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Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith (Part Two)

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As previously stated, in the first part of this article,* traditional Protestant understanding separates regeneration from justification. One is not justified in regeneration; rather, regeneration leads one to justifying faith and a legal acceptance before the judgment seat. However, these two elements of salvation are not so separated in Edwards' presentation of the salvation process. He writes: "Supposing a man dies suddenly and not in the actual exercise of faith, 'tis his [regenerated] disposition that saves him."[1] This passage is significant in that it appears to attribute saving righteousness to the regenerated disposition which has not been declared righteous until justification. Edwards believes that the righteousness of justification is an "intrinsic reality."[2] Does a saving disposition equal the justifying righteousness of Christ?[3] No. But a saving disposition contains the faith by which one is united to Christ and declared righteous.

Edwards interacted on this issue with his grandfather Solomon Stoddard. Edwards writes, "A principle thing that made Mr. Stoddard think that there was no grace in humiliation (a principle of faith), was because he looked upon an

* Part one of this study appeared in the previous issue of the journal (Volume 11, Number 2). We apologize to the author and readers that the issue did not make clear that part two would follow.

explicit act of faith in Jesus Christ as evermore the first gracious act that ever was exerted."[4] Theologians like Stoddard asserted that a person "can't be saved before he has actually believed," or in other words, one is not saved in regeneration prior to the act of saving faith.[5] In *Miscellanies 77* Edwards disagrees: "What is held by some that none can be in a state of salvation before they have particularly acted a reception of the Lord Jesus Christ for a Savior, and that there cannot be sanctification one moment before the exercise of faith, as they have described it, cannot be true, as they explain the reception of Christ."[6] Edwards challenges Stoddard by saying that there are principles of faith that count as "acts of [saving] faith."[7] He reasons:

> The graces of the Spirit, especially those that more directly respect God and another world, are so nearly allied that they include one another; and where there is the exercise of one, there is something of the other exercised with it: like strings in consort, if one is struck, others sound with it; or like links in a chain, if one is drawn, others follow. So that humiliation that there is in repentance implies a principle of faith, and not only so, but something of the exercise too; so that a person according to the Gospel may be in a state of salvation, before a distinct and express act of faith in the sufficiency and suitableness of Christ as a savior. Persons are justified upon the first appearance of a principle of faith in the soul by any of the soul's acts: but a principle of faith appears and shows itself by the exercise of true repentance and evangelical humiliation; for the graces are all the same in principle, especially those that more immediately respect God and Christ and another world.[8]

There are principles in the soul of a person that Edwards considers so joined together *that each of them implies a principle of faith by which someone is justified.* As has been explained, love, submission and other principles of faith in regeneration are prior acts of saving faith. Edwards speculates, "supposing a man dies suddenly and not in the actual exercise of faith, 'tis his [regenerated] disposition that saves him *for if it were possible that the disposition was destroyed, the man would be damned and all the former acts of faith [love and submission] would signify*

nothing" (italics mine).[9] There is certainly one crucial act of faith, but the changes that occur in the person are considered prior acts of this faith.

One way to demonstrate these prior acts of faith is to use a principle of faith: love. The Spirit is God's love and grace and he changes a person's heart, enabling him or her to love God. Edwards writes that "a saving belief of truth arises from love, or a holy disposition and relish of heart."[10] This love is so closely united to faith that it is considered a condition of salvation.[11] Love is "in nature so related to faith" that "in obtaining . . . [love] we obtain faith, and in obtaining faith we obtain [love]."[12] One is not saved by love alone, but only as it is related to justifying faith which is necessary for the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Edwards emphasizes that saving faith is not separate from these other conditions. They "accompany and follow faith," or as Edwards further describes, they are the "strings in consort, if one is struck others sound with it."[13]

The intimacy of each of these items is seen in *Miscellanies 218* titled "FAITH, JUSTIFYING" in which Edwards proceeds to explain that justifying faith "'tis the same agreeing or consenting disposition that according to diverse objects, different state or manner of exerting, is called by different names." Edwards concludes that "when toward persons excellent" it is called "love."[14] Love that exists in regenerated persons has Christ as its object and is really a part of and is counted as justifying faith.

THE SECOND ADAM: UNION WITH CHRIST

When the Spirit of God is infused and inhabits the soul, he brings about faith and the principles of faith in the receiver. By faith the Spirit effects a union of the believer with Christ (as previously had been with Adam). Christ is the second Adam and his posterity is his Church, who by faith are united to him and are actually consenting to his work and are really and truly partaking in his righteousness. It is not merely a legal declaration, but rather a real union that is based on principles of faith and creates a real relationship. Edwards did not write a great deal on this subject, but his Master's *Questio*, his various miscellanies, and his famous sermons on justification address it.

Edwards' sermons on justification by faith alone are the main source of information for his understanding of justification. The union of a person with Christ takes a central place in Edwards' understanding of justification and imputation. Without union in Christ there is no salvation for the soul. Edwards explains that "immediately before this act (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."[15] A person has nothing to offer God and prior to justification he or she is still condemned. This justification is by faith, or more accurately, by the faith that unites us to Christ. 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 qualification 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 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.[16]

The Spirit of God enables one to have faith which unites a person to Christ. This union is the basis for God to view anyone as acceptable. Edwards argues that "this *relation* or *union* to Christ, whereby Christians are said to be in Christ, . . . is the ground of their right to his benefits."[17] He further explains faith, saying, "it is that by which the soul, which 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."[18]

Union is not a reward for faith, but the two are inseparable (62). And when one has faith it forms a true union and

gives the person access to the benefits of Christ. Persons are so intimately involved in union with Christ that his righteousness is imputed to them. But it is not mere imputation. Edwards' famous line indicates that there is something beyond mere declaratory terminology. He writes: What is *real* in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is *legal*; that is, it is something really in them, and between them, uniting them, that is the ground of the suitableness of their being accounted as one by the Judge.[19]

Edwards scholar Thomas Schafer, in his article "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," indicates that this real basis in union is what Edwards calls the principles of faith, such as love.[20] Salvation is not a person's own work. Faith itself is God's gift and so are its principles, and therefore possessing them does not indicate that the person is earning his or her justification. Schafer joins Edwards' passage on union with his remarks in *Miscellanies 77*.[21] Here Edwards argues:

> There must be the principle before there can be the action, in all cases; there must be the 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.[22]

The Spirit of God changes a person and infuses a principle of holiness; however, this does not equal or earn justifying righteousness. This leads one to ask, what is the difference between holiness before justification and holiness at justification? In his sermon "None Are Saved By Their Own Righteousness" (a sermon on Titus 3:5 concerning righteousness and regeneration), Edwards preaches a "two-fold" righteousness. He explains:

> There is a two-fold righteousness that the saints have: an imputed righteousness, and 'tis this only that avails anything to justification; and an inherent righteousness, that is, that holiness and grace which is in the hearts and lives of the saints. This is

> Christ's righteousness as well as imputed righteousness: imputed righteousness is Christ's righteousness accepted for them, inherent holiness is Christ's righteousness communicated to them. They derive their holiness from Christ as the fountain of it. He gives it by his Spirit, so that 'tis Christ's holiness communicated, 'tis the light of the sun reflected. Now God takes delight in the saints for both of these: both for Christ's righteousness imputed and for Christ's holiness communicated, though 'tis the former only that avails anything for justification.[23]

Edwards describes this "twofold fitness to a state" in his sermons on justification as moral fitness and natural fitness.[24] Though similar in name, these two conditions are not the same as the distinction of natural ability and moral inability mentioned earlier. If one is morally fit then one has the innate worthiness to be called righteous before God. If one is naturally fit then one, though not inherently righteous, has the faith to be united to Christ and his righteousness after which one is declared righteous by God. Edwards writes, "a person has a moral fitness for a state, when his moral excellency commends him to it."[25] Christians worship God because he is intrinsically worthy of it or morally fit; he is morally holy and deserving of worship. Human beings are not morally fit; however, they can become naturally fit when they are regenerated by God. The person is in a natural fitness state when it appears good and right

> that he should be in such a state or circumstances, only from the natural concord or agreeableness there is between such qualifications and such circumstances; not because the qualifications are lovely or unlovely, but only because the qualifications and the circumstances are like one another, or do in their nature suit and agree or unite one to another.[26]

The naturally fit person is the regenerated person who is enabled by God's Spirit to believe in Christ. It is natural for faith to unite a person to Christ. For example, a piece of a puzzle will naturally fit into the puzzle. The piece of the puzzle

did not make itself fit, but fits by its constitution. The principles of holiness, love, submission, etc. are a part of the natural fitness. God bestows "Christ and his benefits on a soul in consequence of faith, out of regard only to the natural concord there is between such a qualification of a soul, and such an union with Christ."[27] Faith and its principles make one *naturally fit* so that one can be united to Christ and justified based on his righteousness, which is *morally fit.*

Edwards concludes that no further justification is needed. He affirms that "it is faith that justifies, or gives an interest in Christ's satisfaction and merits, and a right to the benefits procured thereby, *viz.* as it thus makes Christ and the believer one in acceptance of the Supreme judge."[28] God "pronounces man perfectly righteous, or else he would need further justification after he is justified."[29] However, Edwards writes, "perseverance of faith is not excluded in this affair; it is not only certainly connected with justification, but it is not to be excluded from that on which the justification of a sinner has a dependence, or that by which he is justified."[30] "Real" union with Christ's righteousness not only justifies, but as it becomes an intrinsic reality and as it is infused into the person's soul, it causes one to persevere. Just as union with Adam's unrighteousness causes human beings to sin, so also union with Christ causes one to persevere. Just as there are principles of faith (natural fitness) in regeneration, so also there are principles after faith called acts of perseverance (also natural fitness), which are one with justifying faith. This may sound alarming and indicate that Edwards does not separate his view of sanctification from justification. Edwards explains:

> Although the sinner is actually and finally justified on the first acts of faith, yet the perseverance of faith, even then, comes into consideration, as one thing on which the fitness of acceptance to life depends. God, in the act of justification, which is passed on a sinner's first believing, has respect to perseverance, as being virtually contained in that first act of faith; and it is looked upon, and taken by him that justifies, as being as it were a property in that faith.[31]

The sinner is "forever justified" in justification, but God promises perseverance in the first act of faith so that "God . . . 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."[32] Edwards is saying that God justifies based on future acts of faith as well because he has promised them. The acts themselves do not bring justification (as one who is morally fit). Justification is not a process, but as principles of faith in regeneration look forward to justification, so perseverance looks backward. Justification includes future acts of faith that are subsumed (in God's eyes) under the first acceptance of Christ. In reverse, this is the same for past acts of faith such as love and submission and obedience. Edwards reasons:

> God in the act of final justification which he passes at the sinner's conversion, has respect to perseverance in faith, and future acts of faith, as being virtually implied in the first act, is further manifest by this, *viz.* That in a sinner's justification, at his conversion there is virtually contained a forgiveness as to eternal and deserved punishment, not only of all past sins, but also of all future infirmities and acts of sin that they shall be guilty of; because that first justification is decisive and final.[33]

Previous acts of faith and following acts of faith are joined under justifying faith giving Edwards' soteriological understanding a very lively foundation. Justifying righteousness is still Christ's, but evidence of that justification is found in the fact that along with justification is union with that righteousness and principles of faith.

IMPLICATIONS OF EDWARDS' SOTERIOLOGY

Edwards demonstrates a soteriological understanding of controversial proportions. He contributes to this discussion in several ways. First, Edwards uses the word infusion—a word not preferred in today's Protestant discussion over justification.[34] It has the meaning of "making righteous," raising the question about the status of the person being justified. If

righteousness or holiness is inherent (even in a form of natural fitness), is the person being justified truly unrighteous?[35]

Second, Edwards mixes the order of salvation and virtually (even if it is brief) conflates terms such as regeneration, sanctification, and justification. Anyone who insists upon speaking only in distinct categories is challenged in this respect. By placing sanctification before justification, Edwards could be accused of saying that justification is not by faith alone, but also by previous acts and an inherent condition in the person prior to justification. Edwards would counteract this by explaining that this is a part of natural fitness, which is a facet of faith, thereby making it still by faith alone.

Third, Edwards places an emphasis on the "real" being the "foundation" of the legal. This is a challenge to those who insist on a purely forensic presentation of the gospel and do not view as acceptable the slightest weaving together of regeneration and justification.[36] But by paralleling Adam's union with Christ's, Edwards gives a more real and inherent reality to justification. Though a person is not declared righteous by his or her inherent possession of Christ's righteousness; nevertheless, if one must be united to righteousness to be declared righteous, is that righteousness truly alien?

Fourth, and somewhat overlooked today, Edwards' understanding of the will and the disposition, including natural ability and moral inability, has been challenged in the past and continues to be challenged today. One reason for these theological skirmishes is that it implies corruption as existing only in the will as it is morally unable to choose what is good.[37]

Fifth, Edwards' understanding of the role of perseverance in justification and his distinction between moral and natural fitness may present some difficulty for those who find it to be a compromise of the role of Christ's obedience alone as acceptable in justification. Edwards would argue that he is not labeling perseverance as moral fitness, but as natural fitness; therefore, it is not the same as Christ's righteousness infused into the person earning justification. But does he not also believe that the ability to persevere (natural fitness) is due to the

communication of Christ's righteousness through one's real union with him (moral fitness)?

Sixth, love is given a prominent position as the object from which faith flows. Does Edwards go too far in this and dilute the Protestant view of faith alone by including with faith the facets of love and submission? Edwards conceives of justification as solely resting on Christ's righteousness through faith, yet sees the need for the natural fitness in terms of obedience and love (etc.) which are considered conditions, though not what God has "primary respect to" for justification.[38]

And last, Edwards undermines the assumption that all theologians have argued for justification in like manner without alteration. Some Reformed theologians of the past have disagreed over the order of salvation and how it relates to justification. Beyond Reformed theology, Christians from various denominations throughout church history have explained this and other doctrines in very different ways. This is not to say that anything goes, but it does suggest that one has to be careful when one expects everything to fall in line with a system of justification that may not be consistent even within a single tradition, let alone the rest of Christendom. These points are not meant to advocate throwing out the Biblical teaching on faith alone or imputation, but simply to stimulate thought. If evangelicals are going to continue to work together for a common statement on justification, Edwards and other thinkers from church history need to be taken into consideration.

Evangelicals on both sides are now faced with a valuable opportunity to influence the remainder of church history in the direction of gospel unity. As Edwards wisely concludes:

> How far a wonderful and mysterious agency of God's Spirit may so influence some men's hearts, that their practice in this regard may be contrary to their own principles, so that they shall not trust in their own righteousness, though they profess that men are justified by their own righteousness—or how far they may believe the doctrine of justification by men's own righteousness in general, and yet not believe it in a particular application of it

to themselves—or how far that error which they may have been led into by education, or cunning sophistry of others may yet be indeed contrary to their practice—or how far some may seem to maintain a doctrine contrary to this Gospel-doctrine of justification, that really do not, but only express themselves differently from others; or seem to oppose it through misunderstanding of our expressions, or we of theirs, when indeed our real sentiments are the same in the main-or may seem to differ more than they do, by using terms that are without a precisely fixed and determinate meaning-or to be wide in their sentiments from this doctrine, for want of a distinct understanding of it; whose hearts, at the same time, entirely agree with it, and if once it was clearly explained to their understanding, would immediately close with it, and embrace it:—how far these things may be, I will not determine; but am fully persuaded that great allowances are to be made on these and such like accounts, in innumerable instances; though it is manifest, from what has been said, that the teaching and propagating contrary doctrines and schemes, is of a pernicious and fatal tendency.[39]

Jonathan Edwards, due to his creative soteriological presentation, offers the challenge needed for this kind of ecumenical discussion. Though his voice is now heard only as an echo in his writings, one can hope that it will resound as Christians work toward a fuller understanding of the gospel.

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Notes

1. "Miscellanies" 27b.
2. "Miscellanies" 47.

3. Though outside the breadth of this article, a very important discussion on the subject of a saving disposition in Edwards' theology can be found in Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation,* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995). According to Morimoto, Edwards believes that one can "remain non-Christian for their whole lifetime, and still be saved" (*Catholic Vision of Salvation,* 66). One can be of "other faiths" and if God regenerates the person they can be saved if they died in that regeneration prior to justification. However, though contributing much to this discussion, Morimoto's thesis does not meet eye to eye with Edwards' presentation of principles of faith. The regenerated disposition in Edwards' view includes principles of faith, which have God as their object. Thus one loves, submits, etc. always, even if in a very minor way, with a view toward God, not any other false god. However, more work on this can be done by pursuing Edwards' *Controversies Notebook* in which Edwards treats the subject of justification in regard to situations like these. For more discussion on this see my Master's thesis, "Jonathan Edwards as a Resource for Current Evangelical Discussion Over the Language of the Doctrine of Justification," (M.A. thesis., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999).
4. "Miscellanies" 393.
5. "Miscellanies" 27b
6. "Miscellanies" 77.
7. "Miscellanies" 27b.
8. "Miscellanies" 393.
9. "Miscellanies" 27b
10. Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* vol. 2 (Guildford, London: Billings and Sons, 1834; reprint, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1979), 585 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
11. "Miscellanies" 412.
12. "Miscellanies"
13. "Miscellanies," 315, 393.
14. "Miscellanies" 218.
15. Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* 1:622.
16. Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone, " 624.
17. "Justification" 625.
18. "Justification"
19. "Justification" 626.
20. "Justification"
21. Schafer, "Jonathan Edwards and Justification By Faith," 58-67.
22. Schafer, "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," 58,59.
23. "Miscellanies" 77.

24. Jonathan Edwards, "None are Saved By Their Own Righteousness," In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol. 14, *Sermons and Discourses: 1723-1729*, edited by Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 340-341.
25. Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," 626.
26. "Justification" 627.
27. "Justification". Though the Spirit of God infuses virtues into the soul of a person, thereby making them a part of the person, this is very different from a position like that held by Aquinas' in which one is justified based on that infusion. In other words, Edwards makes this an issue of natural fitness, where Aquinas makes it an issue of moral fitness. Theologians like Anri Morimoto argue the opposite of this assessment of Edwards, but without a solid recognition of Edwards' teaching on natural and moral fitness.
28. "Justification"
29. "Justification" 626.
30. "Justification" 637.
31. "Justification" 640.
32. "Justification" 641.
33. "Justification" 642.
34. "Justification" 641.
35. Paul Ramsey, Professor of Religion emeritus at Princeton University, says in his introduction to Edwards' work, *Charity And Its Fruits*, that Tryon Edwards edited the word "infusion" out of Edwards' works due to the connotation that it would carry in the 19th century (Paul Ramsey ed., "Introduction," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989],59-60).
36. Originally, when Edwards published his treatise on justification in 1738 he defined justification by describing "the Etymology, and natural import of the Word" as meaning "to make righteous, or to pass One for righteous in Judgment" (Jonathan Edwards, *Discourses on Various Important Subjects, Nearly Concerning The Great Affair of the Soul's Eternal Salvation* [Boston, Massachusettes: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1738], 5.). However, after Edwards' day and by the time of the Hickman edition, the words "to make righteous" were removed. This may very well be due to their relation to the concept of infusion.
37. Contemporary views that do not fit Edwards' understanding of the forensic nature of justification are readily available. In making the real the basis for the legal, Edwards has placed the forensic in a close relationship to the real change in nature that occurs when one is united to Christ. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Church in California, writes that, "justification means the sinner is *declared righteous, not actually made righteous.* This goes hand in hand with the fact that justification is instantaneous. . . . Justification is a purely forensic reality, a declaration God makes about the sinner. Justification takes place in the court of God, not the sinner's soul. It is an objective fact, not a subjective phenomenon. It changes the sinner's status, not his nature. Certainly at the moment of conversion the sinner's nature *is* changed miraculously; old things pass away and all things are made new (2 Cor. 5:17). But the actual changes that occur in the believer have to do with regeneration and sanctification, not justification, Again, it is absolutely vital to keep these ideas separate." (John F. MacArthur, "Catholicism: Evangelicals and Catholics Together," In *The Master's Perspective Series*, vol. 2, *The Master's Perspective on Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert L. Thomas [Grand Rapids: Kregal Books, 1998], 176-177).

38. Allen Guelzo explains the tension with this point, saying, "Edwards's centerpiece argument about the will—that everyone possesses the natural ability to will freely (in that everyone can will and has the natural endowments to execute choices), but only those regenerated by divine grace possess a moral ability to will the good—generated deep and abiding suspicions among Old School Calvinists like Hodge and Warfield. For a century after Edwards's death, Calvinist churches in America were racked with indecision over 'Edwards on the Will' (it played a major part in the 1837 New School—Old School Presbyterian schism)." (Allen C. Guelzo, review of *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will*, by R. C. Sproul, *Christianity Today* [March 1998]: 59-61). Guelzo also writes in his book *Edwards on the Will* about the opposition to Edwardsian ideas by Archibald Alexander and "his protégé Charles Hodge, whose animus against New England theology would generate numerous polemical articles and a major two-volume critique of Edwards and the Great Awakening, both in New England and in Presbyterianism" (Alan Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, [Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989], 206). This tension is increased even more when one realizes that Edwards' distinction between natural ability and moral inability was condemned in the Helvetic Formula Consensus. Canon 22 of the Consensus reads, "We hold therefore that they speak accurately and dangerously, who call this inability to believe moral inability, and do not say that it is natural, adding that man in whatever condition he may be placed is able to believe if he desires, and that faith in some way or other, indeed, is self-originated. The Apostle, however, clearly calls [salvation] the gift of God (Eph. 2:8)." (Martin I. Klauber, "The Helvetic Formula Consensus (1675): An Introduction and Translation," *Trinity Journal* 11, no. 1 [Spring 1990], 122). For pointing this out I am indebted to Douglas Sweeney of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. The Consensus is a product of the response to the Amyraldian "heresy" as first proposed by Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664). For an explanation of the New England distinction see Douglas A. Sweeney, "Nathaniel William Taylor and the Edwardsian Tradition: Evolution and Continuity in the Culture of the New England Theology," (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1995), 155-212.
39. "Miscellanies" 412.
40. Edwards, "Justification by Faith alone," 654.