

Title: John Edwards (1637-1716) on the Freedom of the Will: The Debate on the Relation between Divine Necessity and Human Freedom in Late Seventeenth-Century and Early Eighteenth-Century England

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines John Edwards' (1637-1716) doctrine of free choice, focusing on his understanding of the relation between divine necessity and human freedom as an illustration of the way Reformed theologians of the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century developed their ideas of human free choice. Even though free choice is an important theme in the history of Reformed theology, Reformed teaching on free choice has gained much less attention by modern scholars than other Reformed themes such as faith, grace and predestination. Moreover, the traditional Reformed doctrine of free choice has been frequently criticized as metaphysical or philosophical determinism by modern scholars. The crux of this evaluation or criticism is the claim that the classical Reformed doctrine of divine necessity such as divine decree, predestination, foreknowledge, providence, and grace rule out human freedom or contingency of events in the world.

Filling the historiographical gap, this dissertation raises a fundamental question concerning the criticism of the Reformed doctrine of free choice in relationship to divine necessity as determinism. Unlike the deterministic interpretation of traditional Reformed thought on free choice, the substantive and careful study of Edwards' writings on free choice in the intellectual context of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century shows that in Edwards' view, human beings retain the natural freedom from compulsion and freedom of contrary choice even after the Fall, and divine necessity such as decree, predestination, foreknowledge, providence, and grace does not exclude human free choice at all. Therefore, in so far as human freedom and contingencies are maintained by Edwards, especially with respect to divine necessity, his thought does not conform to the stereotype of Reformed theology as a deterministic system. Consequently, the examination of Edwards' view of free choice points toward the need for a broad reassessment of Reformed understanding of free choice in the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras.