

A Book Review: Free Will Revisited

I tend to talk about Dr. Robert Picirilli in sycophantic tones. I suppose it is hard not to come across that way even though I am sincere in my praise of him and his influence in my life. I actually had him as a professor at a small school with intimate classes. Beyond that, he has been humble enough to answer my emails about Greek long after I graduated. And then there's his published works, which have a special place on my bookshelves.

I've read all of his works at least once, and *Grace, Faith, Free Will* at least 20 times—mostly because it takes many, many readings for a man like me to absorb the fire hydrant of material. And even then I do not think I understand it all. Anytime I feel like I'm getting a little too proud of my intelligence, one chapter of that book will bring me down a notch.

So it was with great joy my Senior Pastor told me not to buy Dr. Picirilli's new book, *Free Will Revisited*, because he already had a copy for me. And despite it being a slim 135 pages, it still took me days to get through it. Because this treatment of a crucial difference between two major branches of orthodox Christianity cannot be discussed simplistically. The reasoning gets into deep waters at times. I will be rereading.

I want to say up front that yet again, just as with *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, Picirilli goes to admirable lengths to make sure he presents his opponents views accurately and fairly. Like a champ, he takes on three of the heaviest weights of the last 500 years of church history in Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. And he spends probably 35-40% of the book trying to express their views in their own words.

There are no straw men being batted down. In stark contrast to the Social Media Debate Generation, Picirilli reads to understand, articulates the other position, and does not jump quickly to his responses. And by all means note the subtitle of this book is a “respectful” response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I implore all of us to take a note from Picirilli’s format and approach. Listen or read carefully. Do not misrepresent your opponent’s views. Be humble and respectful.

As far as the content itself, there are times where Picirilli makes a more simple and straightforward argument against the writings of these three men opposing human free will. As when he notes that it is very difficult to get around teaching that God coerces us if we believe our will is completely against God prior to salvation and that God by his grace changes our will to His. Yet there are other times Picirilli shows how complex the debate can get, as on pages 86-87 when he talks about how things that are certain are not “necessary” and how God’s knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past. He dealt with this in the early part of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* but I believe Picirilli to be a very self-aware man, knowing that many of his readers would have read that volume and in my opinion avoids rehashing that part of his previous book but instead explains it with a fresh perspective.

[In the past I have written for REO on Arminius’s own words and how much overlap there is to Calvinism and Arminianism.](#) I did so based on what my professors, like Picirilli, have taught me. Here again, he accomplishes the same goal. He does not cite Arminius yet he still makes the point plainly and necessarily that Arminians believe that man is totally depraved, that God draws us to Himself by grace, that man does zero to contribute to his salvation in a way that could be called “works” and that God is completely sovereign over all creation, including human will. The difference lies, in large part, on the focus of the book. Do Christians accept salvation like a drowning man who realizes he cannot swim and chooses to

take a rope to save him or are they saved completely void of any free, self-determined choice?

Tribalism can be dangerous in politics and Christianity. I consider myself an Arminian because I think the doctrines are important. Yet I attended a Calvinist seminary, have close Calvinist friends and will gladly lock arms with them in worship and ministry any day. But I consider this topic important enough to read and write about a couple of times a year. And I am thankful yet again to Dr. Picirilli for the impetus to think about, react to and create in the sphere of theology. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to have their mind stretched, even if it is by Jonathan Edwards more so than Robert Picirilli. Because the point of the book is to debate, not pontificate. I only wish the other three men were alive to respond.

Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part One

And predators eat prey. Tornadoes destroy. Disease wastes and kills. The sun blisters. Hangnails, well, hang. And so on and so forth. Everything that lives is in the process of dying. The imperfection of nature is expressed in a hundred billion ways throughout the universe every day.

A large chunk of humankind has assumed this as all God's fault, an injustice that our supposedly good, all-powerful God is not remedying which therefore makes Him evil and/or a powerless God. There are so many things wrong with that line of thinking.

I think to fully understand it—even remotely—you must look and

think closely about some biblical teachings and concepts. This three-part series will look at 1) how the problem began, 2) life with the problem, 3) and how the problem will end. It will not be a thorough look at the issue. Not even close. The subject is way too complex for that and has been the subject of whole books. Rather this is mainly a general overview.

It all started when the free will of man and pride met to create the biggest human moral problem in the universe. Although this article is not specifically looking at the problem it created in the human heart, the human moral problem is where the whole issue started so we will look at that first.

The Corruption of Free Will

So about this thing called free will. Like everything else, God created it to be a good thing. But also like everything else it can be made into a bad thing. C.S. Lewis says "If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad...Why, then, did God give them [us] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible...makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having" (Mere Christianity, 48).

The big baddie himself, Satan, was good once but may have been the first to warp God's gift of free will. God created and made him the top angel in His kingdom, but this wasn't good enough and he chose rebellion. And then he later convinced Adam and Eve on behalf of humankind to choose to rebel too. And evil has since infected all of mankind.

Evil comes in many guises. It does not always look evil or self-centered. In fact, it can be born of a desire to do something good. Tolkien commented on this very thing. Tolkien was not only one of the greatest Fantasy writers who ever lived, but he was also a very great Christian thinker who was instrumental in converting Lewis, his best friend, to Christ.

Tolkien believed that evil is good in its originally created

form. In a letter to a prospective publisher, Tolkien related how he viewed evil: "...frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others—speedily and according to the benefactor's own plans" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 146). Yes, evil can either look good or as previously mentioned originate in a good source. Throughout his masterpiece, The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien demonstrates his view that at one time the forces of evil were originally intended by their creator to be good. Morgoth, Saruman, Sauron, Gollum—such evil forces were created good but chose to be corrupted. And trolls, orcs, and the Nazgul were originally created good ents, elves, and men, but were corrupted by evil.

Evil is also a force both outside of man and within man. At various times in history, there have been well-meaning individuals who postulated that there is either internal evil which is evil that arises in each of us or there is an evil force outside of us that makes us choose evil. Tolkien said there is both. He demonstrated this dual nature of evil in The Lord of The Rings. Through the ring, Frodo, the ring bearer, is tempted both internally and externally by the dark lord Sauron.

Frodo came to recognize, respect, and at times resist this seductive force as demonstrated in the valley of Minas Morgul in the presence of the witch-king:

"...he felt, more urgent than ever before, the command that he should put on the Ring. But great as the pressure was, he felt no inclination now to yield to it...There was no longer any answer to that command in his own will, dismayed by terror though it was, and he felt only the beating upon him of a great power from outside. It took his hand, and

as Frodo watched with his mind, not willing it but in suspense (as if he looked on some story far away), it moved the hand inch by inch towards the chain upon his neck. Then his own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back..."
(Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, 315-316)

In all its forms, evil is evil. if it is opposite of God's expressed will, that's exactly what it is. It does not matter if any man judges something to be good. Anything that is contradictory to God is evil.

The fact that God gave us entirely free wills to either choose or to reject this evil almost makes it amazing that He was able to have a plan at all. almost. Not really, though. God is divine and all-knowing of the past, present, and future so it's actually not that surprising. In His infinite knowledge, He was able to plan the entire redemptive history of man before creation even got started. The Apostle Paul spoke of a mystery, a hidden wisdom, that God ordained before the world began (1 Corinthians 2:7). The salvation act of Jesus Christ, God the Son who was God the Father, was the planned end result of all of this, but the free wills of man were left free. God knew what would we choose and planned accordingly.

Via God's long plan of salvation, we have been enabled to exert our free will again to begin the process of being returned to our perfect state one day. Frodo was eventually able to exert his free will to the good and thusly destroy the overpowering ring. That kind of exertion of our free will is necessary to begin the process of turning back the damage caused by the original corruption in the Garden of Eden. We'll come back to that in the last part of this series.

For now, all of mankind is burdened with evil. Adam and Eve made their horrible choice and because of it man was cursed.

But their bad choice affected more than just humanity. Their error also cursed the rest of creation with imperfection. Adam and Eve eventually died in a world that was increasingly hard to care for, in a land that they had had a hand in corrupting. In the second part of this series we will look at that corruption.

Choosing Catastrophe

The thing about humans making choices is that we are so bad at it. We think we know everything, but we so don't. Only God does. Only God has all the knowledge. He knows a whole lot that we don't know and will probably never know. That is why almost as important as knowing what you know is knowing what we don't know. That is, not actually knowing the facts of what we don't know, but realizing that we don't know these things. No human being has ever, ever had all the humanly knowable knowledge, much less the unknowable knowledge. As much as some may believe they can achieve such, we simply don't have all of God's complete knowledge and wisdom, and that has always put us at risk of making bad choices, choices that have so often led to our own catastrophes.

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The very first catastrophe of mankind was chosen in the Garden of Eden by the first man and woman. As our representatives, they chose our catastrophe. This choice was to choose to disobey God, to give in to Satan's temptation to sin. However, even if Adam and Eve had somehow managed to withstand Satan's temptation to commit the original sin, someone else probably would have done so. We are all just as guilty as the first

couple for we have all sinned and constantly come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We are just as susceptible to the pride that leads to catastrophe.

Although we chose and choose catastrophe, we should not ignore Satan's role in both original sin and every sin since Adam. He is the great tempter. We must always remember, Satan was created by God and has never been equal with him. The creation called Satan rebelled and so chose the life that led to his own catastrophe. Although many other things are prophesied to take place by Satan's hand before the end, according to Revelation 20:10 his final destination is the Lake of Fire where he will endure an eternal, fiery catastrophe with his armies and with all those who have chosen not to follow after Christ.

Still, the fact that man has a free will means we can't wholeheartedly blame Satan for what is bad in the world. Genesis 1:27 describes God's creation of man. The second chapter revisits this particular act of creation, giving us some added details. Genesis 2:7 says that God "formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." This in itself reveals that the human creation is special. In the first chapter God simply speaks stuff into being and that's it. He did speak man into creation as well, but He also formed him from the matter of earth and breathed life into Him.

One of the potentially bad characteristics that seems to have been in this created man even before sin is self-absorption. Satan took advantage of this characteristic to help encourage human catastrophe. Self-absorption is one aspect we share with God. God is us-absorbed, but He is also very self-absorbed. However, His is a very holy and justified self-absorption. He rightly created everything for His glory. He rightly created us so that we might glorify Him. He rightly created us with a free will so that we might choose to glorify Him. And that in itself brings Him more glory. That is God's style of self-

absorption, but a very, very, very justified self-absorption. Our self-absorption can be justified. Not all human self-absorption is morally evil. If it were, I don't think God would have created it in pre-sin man. Untamed self-absorption can be unjustified and evil and twisted. And unfortunately this warped self-absorption is a fault we all share. It is this kind of self-absorption that will rage at accepting that there is knowledge—both knowable and unknowable—that you just don't know and sometimes can't know.

That brings us back to the first divine rule that we chose to break. We chose to disobey, creating our own disease. And to our harm and shame we keep on feeding that disease. History is God's story of curing us of the disease. His is a story of bringing us back from the brink of death, the brink of our chosen catastrophe. Ours is still a choice. Choose Him, choose His will, choose to turn catastrophe into blessing once again.