

# 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.

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## **REO Pays Tribute: Dr. Robert Picirilli**

There are probably very few in the Free Will Baptist denomination who have never heard about Robert Eugene Picirilli. And if you haven't, well, why haven't you? Have you been paying attention at all? You need to get to know about this living legend pronto. In my mind, he and Leroy Forlines are the very epitome of today's Free Will Baptist theology. One of my great regrets is only managing to have Picirilli for one class in college (and Forlines not at all). The one Dr. Pic course I had was Fundamentals of Philosophy and unfortunately, my immature college self didn't fully appreciate this great man and did not pay enough attention in that one course. But since then, I have grown to truly

recognize his theological genius and denominational significance.

Picirilli was born in North Carolina in 1932. In 1949 he left his home state to become a student at Free Will Baptist Bible College where he received his B.A. in 1953. But he was only getting started. During those first years at FWBBC, he had made a commitment to God to dedicate his life to the school. So in order to be qualified for a college professorship position, he determined to pursue his higher education. To this end, he earned an M.A. in theology from [Bob Jones University](#) in 1955 and a Ph.D. in New Testament Text from the same institution in 1963. In 1967, Bob Jones University awarded him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

While still at Bob Jones, he made his move to return to FWBBC as a member of its faculty. As he recalled it in an interview by [The Helwys Society Forum](#), after attaining his M.A. he felt a pressure to apply for teacher status a little sooner than expected in order to support his growing family. (At the time he and his wife had three daughters and would later have two more.) So just after attaining his M.A. in 1955, he approached Dr. L.C. Johnson about it. It is very fortunate for the entire denomination that this other great Free Will Baptist man wisely decided to give Picirilli the position in 1955.

He has been involved with the workings of FWBBC (now [Welch College](#)) ever since. Before retiring, he had various roles including professor, registrar, academic dean, and many other crucial school-related positions. But the college is not Picirilli's only area of impact. He has also had a profound influence on the denomination and the Christian world as a whole. He is today considered one of the most respected and influential writers, teachers, and thinkers in Free Will Baptist history. Among his best literary works are Book of Galatians; Romans; Paul the Apostle; Grace, Faith, Free Will; and Discipleship. He has also been involved with the Southeastern Section [formerly Southern Section] of the

Evangelical Theological Society to which he has presented numerous papers and serving twice as the society's chairman. He has been a fellow of the Institute for Biblical Research and a member of the Research Commission of the American Association of Bible Colleges. He also frequently contributes to denominational works of discipleship, biblical instruction, and scholarship.

Picirilli retired a number of years ago and continues to reside in Nashville. In his retirement he continues to be extremely active in various ministries. He attends [Cofer's Chapel Free Will Baptist church](#) where he frequently teaches classes on various topics and regularly teaches a Sunday school class. He also remains involved with Welch, frequently engages in various scholarly studies, is a much sought after revival preacher at churches all over the country, and currently serves as chairman and treasurer of the Free Will Baptist Historical Commission.[1. He even contributed to an article for [Rambling Ever On.](#)]

