

JONATHAN EDWARDS'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)¹ is recognized as a figure of critical importance among students and scholars from a wide range of disciplines and from varying positions on the political and theological spectrum. There are a number of reasons for the strong interest in him. Among them is the fact that Edwards emphasized the primacy of human reason and validated the need and importance of the human experience in religious life. He is also considered the theological father of the Great Awakening that took place in America between 1730 and 1760, which stressed the need for a personal experience of conversion and a transformed life of holiness on the theological ground of the gospel revealed in Sacred Scripture as understood by Protestant, or Reformed, theology. According to Reformed thought, one of the most vital elements of that gospel is the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the material cause of the Reformation.² Edwards himself claimed that the awakening revivals began in his own church after he preached two sermons on that great biblical truth.³ In the preface to the published edition of these sermons, Edwards wrote, "The following discourse of justification . . . seemed to be remarkably blessed, not only to establish the judgments of many in this truth, but to have engaged their

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For biographical information on Jonathan Edwards, see George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (London: Yale, 2003); Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloan, 1949); Ian H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000); Stephen J. Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Henry Bamford Parkes, *Jonathan Edwards: The Fiery Puritan* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1930).

2 Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1988), 67-94.

3 "Just when the people of the region were in an 'unusual ruffle' over Arminianism, Edwards preached a two-part public lecture sermon on 'Justification by Faith Alone.' . . . preaching this doctrine, he later emphasized, proved the spark that set off the nearly unprecedented spiritual fires. The very spread of Arminian views, he believed, encouraged people to reexamine and to take more seriously the Calvinist views they had always heard." Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 177.

hearts in a more earnest pursuit of justification,” and then, Edwards wrote, “God’s work wonderfully brake forth amongst us, and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Saviour in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified.”⁴ Since the awakening in Edwards’s church and region grew out of his doctrine of justification, it would seem important to understand exactly what he taught about it.

Due to the fact that Edwards was an heir of the Protestant Reformation, one would expect his doctrine of justification by faith alone to square with the classical Protestant expressions of the doctrine. However, while Edwards was no innovator in matters of theology, he did seek to develop and articulate the classical doctrines in ways that demonstrated both their reasonableness and Scriptural character without necessarily using classical terminology. As a result of different ways of expressing various aspects of the doctrine, a number of scholars have argued that Edwards did in fact depart significantly from the classical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Specifically, they charge that Edwards made room for the virtue of evangelical obedience in justification. However, the thesis of this paper is that Edwards did not affirm justification by moral virtue, but that he insisted that justification is grounded on the righteousness of Christ to which the believer is united by faith alone.⁵ After surveying some of the important scholars who argue that Edwards diverges from *sola fide*, Edwards’s own views will be examined from the treatise in which he gives the most extensive treatment of the subject, *Justification by Faith Alone*, and finally, some analysis of Edwards’s position will be provided in light of his own writings.

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From the preface of Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Five Discourses* (Peabody, MA: 2000), 620.

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The question of which specific perspectives on justification are within the stream of Protestant and Reformed orthodoxy and which perspectives are without is outside the scope of this paper. Some who charge Edwards with making room for good works in justification apparently hold that Edwards has departed from his tradition, while others seem to think that in giving a subordinate role to works in justification he represents a legitimate strand of orthodox Reformed theology. The only question this paper will seek to answer is whether Edwards made room for works within justification.

Scholarship Arguing for Divergence from *Sola Fide*

Thomas A. Schafer

Schafer, an influential Edwardsian scholar, wrote an article in 1951 entitled, “Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith,” in which he argued that Jonathan Edwards moved away from any meaningful doctrine of *sola fide*, even though Edwards explicitly professed to hold that view.⁶ He admits that the “doctrine” of Edwards’s treatise, *Justification by Faith Alone*, is “unequivocal enough,” since Edwards explicitly says, “We are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.”⁷ At the beginning of the article, Schafer provides an accurate summary of Edwards’s treatise on justification, and he recognizes that Edwards holds that “all works are destitute of merit, even those which flow from faith; it is only the element of faith in them that God accepts for justification.”⁸ However, Schafer goes on to say, “Even so, the conviction has emerged in this study that 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.”⁹ Schafer rightly says that while Edwards acknowledges that love in regeneration precedes faith and justification, and in this sense, elements of sanctification precede justification, Edwards nevertheless asserts that it is only faith that grasps Christ and his righteousness for justification, and that this faith is non meritorious.¹⁰

But, Schafer is not satisfied with Edwards’s formulation. He writes, “But one may fairly ask whether Edwards has retained a unique act of the soul called faith which becomes the

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According to McClymond, this article, “may have been the first to raise the question of Edwards’s position *vis-à-vis* classical Protestantism.” Emphasis is in the original. Michael J. McClymond, “Salvation as Divinization: Jonathan Edwards, Gregory Palamas and the Theological Uses of Neoplatonism,” in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, eds. Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 139.

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Thomas A. Schafer, “Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 56.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 57.

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Ibid., 59.

condition of justification separately from all other acts of the soul.”¹¹ This becomes the driving question throughout the rest of the article. He does not believe that Edwards can be regarded a faithful adherent of *sola fide* when he fails to distinguish properly between faith and love. Shafer argues that the Reformers and their disciples asserted that there is a sharp distinction between faith and the other graces of sanctification, including love and good works. However, Edwards is not so careful to maintain that distinction, but instead defines faith in such a way that it is a unity, which includes love, hope, holiness, as well as evangelical obedience, depending on its object.¹² Shafer writes, “The reader cannot help feeling that the conception of ‘faith alone’ has been considerably enlarged – and hence practically eliminated.”¹³ For Edwards, the center of Christian piety and the essence of evangelical faith is “a direct, intuitive apprehension, a ‘sight,’ a ‘sense,’ a ‘taste,’ of God’s majestic beauty, a love of God, simply because he is God, an exultant affirmation of all God’s ways.”¹⁴ Shafer concludes that Edwards believed that love is really the soul and core of saving faith.¹⁵ In fact, the unity and harmony between faith and good works is found in that both graces have the same root. They both begin in love, which, according to Edwards, is “the soul’s inmost ‘consent’ to God and his holiness.”¹⁶ Love, or affection for God, is the most basic foundation and seat of the soul’s virtue and proper disposition toward God, not faith.¹⁷ Though Shafer acknowledges that Edwards fervently maintained that there is no merit in love, Shafer says that Edwards believes that “faith joins a man with Christ because faith *is* love in its deepest essence.”¹⁸

¹¹

Ibid.

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Ibid., 60.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 61.

¹⁵

Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Therefore, Shafer holds that Edwards has departed from *sola fide* for at least two reasons. First, Edwards did not properly distinguish between faith and love as did his Reformed forefathers, but instead included love in faith as a part of faith itself. Second, Edwards held that faith joins a man to Christ, and so ties him to the ground of his justification, precisely “because faith *is* love in its deepest sense.”¹⁹

George Hunsinger

In 2004, George Hunsinger, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Seminary, wrote an article entitled, “Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith Alone” in which he examines Edwards’s treatise, *Justification by Faith Alone*. Hunsinger argues that Edwards fails to defend *sola fide*, and affirms instead that justification is by congruent merit. Hunsinger writes, “It is not clear that Edwards can successfully defend himself, as he explicitly tries to do, against the perception that his doctrine of justification implicates him in a doctrine of ‘congruent merit.’”²⁰ He defines “congruent merit” as “the idea that God bestows a reward not out of strict obligation but out of pure benevolence.”²¹ Hunsinger says that while Edwards does maintain that Christ merits justification in a condign, or strict, sense, the one who is justified merits justification in a congruent sense. He explains, “The primary ground, as Edwards states, is Christ alone; it results in the actual . . . justification . . . that the believer enjoys ‘in Christ.’ A dependent and secondary ground is also posited at the same time, however, because faith is that condition ‘in us’ which makes it fitting for us to be justified.”²²

He goes on to argue that Edwards believed that faith was a true virtue in the believer

¹⁹ Ibid., 63. Emphasis in the original.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ George Hunsinger, “Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith Alone,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66:1 (2004): 108.

²² Ibid.

Ibid., 109.

and that God justifies the believer because “faith is a rewardable excellence.”²³ Hunsinger says that in arguing for the moral or virtuous excellence of faith, Edwards departed from the Reformed tradition, which asserted that “faith was simply not a virtue in that sense.”²⁴ According to Hunsinger, by defining faith as a “meritorious virtue,” Edwards “did not know, apparently that . . . he had moved closer to Thomas than to the Reformation.”²⁵

Hunsinger argues that by including love in faith and by making faith a prerequisite means of justification, Edwards contradicted the Reformation in three ways. First, he overturned the Reformation’s insistence that the imputed righteousness of Christ excludes inherent righteousness from being “in any sense, a ground of justification.”²⁶ Second, Edwards contradicted the Reformation teaching that the one who is justified receives justification in an entirely passive manner and without any merit of our own.²⁷ Third, Edwards ignored the Reformed emphasis on the need to participate in Christ’s person prior to benefiting from His righteousness.²⁸

Here again, as we saw in Shafer, the crux of the criticism is that because Edwards included love in faith, he made love a subordinate ground of justification (what Hunsinger says is congruent merit), and so overturned the real meaning of the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*, which excluded all love and merit from justification on the human side. Classical Protestant theology affirmed that justification is because of the merits of Christ, plus nothing.

Conrad Cherry

In his book on Edwards’s theology of faith, Conrad Cherry surveys Edwards’s doctrine

²³

Ibid., 110.

²⁴

Ibid.

²⁵

Ibid.

²⁶

Ibid., 111.

²⁷

Ibid.

²⁸

Ibid.

of justification, and essentially agrees with the criticisms of those who charge Edwards with denying justification by faith alone.²⁹ After reviewing Edwards's explanation of the doctrine of justification, Cherry deduces:

Needless to say, this explanation of the sinner's involvement in justification poses, from the Reformation perspective, as many questions as it answers. What we have labeled the second danger clearly appears in it; viz., that of involving a human act in justification as a determining condition of salvation. Indeed, if justification is not efficacious until a human act is performed, the Calvinist refusal to allow any human contribution to be determinative of salvation is disavowed, and the Arminian doctrine that belief in Christ is the condition of salvation is invited in.³⁰

In other words, Cherry says that since Edwards makes justification contingent upon a human act, then the classical emphasis on free and gracious justification is undermined. Furthermore, it is problematic that Edwards describes faith "as the God-given, inherent human good which qualifies for justification" because from there "it is only a short step to the ascription of a godliness, a holiness to faith itself outside of and prior to actual justification."³¹ In the end, Cherry concludes that Jonathan Edwards is not consistent with himself. On the one hand, Edwards affirms that God justifies the ungodly, as the Scriptures teach in Romans 4:5, while on the other hand, Edwards affirms that the faith by which God justifies sinners is itself godliness. The "consequence" of Edwards's affirmation that faith is a "holy, human prius to justification" is "contrary to the thrust of Edwards' thought" that salvation begins with the objective saving grace of God rather than with the subjective human disposition.³²

More than Hunsinger and Chafer, Cherry argues that Edwards is simply inconsistent. Throughout his treatise on justification and all of his works, Edwards intends to affirm that God reckons sinners righteous not by any virtue of their own, but only on the basis of the virtue of Christ. However, Cherry notes that Edwards defines faith to be a virtue and to include love, and

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See Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University, 1966), 90-106.

³⁰

Ibid., 94-95.

³¹

Ibid., 96.

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Ibid., 96-97.

then makes this faith the organ of union with Christ. So, on the one hand Edwards affirms *sola fide*, but on the other hand, Edwards denies it, according to Cherry.

Justification by Faith Alone

Edwards begins this treatise on Romans 4:5 with four critically important exegetical affirmations and then a statement of the doctrine he derives from this text. First, Edwards says, “immediately before this act [of justification] God beholds him only as an ungodly creature; so that godliness in the person to be justified is not so antecedent to his justification as to be the ground of it.”³³ Second, the text not only excludes ceremonial works, but “works of morality and godliness.”³⁴ Third, “the faith spoken of, by which we are justified, is not meant the same things as a course of obedience or righteousness.”³⁵ Fourth, the one who is justified “is looked upon [by God] as destitute of any righteousness in himself,” but God imputes righteousness such that “the subject of imputation is mentioned as a sinner, and consequently destitute of a moral righteousness” of his own.³⁶ Edwards then sums up the teaching of the text by stating its doctrine: “That we are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.”³⁷ Edwards then proceeds to explain the meaning of this doctrine and how it should be understood.

Section One

Edwards writes that a person is justified only “when he is approved of God as free from the guilt of sin and its deserved punishment, and as having that righteousness belonging to

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Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 622.

³⁴

Ibid.

³⁵

Ibid.

³⁶

Ibid.

³⁷

Ibid.

him that entitles to the reward of life.”³⁸ After so defining justification, Edwards insists that mere forgiveness is insufficient but that a positive righteousness is requisite to justification. Here he launches into a discussion of the federal headships of Adam and Christ as the starting point of understanding justification. Had Adam “finished his course of perfect obedience,” then he would have satisfied the demands of God’s law and “would have been adjudged to the reward of it.”³⁹ In the same way, Christ not only had to die to pay the legal penalty for sins negatively, but positively had to render perfect obedience to the law to satisfy God’s demand for righteousness on behalf of the beneficiaries of his redeeming work. This is the basis of justification.

Edwards turns to discuss the meaning of “by faith” and “not by any manner of virtue.” He says that the word “by” is often said to imply a condition, but Edwards does not approve of calling faith a condition because the term is easily misunderstood. He says that if the word “condition” is intended in its logical sense, as an antecedent condition of a logical proposition, then not only is faith a condition, but also all the other graces of salvation are conditions of justification. If there is love, then there is justification. If there are good works, then there is justification, etc. But, by saying that sinners are justified “by” faith, the Bible means more than that faith is a logical condition. Historic Reformed theology has called faith the “instrument” of justification, but Edwards disapproves of this manner of speech because justification is an act of God and calling faith an instrument of justification makes it unclear as to whether faith is an instrument in the hand of God or an instrument in the hand of the believer. Instead, Edwards understands faith as that disposition of the human soul that “qualifies” him to be a proper subject of justification. He writes, “To be justified is to be approved of God as a proper subject of pardon, with a right to eternal life; and therefore, when it is said that we are justified by faith, what else can be understood by it, than that faith is that by which we are rendered approvable,

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Ibid., 623.

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Ibid., 623. Edwards develops this idea later in the work, when he writes, “God saw meet to place man first in a state of trial, and not to give him a title to eternal life as soon as he had made him; because it was his will that he should first give honour to his authority by fully submitting to it, in will and act, and perfectly obeying his law.” Ibid., 636.

fitly so, and indeed, as the case stands, proper subjects of this benefit?”⁴⁰ Still, Edwards insists that without the redemptive work of Christ, no qualification would be sufficient.

Edwards then begins a discussion of why justification is by faith “alone.” He raises two questions. First, since faith is itself a “virtue,” then how can it be said that men are not justified by any virtue of their own? Second, if justification is by the virtue of faith, then why are the other excellent virtues of the Christian excluded from justification?⁴¹

In answer to the first question, Edwards writes:

When it is said, that we are not justified by any righteousness or goodness of our own, what is meant is, that it is not out of respect to the excellency or goodness of any qualifications or acts in us whatsoever, that God judges it meet that this benefit of Christ should be ours; and it is not, in any wise, on account of any excellency or value that there is in faith, that it appears in the sight of God a meet thing, that he who believes should have this benefit of Christ assigned to him, but purely from the relation faith has to the person in whom this benefit is to be had, or as it unites to that mediator, in and by whom we are justified.⁴²

In other words, when God justifies men by faith, he does not look to the virtue of faith when he renders the verdict. It is as though he does not even see faith’s virtue when he justifies men. God does not consider the virtue of faith in justification, but only the relation in which faith stands to Christ. He elaborates, “God does not give those that believe an union with or an interest in the Saviour as a reward for faith, but only because faith is the soul’s *active* uniting with Christ, or is itself the very act of union, *on their part*.”⁴³ Faith only justifies because it joins the believer to Christ in a legal union, and God does not give the grace of justification as any sort of reward of faith. When believers are united to Christ, they gain the right to and possession of all that belongs to him, very much like a legal marriage. Edwards writes, “What is

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Ibid., 624.

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Ibid., 624.

⁴²

Ibid.

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Ibid., 626. Emphasis is in the original. According to the editor’s notes on pages 624-625, the phrase, “on their part” was a common phrase used among theologians of Edwards’s day to reference the responsive human side of union with Christ. That is, God, *on his part*, initiates the union by working regeneration and faith in the one who will be united with Christ by faith, *on their part*.

real in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is *legal*.⁴⁴ In other words, faith, what is real, is the foundation of union with Christ, what is legal, and brings that legal union into existence. Edwards then turns to demonstrate how faith unites men to Christ without doing so by its own virtue.

Edwards makes a distinction between “moral” fitness and “natural” fitness. A thing is morally fit for justification if it conforms to God’s holy law. Edwards denies that faith is morally fit for justification and explicitly rejects the notion that faith justifies by means of the “merit of congruity.”⁴⁵ Faith does not justify because it is morally fit for justification, even though faith is a moral and virtuous act. But, faith justifies because it is naturally fit for justification, not because its qualities are “lovely or unlovely,” such that God would look upon faith, love it, and reward it with eternal life, but only because “the circumstances [of faith and union with Christ] are like one another or do in their nature suit and agree or unite one to another,” such that God judges it appropriate to justify men by faith as it connects them to Jesus and as God looks upon Christ and His righteousness alone as that which God finds worthy of the reward of eternal life.⁴⁶ In saying this, Edwards is not conscious of departing from his tradition in this formula. He writes, “This is plainly what our divines intend.”⁴⁷

In answer to the second question as to why other virtues besides faith are excluded from justification, Edwards says that none of the other virtues are naturally fit to bring about union with Christ.⁴⁸ Only faith grasps Christ, but love and other good works do not. That ends the first major section of Edwards’s treatise.

Section Two

⁴⁴

Ibid.

⁴⁵

Ibid.

⁴⁶

Ibid., 627.

⁴⁷

Ibid.

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Ibid., 628.

In the second section, Edwards labors to prove the doctrine that he previously explained. He does so by making four arguments in its support. Edwards's first argument is that no grace but faith can make it suitable for God to justify them. His second argument is that the Scriptures abundantly prove this doctrine of justification. The third argument is that if justification is by our own moral virtue, then the gospel of grace is nullified. The fourth and final argument is that if justification is by any virtue of our own, then Christ is robbed of his glory in justification.⁴⁹

In the first argument, Edwards anticipates that some will charge him with affirming justification on the ground of moral goodness. Edwards admits that faith is a moral virtue; therefore, Edwards rebuts the arguments of those who will accuse him of denying what he previously affirmed: that God justifies the ungodly. First, Edwards says that since those who believe are deserving of infinite wrath, the limited virtue of faith must be weighed in the scales against its opposite.⁵⁰ One logical moment prior to justification, when the virtue of faith is compared to the viciousness of sin, faith's virtue is so infinitely small and cancelled out by sin's vice that it counts for nothing at all. God looks upon the believer, immediately prior to justification, as ungodly and only worthy of condemnation. Second, prior to entering into union with Christ, the law, under which the believer still stands, forbids giving the believer an interest in Christ as a *reward* for that virtue. A righteous King, who upholds the law, cannot justly accept any gifts from a condemned man until that condemnation is removed.⁵¹

In the second supporting argument, Edwards draws proof directly from the well of Sacred Scripture. In this section, he seeks to support the proposition that justification is not by any virtue or goodness of our own by refuting those who interpret Paul to include virtue in justification.⁵² Their principal tactic is to interpret the phrase "works of the law" as "works of

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Ibid., 628-640.

⁵⁰

Ibid., 628-629.

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Ibid., 629.

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the Mosaic ceremonial law.” Thus, when Paul says that justification is by faith apart from the “works of the law,” they argue that he means to exclude only those works that are peculiar to the Mosaic covenant, while leaving room in justification for the good works that come from faith. Edwards seems to have the doctrine of the Neonomians in view when he writes, “Some that oppose this doctrine indeed say that the apostle sometimes means that it is by faith . . . in its first act only . . . that persons are admitted into a justified state; but, say they, it is by a persevering obedience that they are finally justified.”⁵³ Regarding that formulation, Edwards says that it “is to make just nothing at all of the apostle’s great doctrine of justification by faith alone. Such a conditional pardon is no pardon or justification at all.”⁵⁴

Edwards makes eleven arguments defending the notion that “works of the law” includes the moral law and does not exclude it. He unfolds the following propositions. Paul uses “works” and “works of the law” interchangeably. Romans chapter three is an argument that because we are guilty of breaking the moral law, there is no justification by the law. Romans chapter two speaks of the “law” written on the heart and lists parts of the moral law. In Romans chapter three, Paul says that “by the law is the knowledge of sin,” which cannot possibly refer to the moral law.⁵⁵ In Romans four, Paul explicitly contrasts the law with faith and says that justification must be by faith so that it might be by grace. Paul says that the works of the law are excluded from justification so that “boasting might be excluded” (Rom 3:26-28). In Galatians, those who are under the law are under a curse, which makes no sense if it refers to the ceremonial law. Paul refers to being justified by “our own righteousness” and the “works of the law” as the same thing, but our own righteousness is not of the ceremonial law.⁵⁶ Both the Old

Ibid., 630.

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Ibid., 630. Edwards’s arguments at this point would seem to have some application to contemporary discussions of “covenant nomism” (in by grace, stay in by works) and other features of the “new perspective on Paul” (which interprets “works of the law” as Jewish boundary markers: Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws) advocated by scholars such as E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 631.

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and New Testaments deny that justification is by the works of the law. Edwards finally argues that when the Old Testament says “he that does them shall live by them,” it is not referring to the ceremonial law alone.⁵⁷

Edwards’s third argument shows that those schemes of divinity that base justification on the sincere obedience of the one who is justified overthrow the grace of the gospel. He proves this by arguing that God is shown to be more gracious by giving justification without respect to “any excellency in our persons or actions that it should move the giver to love and beneficence.”⁵⁸ He goes on to say that this great grace “enhances the obligation to gratitude in the receiver.”⁵⁹

In his fourth argument, Edwards says that those who say that justification is by a man’s own virtue or obedience ascribe the glory that belongs only to Christ to a mere man. Under this heading, Edwards unpacks his doctrine of “the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”⁶⁰ He defines Christ’s righteousness as his positive obedience of moral goodness, as it is distinguished from his negative sufferings to free men from guilt. He says that righteousness is imputed when “Christ’s perfect obedience shall be reckoned to our account, so that we shall have the benefit of it, as though we had performed it ourselves. And so we suppose that a title to eternal life is given us as a reward of this righteousness.”⁶¹ Edwards then proceeds to show that it is both irrational and unbiblical to suggest that a relaxed law of imperfect obedience can replace God’s law of perfect obedience, since all laws require perfect obedience or else they do not require what they require.⁶² So, he argues that the law must be a standard of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 632.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 633-634.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 635.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 635.

⁶² Ibid.

Ibid., 637.

perfect obedience that must be fulfilled in order to have life. He then shows that the death of Christ is not only a negative act that pardons sin, but is also a positive act that merits eternal life. The Father commanded that Christ die; so, Christ's obedience to that positive command is obedience to the law given to him and so positively merits eternal life. This explains why the cross is central in biblical discussions of redemption and justification, because it is the chief embodiment of both pardon from death and merit of life.⁶³ Edwards then says that in systems where God gives men an interest in Christ by virtue of their own obedience, as any kind of reward, God really gives salvation as a reward for obedience.⁶⁴ This makes our obedience more basic than Christ's and so exalts our obedience and virtue over that of Christ.

Section Three

In his third major section, Edwards sets out to "show in what sense the acts of a Christian life, or of evangelical obedience, may be looked upon to be concerned in this affair"⁶⁵ of justification. In this section, Edwards argues that God does not justify men merely by their first act of faith, but with a view to all subsequent acts of faith, since justification is based on the fact that a person is united to Christ permanently and continued faith qualifies a person to continued union.⁶⁶ Edwards goes on to argue that inward acts of the obedience of faith, as distinguished from outward acts, are prerequisite to justification. He writes, "All evangelical works of that faith that worketh by love; and every such act of obedience, wherein it is inward, and the act of the soul, is only a new effective act of reception of Christ, and adherence to the glorious Savior."⁶⁷ So, apparently, Edwards considers Christian love, which is at the foundation

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Ibid., 638-639. Edwards writes, "Hence we may see how that the death of Christ did not only make atonement, but also merited eternal life; and hence we may see how by the blood of Christ we are not only redeemed from sin, but redeemed unto God; and therefore the Scripture seems every where to attribute the whole of salvation to the blood of Christ." Ibid., 639.

⁶⁴

Ibid., 640.

⁶⁵

Ibid., 640.

⁶⁶

Ibid., 642.

⁶⁷

Ibid.

and core of genuine faith, as an inward principle, to be that which qualifies faith as the means of justification in a natural sense. Yet Edwards continues to insist that faithful love does not justify by any virtue in it:

So that as was before said of faith, so may it be said of child-like believing obedience, it has no concern in justification by any virtue or excellency in it; but only as there is a reception of Christ in it. And this is no more contrary to the apostle's frequent assertion of our being justified without the works of the law, than to say that we are justified by faith; for faith is as much a work, or act of Christian obedience, as the expressions of faith, in spiritual life and walk. And therefore, as we say that faith does not justify as a work, so we say of all these effective expressions of faith.⁶⁸

Thus he denies that God in any way considers or has a view to the virtue of faithful evangelical obedience. In this, Edwards maintains that God himself promises to continue the justified believer in faith, such that God is the one who causes and maintains the believer in a state of justification. He writes, "God, in that [first act of] justification, has respect, not only to the past act of faith, but to *his own promise of future acts*, and to the fitness of a qualification beheld as yet only in *his own promise*."⁶⁹

Section Four

In this section, Edwards considers various objections to the doctrine he has already presented. Some might argue that the Scriptures teach that judgment is by virtuous works; therefore, it is not correct to say that justification is by the natural fitness of faith alone. However, Edwards argues that only an antecedent justification can make good works pleasing and agreeable in the sight of God. God indeed judges good works and by good works gives men access into heaven and the rewards of heaven; however, he only does so on the basis of justification grounded upon Christ alone and only upon his worth and value. He explains, "There is a vast difference between this scheme, and . . . the scheme of those that oppose the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This lays the foundation of first acceptance with God . . . wholly in Christ and his righteousness. . . . in their scheme, a regard to man's own excellency or

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Ibid., 642.

⁶⁹

Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

virtue is supposed to be first, and to have the place of the first foundation in actual salvation.”⁷⁰ He also answers the objections of those who say Scripture bases the remission of sins on repentance by saying that faith and repentance are not two distinct things, but are two ways of talking about the same thing. So, the aspect of faith that is repentance justifies by its natural fitness to union with Christ and not by its own virtue. Finally, Edwards deals with the apparent difference between Paul and James on justification. Paul teaches that we are justified by faith, apart from the works of the law, while James says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. Edwards reasons that either Paul and James mean something different by the term “faith” or by the term “justified.” Edwards argues they mean something different by the latter. Paul uses the term as that which “renders his cause good,” and is the “proper ground of his justification.”⁷¹ But, James uses the word to reference those “evidences” which “justify only as they manifest that his cause is good in fact. . . . It is by works that our cause appears to be good.”⁷²

Section Five

Edwards’s final section deals with the practical importance of the doctrine. While he denies that all men must agree on all the particulars of this doctrine, he insists that it is a critically important doctrine on a number of grounds. Scripture itself teaches that this is a doctrine of “very great importance.”⁷³ Other formulations lay the foundation of salvation in man, rather than in Christ, which detracts from his glory in salvation. He also says, “It is in this doctrine that the most essential difference lies between the covenant of grace and that first covenant.”⁷⁴ Under the first covenant man’s title to eternal life depended on the virtue of his own

⁷⁰

Ibid., 645.

⁷¹

Ibid., 650.

⁷²

Ibid.

⁷³

Ibid., 652.

⁷⁴

Ibid.

obedience, but under the second covenant, man's title to eternal life depends only on the virtue of Christ which is apprehended by faith. The opposing doctrine of justification by works tends to throw men back on themselves for their justification, "which is a thing fatal to the soul."⁷⁵

Analysis and Conclusion

Chafer and Hunsinger both say that Edwards really affirms that justification is by moral virtue and not by faith alone. Cherry affirms the same but adds that Edwards is inconsistent. But, Chafer and Hunsinger have not grappled with Edwards's argument. In fact, Edwards anticipates the very objections they raise against him and he responds to them in advance. The essence of Edwards's response is twofold.

First, while moral virtue is antecedent to union with Christ and justification, God only justifies men by faith because faith is a naturally fit qualification for union with Christ. To add to an analogy that Edwards used, it may be a virtuous act for a man to say "I do" and so to marry the woman he has promised he will marry, since it is virtuous to keep promises. However, the man's act of saying "I do" does not bring about the marriage union on the ground that it is virtuous; rather, it brings about the union because it is only naturally fitting that a man and woman be married by consent to marriage.

Second, Edwards plainly says that even though faith and the graces that accompany it are virtuous, God cannot consider them as virtues because prior to justification, believers are infinitely worthy of condemnation and that infinite guilt wholly cancels out all other limited virtue. Therefore, God only sees the believer as ungodly until the believer is joined to Christ and actually justified. So, God cannot be charged with justifying the godly on Edwards's scheme. Now, it may be that Chafer and Hunsinger believe that Edwards's arguments are weak; however, they did not attempt any direct interaction or refutation of these arguments. For that reason, they have failed to prove their thesis, and the thesis of this paper is established.

Cherry does a better job of recognizing Edwards's arguments; however, in the end, he

⁷⁵

Ibid., 653.

believes that Edwards is involved in a contradiction, affirming that justification is by the natural fitness of faith alone on the one hand, while teaching that justification is subsequent to virtue on the other. Some of the confusion here relates to the fact that Edwards does not separate faith from repentance or love either temporally or categorically. That is, the faith that justifies, which includes in its essence repentance and love, exists logically before justification. Edwards freely admits that faith is a work when considered in terms of its moral virtue. However, he goes to great pains to show that this virtuous, repentant, and loving faith only justifies because of its natural character, which fits a person for union with Christ, and not at all because of its moral virtue. Therefore, Edwards succeeds in demonstrating that justification is by faith alone (which he says means “by the natural fitness of faith alone”), apart from the works of the law (which he defines as moral virtue or godliness). He plainly sets himself against all Roman Catholic, Arminian, and Neonomian doctrines of justification, which teach that God justifies men with a view to the virtue of their faithful perseverance in godliness.

While Edwards has upheld the doctrine of justification by faith alone, his position does raise some questions. First, though his treatise was initially presented in response to Arminianism, it would only seem to counter the Arminian doctrine of justification that was prevalent in his day and not Arminianism in general, which denies God’s irresistible grace. In fact, Edwards’s arguments provide a conceptual framework that Arminianism might adopt for itself. Calvinists have traditionally argued that in Arminianism, faith is meritorious since God does not graciously work faith in a person and because faith is something that a person brings to his own salvation. However, in light of Edwards’s arguments, an Arminian might insist that while that faith is morally virtuous, it does not justify because of its moral virtue, but because of its natural fitness.

Second, Edwards’s treatise does not explain the relationship between the accomplishment and application of redemption. Though it was beyond the scope of his intention to deal with that subject in *Justification by Faith Alone*, his doctrine of justification brings up some questions about what Christ objectively accomplished in his death, and leaves one

wondering how he would deal with issues raised by the old Calvinists who argued about whether active justification is before or after faith. That controversy filled volumes in the disputes against Neonomianism. In various places, Edwards hints at the fact that Christ's atonement purchased regeneration and faith in the one who is justified; however, it is not clear how the atonement can do that. If Christ actually satisfied God's wrath toward the elect, freeing God to work savingly in them, then how is it that their justification can be delayed until after they believe? How can the sins of the elect be applied to Christ on the cross and yet those same sins applied to the pre-regenerate elect in the same logical moment? Edwards may have dealt with these and similar questions elsewhere in his writings, but it would have been helpful for him to have dealt with them briefly in this context, especially since he was opposing both Arminianism in its Neonomian expression and antinomianism.

In conclusion, Jonathan Edwards's treatise, *Justification by Faith Alone*, is a masterful and well-argued work. Edwards defines all of his key terms and carefully distinguishes between his position and that of his opponents. He walks his reader through a progression of thought that ends in a fully orb'd doctrine of justification, which genuinely seeks to account for all the biblical data on the subject, and to vindicate the doctrine that justification is by faith alone and not by any moral virtue or goodness of the one who is justified. Those who say Edwards failed to achieve his goal fail to understand Edwards on his own terms and/or fail to interact directly with his own carefully crafted arguments in response to the very objections that they raise. While Edwards's doctrine of justification leaves some questions unanswered, he has provided the church with a wonderful polemic for the biblical teaching that justification is by faith alone.

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