



WITTENBERG BEER

EPISODE 2: THE TOPICS AND FREE WILL

Outline

- I. The topics
 - A. Melancthon enumerates several topics under which the Christian faith can be organized. (See page 23 of *Commonplaces* for his list).
 - B. The topics that deal with the divine majesty, or the inner nature of God, should not be investigated, but adored.
 - C. Before Melancthon even gets to the first topic of sin, he deals with the topic of human powers and free will.
- II. On human powers and free will
 - A. The historical context
 1. Medieval humanism focused on human powers and accomplishments. Melancthon and many of his contemporaries were humanists scholars.
 2. The great debate between Erasmus, a humanist scholar, and Martin Luther produced two works: Erasmus's *The Freedom of the Will* and Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*. Many of the ideas that Luther dealt with in *The Bondage of the Will* Melancthon also covers in his *Commonplaces*.
 3. Melancthon references some old authors and newer authors who wrote on free will, but he says nearly every one of them got it wrong because they failed to make a fundamental distinction.
 - B. The distinction of philosophy and doctrine
 1. The free will can be dealt with according to philosophy and reason, which considers human powers externally.

2. Christian doctrine considers free will according to inward motions and dispositions.

C. The extent of human freedom

1. The Bible does not speak of “reason” or “free will” in the way that philosophy understands these things.
 - a. When the Bible speaks of “reason” or “reasoning,” for example, in Acts 18:4, it is reasoning based upon the Word of God.
 - b. When the Bible speaks of “freedom,” for example in Galatians 5:1, it is not a freedom *of the will*, but a freedom from the captors of sin, death, and the devil.
2. Human powers can be divided into the faculty of knowing and the faculty of pursuing or resisting what is known (the will).
3. The medieval definition of “free will” is “the will as it is joined with knowledge or with intellectual judgment.” Unlike animal will, which acts on pure instinct, knowledge and judgment control the will on this view.
4. But the faculty of knowledge is not free. You cannot choose to understand something or not to understand something. It proceeds naturally, prior to an act of the will.
5. Even though we can choose to act with or against knowledge, this does not mean that we have free will. Moreover, the will often acts against better knowledge.
6. We must also deal with divine predestination, but that is a topic that is better suited toward the end of a systematic treatment of theological topics.

D. Six statements and a summary of human powers and free will

1. There is some freedom in external works, according to natural powers.
2. Inner affections are not under our control.
3. Humans often choose something different than desire; one emotion is overruled by another.
4. Or something is chosen completely contrary to affections.
5. Corrupt desires are not only a mild infirmity; God considers inward disposition above outward behavior.

6. God requires purity of heart.

- E. Summary: Humans have some ability, some freedom to make choices, but not absolute freedom. Desires, dispositions, and affections come about apart from will and choice, and they cannot be adequately judged by external works.