by the invidious cavil of Celestius, hesitated not to assert it in the following terms: "Man through liberty became a sinner, but corruption, ensuing as the penalty, has converted liberty into necessity" (August. lib. de Perf. Justin). Whenever mention is made of the subject, he hesitates not to speak in this way of the necessary bondage of sin (August. de Nature et Gratia, et alibi)." (Institutes 2.3.5)

Calvin, obviously taught the doctrines commonly associated with his name. He believed in Unconditional Election and absolute sovereignty. God did not foresee who would believe, but that He choose merely out of His good pleasure so that they would believe. He taught the doctrine of Irresistible Grace, he said: "The Apostle's doctrine is not, that the grace of a good will is offered to us if we will accept of it, but that God himself is pleased so to work in us as to guide, turn, and govern our heart by his Spirit, and reign in it as his own possession. Ezekiel promises that a new spirit will be given to the elect, not merely that they may be able to walk in his precepts, but that they may really walk in them (Eze 11:19; Eze 36:27)." (Institutes 2.3.10)

Jonathan Edwards

There is not a book besides the Bible that I have tried to deeply study as Jonathan Edwards The Freedom of the Will. I was fascinated by it, it explained a lot to me and I came to a better understanding of free will. The thorough study was caused by the fact that Jonathan Edwards was not very clear, or maybe I couldn't understand him very good. I have to re-read a lot of paragraphs to understand what he was saying, although I was helped by reading other stuff that was made to make understanding of free will easier.

The discussion on Edwards starts by explaining his view of the doctrine of Original Sin. Our doctrine about man must be biblical for us to come to biblical ideas. When many think that people are basically good, sometimes do some little bad things they will not get the idea that people are in bondage to sin, so they will not come to the conclusion that men are not free to do good, but only to do that which they desire – sin. Yet if they start with a biblical anthropology on man, they would soon realize that the natural man is not free to do good and hates God. I have learned that any discussion on the topic of election or free will must clearly define it's doctrine of man and original sin, otherwise it would seem unreasonable to people and will have no foundation. Because of the Fall we are born as slaves of sin and born dead in sin. We are sinners by nature and by choice. The doctrine of Original Sin is important to Edwards because thereby he can know what man is said to be able and unable to do.

Edwards taught that freedom mean the power to choose or refuse without compulsion. He didn't think that this choice just came spontaneously, he was great in mocking the idea of a neutral will or an undetermined will. He taught that the will was determined – determined by one's desires. He said "BY determining 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. As when we speak of the determination of motion, we mean causing the motion of the body to be in such a direction, rather than another." (Freedom of the Will part 1 section 2) The determination of the will therefore means that the will follows our desires, it doesn't choose "indifferently." It chooses something that we please, something we desire. In the natural state man does not desire God (Rom 3:9-18; 8:7-8; 1Cor 2:14; Gen 6:5). God is outside the range of his desires.

That which determines the will is the motive. "By motive I mean the whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things conjunctly." (Freedom 1:2) Not only are our choices determined by our motives, but they are always determined by our strongest motives. This is the teaching of moral necessity. Let's

define our terms.

By moral necessity Edwards means “that Necessity of connexion and consequence, which arises from such moral causes, as the strength of inclination, or motives, and the connexion which there is in many cases between these and such certain volitions and actions.” (Freedom 1:4) What could be more logical than every cause having and effect and every effect having a cause. This the law of causation. The idea that many will get by hearing the word “necessity” is that it is against the will of man, but that is absolutely not so. It is not compulsory, it just shows the connection between our desires and our actions. See above about how Calvin viewed moral necessity.

“By natural necessity, as applied to men, I mean such Necessity as men are under through the force of natural causes;” (Freedom 1:4). When you are commanded and to fly while you obviously have no ability to fly, that’s natural necessity. God doesn’t command us to fly (natural inability), but commands us to love Him (moral inability). We are unable to love God because we do not desire God. God because of His nature and His moral necessity cannot sin. That doesn’t mean that God is not free, it simply means that God’s actions and nature are consistent with each other.

“Moral Inability consists…either in the want of inclination; or the strength of a contrary inclination; or the want of sufficient motives in view, to induce and excite the act of the Will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary.” This is not like telling someone to fly who obviously does not the ability to fly or commanding someone to walk when he is strapped to a chair. It’s more like telling someone who hates you to do you a favor. He doesn’t lack any natural ability to love, he lacks motives to love you and do you a favor.

Conclusion

We indeed are free to do anything that we please. The problem alone is with what we please, but thanks be to God who through Jesus Christ has given us a new heart and a new nature. We are a new creation, being made into the likeness of His beloved Son. We are no longer slaves to sin, although we still struggle and are in war with sin, just like Paul was in Romans 7. The difference alone for those who are in Adam and those in Christ is that the one in Adam only wills the sin, the one in Christ is enabled by the Holy Spirit to do that which is pleasing in God’s sight. “Oh that day when freed from sinning, I shall see Thy lovely face.” True freedom does not consist in doing the good and the evil, but by doing that which God commands – the good. It’s only in the eternal state when we will be freed from any sinful inclination. We shall truly become free from sin, by our inability to do evil.

All glory to the Triune Sovereign, who has granted us to be His children because of His unconditional love which He has poured out in us. Soli Deo Gloria.

Footnotes

1. ^ *Vrije Wil En Genade Gevangenschap: En Bevrijding Van De Wil – http://www.bol.com/nl/p/vrije-wil-en-genade/1001004006153346/*
2. ^ *The whole series can be found at Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZCQXOiAAhJw4AgQG_e_rGdNTByZHjRw7*