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More on the Death of Jesus and Its Meaning

For Paul, Christ did not merely die but died *for sins*. His death determines the value of his life and, in turn, determines our relationship to God. Christ's death comes under the topic of atonement; its benefits come under the topic of justification. Since the apostolic period both doctrines have been interpreted differently. One understanding of Christ's death as atonement has been more prominent than others at different times in history. By concentrating on one understanding and not giving sufficient attention to others, the church falls into error. The same is also true for justification. In this issue, we continue the discussion on the atonement that began in the July 2008 issue (*CTQ* 72:3) and expand it to include justification. William C. Weinrich shows that Adam's transgression was not just another sin among others: the fall corrupted our human nature and thus immortality was replaced with death. According to Athanasius this could only be resolved by the divine Word assuming human nature and dying to offer atonement. Naomichi Masaki shows that many contemporary views fit under "Christ died for sins." Some develop previously undeveloped aspects. Other understandings are so false that the totality of Christianity is corrupted. Prominent in Luther studies is Tuomo Mannermaa, who holds that for the Reformer justification takes place by the indwelling of the deity in the believer. Timo Laato correlates the doctrine of justification as held by Mannermaa and his Finnish Luther School with the views of the Reformation-era theologian Andreas Osiander and traditional Roman Catholicism. Jonathan Edwards brings to mind an early colonial American theologian who outdid John Calvin in his sermon on sinners in the hands of an angry God. Lawrence R. Rast Jr. traces how Edwards, in attempting to ameliorate a severe doctrine of predestination by allowing faith to be the individual's voluntary response, introduced Arminianism into the core of his theology. We hope these articles enrich your understanding of Jesus' death and its benefits.

For those who enjoy early Missouri Synod history, a contribution in the *Theological Observer* section discusses an event among our spiritual ancestors that has been often passed over, maybe with good reason.

David P. Scaer
Editor

Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Mention the name Jonathan Edwards to Lutherans and images of hellfire and brimstone preaching spring immediately to mind. Those familiar with Edwards, who is held up as the greatest preacher of the First Great Awakening, have likely first come to know him through his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which one commentator has called "the most famous sermon ever delivered in the history of America."¹ In what is perhaps the best-known part of his best-known sermon, Edwards writes:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.²

What is not so well known is that, shocking as such sentiments are to Lutherans, they emerge from a consistent Calvinism on Edwards' part. The so-called Great Awakening that Edwards helped to engender initially stemmed not from preaching "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" but from a series of discourses on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Edwards facilely and consistently used the language of "justification by faith" and preached and taught on it throughout his ministry. What Edwards meant by justification by faith and what Lutherans mean by it, however, are different things.

Thomas Shafer has written: "there are important elements in Edwards' religious thought which cause the doctrine of justification to occupy an ambiguous and somewhat precarious place in his theology."³ If Schafer's claim is true, the picture of Edwards as a theologian firmly entrenched in

¹ John D. Currid, foreword to *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, by Jonathan Edwards (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 3.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 23-24.

³ Thomas A. Shafer, "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," *Church History* 20 (December 1951): 57.

the Calvinist tradition will have to be redrawn. If it is spurious, then we still face a difficulty: What would cause one of the leading interpreters of Edwards' thought to such a conclusion? Whether Shafer's statement is fact or fiction can only be determined by posing such questions as: Where does the doctrine of justification by faith alone fit in Jonathan Edwards' theology? Could Edwards integrate his doctrine of justification, with his stress on the internal character of the infusion of grace that turns the inclination to its proper goal, into the traditional Calvinist (Reformation) emphasis on the external and declaratory understanding of justification? In short, the real question is, could Edwards find a place for the doctrine of justification in his system?

Edwards could, and he did so by subtly modifying his classical Calvinistic understanding of justification. Edwards' soteriology will be drawn from his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, *Original Sin*, and "Justification by Faith Alone." Also included is Edwards' critique of Arminianism to show how Edwards integrates justification by faith into his larger system of thought. Far from holding a "precarious" place in his thought, Edwards' stress on the human act of faith in justification fits well with his conception of the manner in which the human will wills.

To do this, Edwards shifted Calvinism's traditional stance by stressing the human act of faith. While he saw justification as the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner, he stressed that it was logically consequent to the real union of the Christian with Christ by faith. In other words, justification as a forensic declaration on the basis of the imputed merits of Christ is based on the volitional union of the Christian with Christ, which occurs by faith. Edwards wanted to maintain both the primacy of God's act and the integrity of the human will. He based justification on God's grace infused into the believer but then required the real consent of the human act of faith. What is *real*—the act of faith—is the basis of what is *legal*—the imputation of Christ's righteousness and forensic decree of "not guilty."⁴

From a Lutheran perspective, Jonathan Edwards reinterpreted justification by grace through faith. In the final analysis, one cannot avoid concluding that Edwards, though he tried to maintain a place for the

⁴ This phrase figures prominently in the fine dissertation by Anri Morimoto, "The Reality of Salvation in the Soteriology of Jonathan Edwards" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1991).

traditional Reformation understanding of justification by faith, actually opened the door for the triumph of Arminianism.⁵

I. Soteriology and the Human Will in Edwards

When Jonathan Edwards died shortly after becoming president of the College of New Jersey in 1758, he left uncompleted his "Rational Account." This was to be a systematic theology in which he intended to treat the theory and practice of Christianity *in toto*, and to provide an integrated theological system. Up to this point in his life he had produced several significant treatises that dealt at length with certain aspects of the Christian message but not a comprehensive treatment.

Edwards published his major soteriological treatises, *Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *Original Sin*, between 1746 and 1758.⁶ These were lengthy and careful theological treatments, but not one covered the range of Edwards' soteriology. By taking the three as a whole, one can piece together an Edwardsean soteriology.

Edwards begins with original sin. Human experience and history show that all people sin. This universal experience of sin finds its root in the sin of Adam and its imputation to his seed. God's act of imputation, however, is not arbitrary. Edwards wrote:

As Adam's nature became corrupt, without God's implanting or infusing any evil thing into his nature; so does the nature of his *posterity*. God dealing with Adam as the head of his posterity . . . and treating them as one, he deals with his posterity as having *all sinned in him*. And therefore, as God withdrew spiritual communion and his vital gracious influence from the common head, so he withholds the same from all the members, as they come into the world mere flesh, and entirely under the government of natural and inferior principles; and so become wholly corrupt, as Adam did.⁷

⁵ Klemet Preus explores the fundamental conflict between Edwards' "style" of preaching and the Calvinistic doctrine he sought so desperately to uphold; see "Jonathan Edwards: A Case of Medium Message Conflict," *CTQ* 48 (1984): 279-297. My article builds on Preus's in treating the technical character of the theological shift that Edwards' Calvinism comprised and the manner in which it opened the door to Arminianism.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959); *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957); *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970). [Hereafter *Works* volume: page number.]

⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:383.

People, by their actual sins, consent to the sin of Adam and, based on their choice, God imputes to them what they wish. Adam's sin becomes their sin by their desiring it. All people sin because their inclination is toward the evil. Thus, they cannot engage themselves in actions that are pleasing to God. Only through the turning of man's inclinations to God can man come to choose the good.

The key question then becomes, how can human beings with inclinations to evil turn themselves to the good? Edwards answers that they cannot:

Tell me [how] a man that has no true grace within him shall begin to exercise it: before he begins to exercise it, he must have some of it. How shall [he] act virtuously the first time? how [sic] came he by that virtue which he then acted? Certainly not [by] exercise of virtue, for it supposes that he never acted virtuously before, and therefore could not get it by acting of it before.⁸

God shifts the orientation of sinners to himself, by infusing into the person a new principle. This alone God can do. This infused divine principle is described this way: "The Spirit of God in his spiritual influences on the heart of his saints, operates by infusing or exercising new, divine, and supernatural principles; principles which are indeed a new and spiritual nature, and principles vastly more noble and excellent than all that is in natural man."⁹

Edwards speaks of the nature of conversion in terms of a divine *creatio ex nihilo* where "God by his mighty power produces something that is new."¹⁰ It is a new vital principle that turns the sinner from self glorification and obsessive self love to love of God. Infusion does not, however, violate the integrity of the human personality. It does not change the way the human will wills. Instead, God lays a new foundation that corrects the structure of the existing building.

The new dispositions that attend it, are no new *faculties*, but new *principles* of nature. . . . By a *principle of nature* in this place, I mean that foundation which is laid in nature, either old or new, for any particular manner or kind of exercise of the faculties of the soul. . . . This new spiritual sense is

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies No. 73," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 242.

⁹ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:207.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:205.

not a new faculty of understanding, but it is a new foundation laid in the nature of the soul.¹¹

Edwards was concerned about protecting the integrity of the human will. His *Freedom of the Will* sought to refute the Arminian notion that Calvinism was fatalistic—that it forced the human being into choosing things against its will. The will is not forced to do things it does not want to do. Edwards' Arminian opponents argued that if a person's actions are determined in any sense, then the freedom to choose is compromised. The will must be indifferent (morally neutral) or else it cannot will. Edwards countered that such an indifferent will is an impossibility. To will is to choose, Edwards argued, but the will that is under the power of sin chooses what is evil in God's sight. Because human beings have assented to the sin of Adam, their wills are determined to choose the evil. That is not to say that the way in which the will wills has been affected, that it is forced to choose what it does not want. The will always chooses what it desires most. To will is to choose, and all humankind retains this capability. What changes, Edwards argues in both *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*, are the decisions that human beings make. Sin and its resultant misdirected inclinations determine the direction of man's choice, but the will chooses exactly what it desires. What people choose fits with their inclination; they choose what they want and get what they choose.

God infuses in the sinner a new "vital principle" in the soul that redirects the disposition of sinful humans and inclines them to choose the good. Thus, the divine principle or nature must be communicated prior to the exercise of the will.¹² The person receives the Holy Spirit "in his own proper nature," which acts as a "vital principle" in the soul. The infusion of grace reorients the sinner toward God. The person then wills the good and unites himself with Christ. The turning, however, does not change the manner in which human faculties function, nor does it add faculties to the person. The will continues to will as it did before. What changes is the object of its desire. Where before it chose evil, now it desires the good.

¹¹ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:206.

¹² Consider "Miscellanies No. 77": "There must be the principle before there can be the action, in all cases; there must be alteration made in the heart of the sinner before there can be action consequent upon this alteration; yea, there must be a principle of holiness before holiness is in exercise. Yea, this alteration must not only be before this act of faith in nature (as the cause before the effect) but also in time . . ."; one may also see "Miscellanies No. 289": "It's evident that the habit of grace is always begun by an act of grace. . . ." See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 245, 381.

II. Edwards' Opposition to the Arminian "Scheme"

Jonathan Edwards sought, through the previously discussed works, to overcome Arminianism by upholding the Reformed tradition, of which he considered himself an heir. The lack of references to justification by faith alone, one of the cardinal doctrines of the Reformation, is striking.¹³ That is not to say that the doctrine fails to appear. Edwards consistently, though infrequently, refers specifically to the idea of justification by faith. There is little in the way of detailed treatment of the subject, however, and no genuine attempt to integrate it into his overall theological system. The one place where Edwards treated the doctrine at length was in a series of sermons on justification by faith. By surveying Edwards' sermon "Justification by Faith Alone," this study will show, contrary to Shafer's contention, that justification by faith and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to human beings did hold a well-founded place in Edwards' theology.

Edwards' sermons on justification by faith were driven by the same threat that would inspire much of his life's work: Arminianism.¹⁴ As he would later recount in *A Faithful Narrative*:

About this time [1734], began the great noise that was in this part of the country about Arminianism. . . . The friends of vital piety trembled for fear of the issue; but it seemed, contrary to their fear, strongly to be overruled for the promoting of religion. Many who looked on themselves as in a Christless condition, seemed to be awakened by it, with fear that God was about to withdraw from the land, and that we should be given

¹³ The paucity of Edwards' treatment of justification by faith is paralleled in the Edwards literature. Works treating the subject are almost as scarce as Edwards' direct references. Thomas Shafer treated the topic in an article long ago; see "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," 55-67. The subject appears in Perry Miller's biography of Edwards, but Miller does not believe it drives the life of the Edwards' mind by any means; see *Jonathan Edwards* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 74-77. Dorus P. Rudisill's *Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and His Successors* (New York: Poseidon Book, 1971) treats Edwards' doctrine of redemption. Conrad Cherry's treatment of faith in Edwards' theology comprises seventeen pages; see *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (1966; repr., Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 91-106. More recently Samuel T. Logan, Jr., has written "The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 26-52, and Robert W. Jenson produced *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 53-64.

¹⁴ For his sermon, "Justification by Faith Alone," see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 147-242.

up to heterodoxy and corrupt principles; and that their opportunity for obtaining salvation would be past; and many who were brought a little to doubt about the truth of the doctrines they had hitherto been taught, seemed to have a kind of trembling fear with their doubts, lest they should be led into bypaths, to their eternal undoing: and they seemed with much concern and engagedness of mind, to inquire what was indeed the way in which they must come to be accepted with God. There were then some things said publicly on that occasion concerning justification by faith alone.¹⁵

Edwards attributed the initiation of the great work of God in the awakening to the sermons on justification.¹⁶ He believed that as he faithfully proclaimed the message of Scripture, God worked grace in the hearts of sinful people.¹⁷

The words of Paul in Romans 4:5 formed the center of his message: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."¹⁸ With the doctrine of the Reformation clearly in mind, Edwards concludes that "we are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own."¹⁹ The person who by faith unites himself to Christ receives the

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 148.

¹⁶ See the preface to "Justification by Faith Alone," in *The Works of President Edwards*, vol. 6, *Five Discourses on Important Subjects, nearly concerning the Great Affair of the Soul's Eternal Salvation: viz. Justification by Faith Alone. II. Pressing into the Kingdom of God. III. Ruth's Resolution. IV. The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners. V. The Excellency of Jesus Christ. Delivered at Northhampton, Chiefly at the Time of the Late Wonderful Pouring Out of the Spirit of God There* (London: n.p., 1817; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 209-212. This work was originally published in Boston by S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1738. See also C. C. Goen, introduction to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, by Jonathan Edwards (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 4-18.

¹⁷ The contrast between Edwards' word-centered theology and the later psychological manipulation characteristic of Charles Finney and his theological heirs must be noted. In particular, many Lutherans seem to equate the preaching of the First Great Awakening with revivalistic developments of the Second Great Awakening. In fact, Edwards attributed salvation completely to the work of God, whereas Charles Finney believed that "religion is the work of man. It is something for man to do. It consists in obeying God. It is man's duty." Further, Finney believed that "a revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means"; see *Revival Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 1, 5.

¹⁸ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:147.

¹⁹ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:149.

double blessing of remission of sins and a righteous status in God's sight. Works done by the person cannot bring the favor of God; only by faith can the benefits of Christ's suffering and obedience become the sinner's own. Faith is the instrument by which a person receives or brings about "union" with Christ. The union of the Christian with Christ makes possible the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Justification is not simply an initial pardon of sin but a real uniting of the Christian with Christ that results in the forensic declaration of "not guilty" to the sinner. In other words, "What is *real* in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is *legal*."²⁰

Edwards insisted that God does not look upon any of the works of a person in effecting justification. He rejected the Arminian conviction that human beings contributed to their salvation. The notion that human works had any place in the justification of the sinner before God was abhorrent to Calvinism in two ways. First, it compromised the glory of God and God's absolute sovereignty, as exhibited most concretely in the election of some to salvation and the reprobation of others to damnation. Second, it compromised the work of Christ. Edwards wrote:

The adverse scheme lays another foundation of man's salvation than God hath laid. . . . [T]hat scheme supposes it to be men's own virtue It takes away Christ out of the place of the bottom stone, and puts in men's own virtue in the room of him: so that Christ himself in the affair of distinguishing actual salvation, is laid upon this foundation.²¹

The "bottom stone" in this controversy for Edwards, then, was his conclusion that Arminianism based salvation in part on human efforts, thereby denigrating the work of God in Christ. If human salvation depends in any sense on the efforts and achievements of man, then Christ's death was not really necessary. With these twin denials in mind, Edwards stakes out his ground clearly at the opening of the discourse.

God in the act of justification, has no regard to anything in the person justified, as godliness, or any goodness in him; but that nextly, or

²⁰ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:158 (emphasis added).

²¹ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:238. The second of the two critiques is the more important one for Edwards here. Sovereignty, however, lies in the near background. Consider also the following: "In their scheme, a regard to man's own excellency or virtue is supposed to be first, and to have the place of the first foundation in actual salvation, though not in that ineffectual redemption, which they suppose common to all: *they lay the foundation of all discriminating salvation in man's own virtue and moral excellency*: this is the very bottom stone in this affair; for they suppose that it is from regard to our virtue, that even a special interest in Christ itself is given"; see Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:218 (emphasis added).

immediately before this act, God beholds him only as an ungodly or wicked creature; so that godliness in the person to be justified is not so antecedent to his justification as to be the ground of it.²²

The preceding critique is generally true of any system that seeks to make salvation a cooperative enterprise between human beings and God.²³ Edwards seems to have had something more specific in mind. What was the peculiar essence of the Arminianism he faced, the "Adverse Scheme" as he called it? Moreover, how would his understanding of this threat help him to outline the doctrine of justification within his theological system?

In answer to the first of these questions, Edwards' Arminian opponents insisted that they needed the work of Christ to attain salvation; however, their understanding of the nature and application of that work differed markedly from Edwards' understanding. The point at issue was human obedience to God's law. The Arminians argued that God gave to Adam the "old law." This old law required perfect obedience of human beings to attain the beatific vision. With the fall into sin, however, human beings proved themselves incapable of strict adherence to the demands of the law. So God, in mercy, "abolished that rigorous constitution or law . . . and has put us under a new law."²⁴ The new law does not demand perfect obedience of human beings. It asks only for "imperfect, sincere obedience."²⁵ God in mercy requires only that of which humans are capable of accomplishing. Commanding anything greater would be unjust on the part of God. "They strenuously maintain that it would be unjust in God to require any thing of us that is beyond our present power and ability to perform."²⁶

Edwards countered that if God's new law demands of and exacts from humans only as much as they are capable of accomplishing, what need is there then for a savior? If human beings can fulfill the demands of God's law, then why would Christ have to enter the world to suffer and die? The Arminians answered: to satisfy God for human imperfection. God still demands perfect obedience, and because humans cannot attain that

²² Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:147.

²³ Robert Jenson states: "'Arminianism' is our inevitable self-serving interpretation of human responsibility over against God's mercy, according to which if we are blessed it is at least partly because we have chosen and labored to be, while when we suffer God is suddenly invoked for our unilateral rescue"; see *America's Theologian*, 53–54.

²⁴ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:165.

²⁵ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:166.

²⁶ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:166.

perfection, "Christ died to satisfy for the imperfections of our obedience, that so our imperfect obedience might be accepted instead of perfect."²⁷

Such a system is nonsense for Edwards; it depreciates the work of Christ. If followed to its reasonable end, there is no real need for Christ as savior from sin because there is no need for perfect obedience. Edwards wrote:

They say it would not be just in God to exact of us perfect obedience, because it would not be just in God to require more of us than we can perform in our present state, and to punish us for failing of it; and therefore by their own scheme the imperfections of our obedience don't deserve to be punished: what need therefore of Christ's dying to satisfy for them? What need of Christ's suffering to satisfy for that which is no fault, and in its own nature deserves no suffering? What need of Christ's dying to purchase that our imperfect obedience should be accepted, when according to their scheme it would be unjust in itself that any other obedience than imperfect should be required? What need of Christ's dying to make way for God's accepting such an obedience, as it would in itself be unjust in him not to accept? Is there any need of Christ's dying to persuade God not to do unjustly?²⁸

In other words, in the adverse scheme, imperfect obedience is perfect obedience.

It follows that if human beings have no real need for a savior, then there is no imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Logically, there is no lack of righteousness in the Arminian system. An imputation of righteousness to an individual presupposes an absence or at least an inadequacy on that person's part; but if imperfect obedience is all that God requires, then human beings lack nothing.

Rejection of the imputation of Christ's obedience to sinful human beings, Edwards believed, showed the true nature of the Arminian system. For him, if the imputation of Christ's righteousness is rejected, then there is only one possible alternative. The Arminian system, said Edwards, rests throughout all its parts on one thing: the works of human beings.

III. The Relationship between Faith and Justification in Edwards

As a Calvinist theologian in the Reformed tradition, Edwards sought to guard the notion of God's glory in all its applications. Anything that compromised God's majesty, particularly in the work of redemption, had to be rejected. In "Justification by Faith Alone," Edwards wanted to reject

²⁷ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:166.

²⁸ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:166.

the Arminian scheme of justification because it “manifestly takes from, or diminishes the grace of God.”²⁹ This section examines how Edwards faced the Arminian challenge and what his positive construction of the doctrine of justification is.

The greatest danger of Arminianism is that “it puts man in Christ’s stead, and makes him his own savior, in a respect, in which Christ only is his Savior.”³⁰ Most striking in this statement of the doctrine is the language of denial of the vicarious atonement. Arminians err by setting themselves in Christ’s place—the righteous one in the stead of the sinner. Inclined to sin from birth, human beings cannot choose to love the good, that is, to be obedient to the demands of God’s law. Christ fulfills this obedience in the place of the sinner. The very honor and glory of Christ is his satisfactory obedience to the law of God as he stands in the stead of the rebellious sinner. Thus any system that downgrades the necessity of Christ’s vicarious work denigrates the very work of God. Christ is obedient specifically so his righteousness can be credited to the accounts of sinful humans.³¹

Crucial is Edwards’ understanding of imputation, which appears in several of his works. Edwards speaks of it in at least three ways. First is the problem of the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. Edwards addresses this topic most clearly in *Original Sin*. When God dealt with Adam, God dealt with him as the head of the human race, “as the head of the whole body, and the root of the whole tree.”³² Although Edwards uses the traditional Reformed language of federal headship, he does so with a twist. When Adam sinned, a loss occurred in him. The divine love and the image of God left the heart of Adam when he sinned. Sin interrupted communion with God, and God the Holy Spirit forsook Adam.³³ God *then* imputed to Adam Adam’s own sin, and he imputes sin to Adam’s posterity as well. The consequence is an inclination to evil, which causes everyone to participate in Adam’s sin, resulting in God imputing to each of

²⁹ Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:183.

³⁰ Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:185.

³¹ Consider also this statement from Edwards’ sermon “The Excellency of Christ”: “And he suffered from the Father, as one whose demerits were infinite, by reason of our demerits that were laid upon him. And yet it was especially by that act of his subjecting himself to those sufferings, that he merited, and on the account of which chiefly he was accounted worthy of, the glory of his exaltation”; see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 579.

³² Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:389.

³³ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:381–382.

them individually their own sin of participating in Adam's transgression. Each human being has "an evil disposition in the heart. . . whereby he is disposed to *approve* of the sin of his first father, as full as he himself approved of it when he committed it."³⁴ This participation in Adam's sin is not a "consequence of the imputation of that first sin . . . but rather *prior* to it."³⁵ What is imputed to Adam's posterity is the sin of participation that they have committed for themselves. By sinning, the child of Adam gets what he wants and deserves and therefore the imputation by God of sin is entirely just.

From what has been observed it may appear, there is no sure ground to conclude, that it must be an absurd and impossible thing, for the race of mankind truly to partake of the sin of the first apostacy, so as that this, in reality and propriety, shall become *their* sin; by virtue of a real union between the root and branches of the world of mankind (truly and properly availing to such a consequence) established by the Author of the whole system of the universe; to whose establishment is owing all propriety and reality of union, in any part of that system; and by virtue of the full consent of the hearts of Adam's posterity to the first apostacy. And therefore the sin of the apostacy is not theirs, merely because God *imputes* it to them; but it is *truly* and *properly* theirs, and on that ground, God imputes it to them.³⁶

The legal imputation of sin to Adam's heirs is based on their actual participation in his sin. In imputing this sin to them, God is not unjust, since they chose what they wanted. God merely allows them to have their desires.

The other two kinds of imputation deal with Christ. First the sins of humanity are imputed to Christ. God's justice demands that both the law's requirements and the penalty for the breaking of the law be fulfilled. Christ bore both the sins and the penalty for sin in his own body. "And he suffered as though guilty from God himself, by reason of our guilt imputed to him; for he who knew no sin, was made sin for us, he was made subject to wrath, as if he had been sinful himself. He is made a curse for us."³⁷ As in the case of Adam's sin, the imputation to Christ is contingent upon a prior act. Christ chooses to bear the sin of rebellious humanity, to bear their penalty so that they may have atonement for those sins. By suffering that penalty he wins righteousness.

³⁴ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:391.

³⁵ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:391.

³⁶ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:407-408.

³⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works* 3:414.

The righteousness Christ earns is not required for him, but he gains it to credit it to the deficient accounts of others. This imputation is Edwards' chief concern in "Justification by Faith Alone." Imputation in this sense consists in the moral obedience of Christ, which "is accepted for us, and admitted instead of that perfect inherent righteousness which ought to be in ourselves."³⁸

Christ's righteousness consists in his willing obedience in the place of sinful humanity. Edwards insists throughout this section that the work of Christ is completely what is traditionally called the active obedience. Protestant scholasticism had differentiated between the active obedience of Christ (his fulfilling of the law) and his passive obedience (his suffering and death). Edwards consistently puts these two aspects of Christ's work under the active obedience.

We are as much saved by the death of Christ, as his yielding himself to die was an act of obedience, as we are, as it was a propitiation for our sins: for as it was not the only act of obedience that merited, he having performed meritorious acts of obedience through the whole course of his life; so neither was it the only suffering that was propitiatory; all his sufferings through the whole course of his life being propitiatory, as well as every act of obedience meritorious: indeed this was his principal suffering; and it was as much his principal act of obedience.³⁹

The correlative to Christ's active obedience is that God imputes Christ's righteousness to those who actively believe. As believers unite themselves to Christ by faith, God imputes to them the righteousness of Christ and declares them justified. "A person is said to be *justified* when he is approved of God as free from the guilt of sin, and its deserved punishment, and as having that righteousness belonging to him that entitles to the reward of life."⁴⁰ At this point it begins to become clear that faith precedes justification.

The critical question is how this righteousness comes to be imputed to the sinner. Is it an arbitrary act by God? Does the sinner grasp and take hold of it apart from the workings of God's grace? Edwards would answer

³⁸ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:185-186.

³⁹ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:198. See also page 195: "The sufferings of Christ are respected in Scripture under a two-fold consideration, either merely as his being substituted for us, or put into our stead, in suffering the penalty of the law; and so his sufferings are considered as a satisfaction and propitiation for sin: or as he in obedience to a law, or command of the Father, voluntarily submitted himself to those sufferings, and actively yielded himself up to bear them; and so they are considered as his righteousness, and a part of his active obedience."

⁴⁰ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:150.

“no” to both. He strives to maintain the free act of grace on God’s part, while simultaneously maintaining the necessity of the individual to choose God’s good.

The key is faith, because faith is the instrument through which human beings receive Christ and thus unite themselves to God. Faith is not, as the Arminians imply, a course of obedience undertaken by the Christian that God rewards with justification. Faith is “believing on him that justifies the ungodly.”⁴¹ Belief in the gracious, justifying God is more than simple assent for Edwards. There is a corresponding action on the part of the human subject.

’Tis most certain, both from Scripture and reason, that there must be a reception of Christ with the faculties of the soul in order to salvation [sic] by him; and that in this reception there is a believing of what we are taught in the gospel concerning him and salvation by him; and that it must be a consent of the will or an agreeableness between the disposition of the soul and those doctrines.⁴²

There is a *reception* and this reception is of *Christ* by means of the faculties of the soul. Man exercises faith as an instrument and actively receives Christ first by understanding the message of the gospel and second by willing to make Christ his own.⁴³ As the disposition is turned from evil to good the soul consents to the grace of God, unites itself with Christ, and receives the benefits of Christ’s obedience.⁴⁴ Thus justification is dependent upon faith and is logically consequent to it. “It seems manifest that justification is by the first act of faith, in some respects, in a peculiar manner, because a sinner is actually and finally justified as soon as he has performed one act of faith; and faith in its first acts does, virtually at least, depend on God for perseverance, and entitles to this among other benefits.”⁴⁵ In short, what is real—the union between Christ and his people effected by faith—is the foundation of what is legal—imputation of Christ’s righteousness.⁴⁶ It is Christ and his righteousness “in us,” received

⁴¹ Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:148.

⁴² Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies No. 27b,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The “Miscellanies”* (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500), ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 213.

⁴³ See Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:227: “For it is doubtless of the essence of justifying faith, to embrace Christ as a Savior from sin and its punishment, and all that is contained in that act is contained in the nature of faith itself.”

⁴⁴ See Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:207: “Faith unites to Christ, and so gives a congruity to justification.”

⁴⁵ Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:201-202.

⁴⁶ Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *Works* 19:158.

by faith, that is the "bottom stone" of the justification of the sinner before God.

Neither are we to understand by God's righteousness, in the New Testament, only a state of justification of God's mere grace, and in which man himself has nothing to do; but also that inherent holiness that is in the heart of the Christian, as being owing not at all unto man, to his own mere motion and natural power, but as being entirely communicated from God through Jesus Christ. The law requires that [we] obey the precepts of it, and supposes that we are to do it of our own natural power; but this way can never obtain righteousness. But the holiness of Christians is merely and entirely a reflection of God's light, or communication of God's righteousness, and not one joy of it is owing to ourselves. 'Tis wholly a creature of God's, a new creature; 'tis Christ within us. 'Tis not our holiness or our righteousness any otherwise than as a gift; not as our offspring or progeny, nor as our natural right, nor because we make any additions to it, or because it is of our preservation. Every motion and action of grace is Christ living in us, and nothing else.⁴⁷

IV. Conclusion

As a Calvinist, Edwards wanted to maintain both the primacy of God's act in salvation and to incorporate the integrity of the human will, which was essential to Enlightenment thought. Classical Calvinism stressed the activity of God and the absolute passivity of man in salvation. God predestines individuals to salvation or reprobation. God imputes the righteousness of Christ to individuals and declares them not guilty. Edwards did all he could to maintain this sovereign activity of God. His battles with the Arminians, however, forced him to maintain a careful balance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of the human subject. He wanted to protect the integrity of the human personality and the freedom of the will. He shifted the notion of imputation away from an arbitrary act of God, so that imputation was dependent on an act of the human will, not the decision of God. Imputation depended on faith. In fact, justification depended upon the act of faith. The unintended but real effect was that Edwards stressed the human side in the salvation equation more than the divine. The ironic result was that while Edwards sought to maintain a consistent Calvinism, he opened the door to a full capitulation to the Arminian scheme. The classical Calvinists were satisfied to state: "Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them,

⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies No. 66" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 236.

but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone."⁴⁸ For Edwards, on the other hand, faith became the means by which the human subject "closed with Christ."

[Faith] is that by which the soul, that before was separate, and alienated from Christ, *unites itself to him*, or ceases to be any longer in that state of alienation, and comes into that forementioned union or relation to him, or to use the Scripture phrase, that 'tis that by which the soul COMES TO Christ, and RECEIVES him.⁴⁹

Arminians believed that forensic justification on the basis of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as set forth by Edwards compromised the human personality. By an arbitrary act of God, it gave to men something that was not rightfully theirs, namely the righteousness of Christ. In "Justification by Faith Alone," Edwards tried to show a logical consistency between forensic imputation and human volition. He employed a similar strategy in his other soteriological treatises. Edwards' argument for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner in "Justification by Faith Alone" is logically consistent with his argument for the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity in *Original Sin*. Imputation is not the only basis of sin or grace in a person's experience. It is solely the legal basis. It, in turn, rests on the real basis of participation in Adam's sin or in Christ's righteousness. Edwards wanted to maintain both the primacy of God's act and the integrity of the human will. Justification is based on God's grace infused into the human soul but also requires the real consent of the human act of faith. By stressing the active, volitional character of faith and fitting the doctrine of justification by faith into his thought logically and consistently, Edwards provided a secure place for justification by faith in his theology. Simultaneously, though, he departed from a strict Reformed understanding of the justification of the sinner before God and allowed the camel's nose of Arminianism into Calvinism's tent. Little more than a generation after his death, strict Calvinism had largely disappeared from the American theological scene, and with it the doctrine of imputation disappeared generally from most theological treatises. Nineteenth-century Arminians saw Edwards as their hero of the faith.

⁴⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "The Westminster Confession of Faith," in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1991), 6.068.

⁴⁹ Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Works* 19:157 (emphasis added).