

Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards On Justification By Faith Alone

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It is impossible to read Jonathan Edwards's long 1734/1738 treatise on justification by faith alone without realizing that one is in the presence of a very great mind.¹ The treatise is as rigorous in argument and subtle in its distinctions as any of his other writings. Since like many of his theological treatises it started out as a series of sermons, one stands in awe at how a congregation could have had the capacity of taking it in by ear. Even to track the argument in its general outlines would have required a level of personal and cultural achievement that puts our own "sound-bite" culture in the shade. At the same time, however, it seems fair to say that the virtues of Edwards's treatise are also in some sense its liabilities. Are there not junctures where the argument seems to pass over from being rigorous to being merely pedantic, from being subtle to being excessively precise, and from being biblically adequate to being rationalistic at the expense of the subject matter?

As an example of commendable rigor, take the long middle section in which Edwards considers what Paul means by the term "law" (pp. 167-83). Addressing himself to a question that has again gained currency in recent New Testament scholarship, Edwards asks whether for Paul the law was primarily ceremonial, as some Arminians had alleged, or whether it was rather primarily moral, as the Reformation tradition had proposed. Edwards not only defends the Reformation, but he does so at a level of sophistication that would seem to remain unsurpassed. Although I am no expert on the current New Testament debate, I suspect that Edwards's meticulous examination of the internal evidence would still hold up rather well. Those dissatisfied with the arguments of scholars like E. P. Sanders and James Dunn will find a welcome ally in Edwards, should they choose to consult him. If Edwards is any indication, one cannot help but feel that standards of evidence and argumentation were perhaps higher in the eighteenth century than they are in theology today.

An impressive but perhaps less successful example of sharp argumentation may be found in Edwards's critique of the traditional distinction between Christ's "passive" and "active" righteousness (pp. 193-99). Edwards proposes [*WTJ* 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 108] to replace the distinction with a supposedly better one, namely, between "negative" and "positive" righteousness. The problem, he avers, is that Christ's so-called passive righteousness, whereby he suffered divine judgment for our sakes, involved his active submission to the Father's will, while his so-called active righteousness, whereby he fulfilled the moral law for our sakes, involved his self-abnegation in complying with that same heavenly will. In short, while Christ's passive righteousness contained an element of active consent, his active

righteousness involved an element of passive compliance. Therefore, it would be better, Edwards concludes, with perhaps a mild tone of irritation at those who have missed this subtlety, to speak of “negative righteousness” for Christ’s fulfilling of the negative requirements of the law, and of “positive righteousness” for his fulfilling of its positive requirements. Although one takes the point, it is hard not to feel that a bit of hair-splitting is going on here. It is not clear that the traditional distinction necessarily overlooks Edwards’s concern, nor is it clear that an unmitigated gain results by shifting the focus of attention, as Edwards does, away from the person of Christ and to the requirements of the law instead.

One place where Edwards seems more clearly to lapse into hair-splitting is the brief section where he considers whether faith is an instrument of reception or whether it is not rather the act of reception itself (pp. 153-54). Not only is it hard to see why faith could not be both, if considered from different standpoints, but also to see why this distinction should matter much at all. Perhaps there is a hidden interlocutor whom Edwards is addressing. Again he seems to treat the failure to note this subtlety with a certain degree of impatience. Yet he never really convinces us, I think, that it deserves the attention he devotes to it. Like Immanuel Kant in a later generation, Edwards seems, at times, to be one of those high-powered rationalists who invents distinctions for the sake of distinctions. However, as will be considered in due course, downplaying the idea of faith as an “instrument” may be fraught with more implications that would at first meet the eye.

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.” It is perhaps already a dangerous sign that he finds it necessary to make this defense at all. What is it about his doctrine that allows the question to arise?

Congruent merit is the idea that God bestows a reward not out of strict obligation but out of pure benevolence. Although none has been promised, a reward is nonetheless bestowed in proportion to the quality of the human virtue or performance that is pleasing in God’s sight. Depending on the conception, the pleasing human excellence can be seen as at once grounded entirely in divine grace, and yet also as somehow relatively independent of the grace that makes it possible. The proportionality between the pleasing human excellence and the benevolent divine reward might be compared, in some sense, to a matching [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 109] grant. The measure of excellence is somehow matched, proportionately if not necessarily equivalently, by the measure of reward. The reward is fitting though not obligatory.

To understand the fix that Edwards’s doctrine is in, it might help to begin by explaining that it cannot fairly be charged with involving the stricter doctrine of merit from scholastic theology, known as condign merit. Condign merit is merit in the proper sense. In contrast to congruent merit, its divine reward is not benevolent but obligatory. It is merit that deserves a reward, or is worthy of reward; and God is obliged to reward it, because God has promised to do so, and it would be unjust of God not to do so. Again the pleasing human excellence or merit can be seen as

grounded entirely in divine grace while still also being somehow an independent human achievement. The relation between merit and reward, however, is not here a matter of proportionality but of strict equivalence—even if, in some respect, God’s rewards always exceed the intrinsic value of the rewarded human virtue or action.

Edwards has to face the question of a “fitting” divine reward—“fitting” and “reward” are his own words—primarily because, in some sense, he makes justification rest on a double ground, the one primary, the other “secondary and derivative” (p. 215). The primary ground, as Edwards states, is Christ alone; it results in the actual though virtual justification—again “virtual” is Edwards’s word—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. Edwards is quite explicit. Faith, along with all that it entails, is described as “that in us by which we are justified” (pp. 222, 153). In short, justification finds its primary ground “in Christ,” in his negative and positive righteousness, and its secondary or derivative ground “in us,” that is, in faith, defined as a disposition, as a “habit and principle in the heart” (p. 204).²

Although many questions would arise at this point—for example, about imputation, or about our union with Christ, or about the place of inherent righteousness—Edwards more or less defers them until he has dispatched with the troubling question of congruent merit. He wants to maintain two essential points at the same time. First, faith is that human excellence or virtue which, in some sense, makes it fitting for God to reward it with eternal life. Second, this idea of fitting reward avoids the pitfalls of congruent merit, because the virtue of faith is grounded entirely in the righteousness of Christ. Because faith brings the believer into union with Christ, Edwards argues, it is fitting not only that God should look on the believer as being in Christ, but also that Christ’s righteousness [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 110] should be applied to the believer. Although the language here is slippery, Edwards clearly intends to set forth the virtue of faith as a secondary reason why the believer should be accepted by God.

Faith is a virtue. It has, in some sense, its own “fitness and beauty” (p. 154). It is that in us “by which we are rendered approvable” to God (p. 154). It is that principle in us which makes it fitting that God should accept us, not because of any excellence it has in itself, but purely from the relation that it bears to Christ (p. 155). But by virtue of that relation, faith is “a very excellent qualification” (p. 154). It is even “one chief part of the inherent holiness of a Christian”—Edwards does not hesitate, as we will see more fully, to use the term “inherent holiness”—that is pleasing to God (p. 154). Faith is a rewardable excellence only because it is grounded in Christ; but by virtue of being grounded in Christ, it is also, in a secondary and derivative sense, excellent and rewardable in itself. It is the thing in a person “on account of which God looks on it as meet that he should have Christ’s merits belonging to him” (p. 156).

“This is very wide from a merit of congruity,” states Edwards, “or indeed any moral congruity at all” (p. 159). If the idea of congruent merit could be restricted only to the case of independent moral effort, Edwards would be correct. His idea

that it is fitting, relatively and indirectly, that God should reward the virtue of faith with eternal life would indeed have nothing to do with the idea of congruous merit, for faith is not a matter of independent moral effort. But the Reformation had insisted that our justification depended entirely on Christ, and not in any sense on some virtue in ourselves—not before faith, but also not after faith; not absolutely, but also not relatively or indirectly. Justification did not rest on any such virtue *qua* virtue in us, even if that virtue were faith. Faith was simply not a virtue in that sense.

Edwards knew about the Council of Trent, against whose view of justification he polemicized, but he apparently did not know about any more sophisticated forms of Thomism. He did not know of the proposal that virtues can be grounded entirely in grace and still be so pleasing to God that by sheer benevolence they merit the reward of eternal life, and that this reward need not necessarily be obligatory but only fitting or congruous. He did not know, apparently, that by defining faith as a meritorious virtue, regardless of how secondary and derivative, he had moved closer to Thomas than to the Reformation.

Toward the end of his treatise, Edwards begins to qualify his earlier emphasis on Christ alone. The imputation of Christ's righteousness turns out not to exclude but to include the believer's "inherent holiness" and obedience as a secondary ground of justification. It is not solely Christ's righteousness, but "mainly" (p. 198) and "properly" his righteousness (p. 216) that functions as justification's ground. Space is cleared for a secondary and improper ground. Thus we begin to read statements like these:

Here it perhaps may be said that a title to salvation is not *directly* given as the reward of our obedience; for that is not by anything of ours, but only by Christ's satisfaction and holiness; but yet an interest in that satisfaction and righteousness is given as a reward of our obedience, (p. 199, italics added)

[WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 111]

Though it be true that the saints are rewarded for their good works, yet it is for Christ's sake only, and not for the excellency of their works in themselves considered, (p. 213)

Though the saints' inherent holiness is rewarded, yet this very reward is indeed, not the less founded on the worthiness and righteousness of Christ. . . . the prime foundation on which all is built. (p. 214)

If we suppose that not only higher degrees of glory in heaven, but *heaven itself*, is in some respect given in reward for holiness, and good works of the saints, in this secondary and derivative sense, it won't prejudice the doctrine we have maintained, (p. 215, italics added)

From these and other statements we may conclude that for Edwards's doctrine of justification by faith, Christ is the prime though not the exclusive ground of righteousness in the saints, and that salvation is, in some sense, given as a reward for their inherent holiness, loveliness, and obedience, so long as we see that the reward is not given directly but only indirectly through the primary ground in Christ. Edwards explains:

If we take works as acts or expressions of faith, they are not excluded; so a man is not justified by faith only, but also by works; i.e. he is not justified only by faith as a principle in the heart, or in its first and more immanent acts, but also by the effective acts of it in life, which are the expressions of the life of faith, (p. 236)

Three basic tenets of the Reformation would seem to be contradicted by the aspects of Edwards's doctrine that we have examined. First, as stated succinctly by Francis Turretin, "what is inherent is opposed to what is imputed."³ In other words, inherent righteousness is excluded by imputed righteousness from being, in any sense, a ground of justification or of acceptance to salvation by God. Following Calvin (*Comm.* II Cor. 5:21),⁴ Turretin observed that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us in the same sense as our sin was imputed to him.

Now Christ was made sin for us, not inherently or subjectively (because he knew no sin), but imputatively (because God imputed to him our sins and made the iniquities of us all to meet on him, Isa. 53:6). Therefore, we also are made righteousness, not by infusion, but by imputation. (*JET*, p. 652)

Since we are righteous in Christ alone, Turretin concluded (in opposition to the Catholic Bellarmine), Christ's righteousness as imputed to us excludes, as a ground of justification, our being righteous in ourselves. Imputed righteousness necessarily entails the corollaries that our righteousness (in any saving sense) is alien and passive. We never have any other righteousness in ourselves, with respect to salvation, than the righteousness imputed to us in Christ, and we never receive that righteousness in any other way than through faith. The righteousness [*WTJ* 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 112] that saves us is "alien" and not inherent, explained Turretin, "because if it is inherent it is no longer another's" (*JET*, p. 655); and it is "passive," because "what justifies as an instrument [i.e., faith] does not justify meritoriously" (*JET*, p. 674). While Edwards had a strong doctrine of imputation, he finally qualified it so as to admit inherent, active righteousness as a secondary and derivative ground of our being accepted by God, which if not directly "meritorious" was still "fittingly" patient of reward.

Second, as stressed particularly by Luther, "the whole procedure of justification is passive."⁵ Justification is not just passive at the outset. As Paul Althaus explained: "This means that passive righteousness is not more and more replaced and limited by an active righteousness, and that alien righteousness is not more and more replaced by one's own."⁶ Christians remain sinners throughout

their whole lives. They cannot live and be pleasing to God except by Christ's righteousness alone, where "alone" is not to be qualified as meaning "primarily." "We live continually under the remission of sins," wrote Luther (*LW* 34, 164). Christ's righteousness is not a ground that needs to be supplemented by a lesser and derivative ground within ourselves. It is rather the solely sufficient ground by which we receive mercy each day. Throughout our whole lives, stated Luther, "we are justified daily by the unmerited forgiveness of sins and by the justification of God's mercy" (*LW* 34, 167). "I daily live under tolerance."⁷

Finally, as emphasized powerfully by Calvin, we do not participate in Christ's righteousness without participating in fellowship with his person (*Inst.* 3.11.10).⁸ There are two points here. First, our union with Christ, according to Calvin, is a mystical union. It is a joining together of Head and members, so that Christ dwells in us eternally and we in him. Second, and closely related, as Calvin affirmed, "the Lord Jesus never gives anyone the enjoyment of his benefits except by giving himself" (3.16.1). Christ does not give his benefits without giving himself, nor give himself without giving his benefits. Arguably, neither of these points is strongly represented by Edwards in his treatise on justification, and the deficiency is symptomatic of larger problems already suggested. Speaking of our union with Christ, Edwards confessed: "I don't know how to determine what sort this union is" (p. 155). He finally resorted to describing it as a "legal union"—a union whereby one person is, because of a legal relationship, accepted for another, in the judgment of God (p. 156). When Scripture speaks of believers as being "in Christ," it means, inferred Edwards, "that they are legally one, or accepted as one, by the Supreme Judge" (p. 191).

Not only does this idea of a merely legal (and thus apparently formal and external) union seem a far cry from what Calvin meant by union and communion with Christ, but it also points toward a deeper though subtle problem in [\[WTJ 66:1 \(Spring 2004\) p. 113\]](#) Edward's conceptually as a whole. It is striking that in his treatise Edwards often writes of "*something*" really in believers that justifies them (p. 158), at precisely those points where Calvin or Luther would more typically have spoken of "*someone*." By casting *participatio Christi* in more nearly legal than personalist terms, Edwards finally ends up separating Christ's benefits, in some sense, from Christ himself. To be sure, Christ's righteousness is the source and ground of the believer's righteousness, but Christ himself as a person is not, as in Luther and Calvin, the exclusive object and content of that righteousness at the same time. If Edwards had seen union with Christ more nearly in terms of the mystery of personal communion or mutual indwelling, he might have concluded that the believer's righteousness in Christ was not just virtual but real, so that the believer's actual or inherent righteousness did not have to bear any weight in making the believer acceptable before God. Rather than the virtue or principle of faith, he might have seen Christ himself—the person in and with his righteousness, and the righteousness in and with his person—as that in us which (by imputation and exchange) makes it fitting for us to be accepted by God.

To sum up: Edwards clearly understood the intention of the standard Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. At the opening of his treatise, he stated that “the act of justification has no regard to anything in the person justified, as godliness, or any goodness in him; but nextly or 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” (p. 147). As suggested by this very remark, however, he made a distinction between what obtained for a person before and after the event of justification, which coincided with the awakening of faith in the believer. Before the awakening of faith, the person had nothing in him—no suitable disposition—by which he could be justified before God. This situation changed, however, after the awakening of faith. Although Christ’s righteousness as imputed to the believer was the only true ground of the believer’s righteousness, it nonetheless entailed faith as the act of reception. Faith as a subjective act and disposition was then interpreted by Edwards as a secondary derivative reason why the believer was pleasing to God and rewarded by God. The idea of faith as a pleasing disposition that God would reward then opened the door to themes that the Reformation had excluded. Inherent as opposed to alien holiness, active as opposed to passive righteousness, and Christ’s righteousness as a benefit de-coupled from his person all entered into Edwards’s doctrine in a way that, to some degree, undermined his basic Reformation intentions.

At this point it might be objected that it is incorrect to claim that Edwards’s idea of justification rests on a “double ground.” Edwards carefully distinguishes, it might be argued, between a “cause” and a “condition.” Christ alone is the cause of justification, while faith is merely a necessary, though unique, condition. Although no justification can occur without faith, faith is not in any sense the effective power by which justification is produced as a result. Nor is faith the meritorious work by which justification is earned. Faith does no more than to receive justification, because it is faith that joins a person to Christ. Without faith no union with Christ is possible, and therefore no justification can occur. But in union with Christ the believer receives justification as a gift or a benefit—something that is entirely undeserved. Because the benefit of justification cannot [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 114] be received without faith, faith is a necessary condition. But because it is something that derives completely from grace, Christ alone is the source and cause.⁹

Although this objection is plausible as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. Other points need to be considered. First, as a matter of fact, in his 1734/1738 treatise Edwards never speaks about justification as having a “cause.” The terms he actually uses are “ground,” “condition,” and, most tellingly, “qualification.” Faith for him is not merely a necessary condition for justification, nor is it merely the most important condition. Faith also functions—in some sense—as a positive qualification for being justified or accepted by God. Edwards explicitly describes it as a qualification that is “excellent” and “amiable.” Faith, for Edwards, is therefore more than a necessary condition. As a positive qualification it functions as a secondary and ex post facto ground.

What must not be overlooked is the importance of Edwards's temporal distinction. A person's "qualifications" for being justified or saved are different prior to faith than they are afterwards, or somewhat more precisely, they differ initially from what they come to be subsequently. At all times a person's justification is founded in and derived from Christ (p. 215). But then faith itself becomes "a derivative loveliness"—a "qualification" that God not only accepts, but also rewards as "lovely." The reward, furthermore, is not only a matter of higher or lower degrees of glory in heaven, but is also somehow a matter, as we have seen, of "heaven itself" (p. 215). Most importantly, faith not only establishes a relation to Christ; it also becomes an inherent property or qualification in the believer. It is "that in us by which we are justified" (p. 153). Faith is described as something really in believers (a qualification), and between believers and Christ (a relation) that "is the *ground* of the suitableness of their being accounted as one by the Judge" (p. 156, italics added).¹⁰ A person's acceptance by God (justification) thus rests not only on the relation, but also, remarkably, on the "inherent holiness" of faith itself (p. 214).

Clearly, Edwards is not just saying that faith is a necessary condition, without which a person cannot be justified (though he does say that). Nor is he merely saying that faith itself, along with other virtues and good deeds, is accepted and rewarded by God as something excellent and amiable on the ground of justification (though he indeed says that as well) (p. 211). He is saying that after (initial) justification, faith and other virtues are (subsequently) accepted by God as inherent qualifications that contribute to a person's acceptance or (final) salvation—in [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 115] other words, to a person's being rewarded with heaven itself (p. 215). The contribution is real despite its being secondary, inferior, and derived.

Thus Edwards can write: "For though there is indeed something in man that is really and spiritually good, prior to justification, yet there is nothing that is accepted as any godliness or excellency of the person, *till after justification*" (p. 164, italics added). This sentence clearly suggests that "after justification" something—an inherent qualification—is accepted in the divine judgment as a "godliness or excellency of the person." We read elsewhere that in judgment God has "regard to a qualification in him, in this respect" (p. 156). In what respect? While the "qualification in him" has no "value or loveliness" in itself, yet in Christ it acquires an *inherent* value or loveliness in the believer (p. 156). Or again, it is "not meet, *till a sinner is actually justified*, that anything in him should be accepted of God, as any excellency or amiableness of his person" (p. 161, italics added). But afterwards, it seems that the person's acceptance by God no longer rests only on an "alien righteousness" (to borrow a term missing in Edwards), but also secondarily on an inherent holiness that is grounded in Christ's righteousness and derived from it. Again we seem to have a twofold ground consisting of alien and inherent righteousness, with the latter ordered to and derived from the former.

The idea of a holy disposition that is subsequent to justification, but that then functions, in effect, as a secondary ground of justification, finds expression elsewhere in Edwards's writings.¹¹ Nowhere is the point spelled out more candidly

than in the “Controversies” Notebook, whose entries on justification date after the 1734/1738 treatise by about ten years.

In a crucial entry Edwards states that *after* justification “men are rewarded for the loveliness of their righteousness,” that is, for the righteousness that is inherent in them as a secondary and dependent quality—as distinct from the righteousness of Christ.¹² Prior to being admitted to “an interest in Christ and his righteousness,” Edwards writes, a person lacks all “moral fitness or value” (CNJ, p. 366). Afterwards, however, the situation is very different.

I say, the believer’s holiness, viewed in these circumstances, is looked upon as a beauty and excellency having in it a great moral value in the sight of God, recommending to great favor and complacence and infinite rewards, and is a secondary recommendation to and worthiness of that eternal life and happiness which Christ has promised to bestow on believers in heaven. Christ’s own righteousness is the primary and fundamental absolute worthiness and recommendation; the believer’s inherent holiness is a secondary, dependent and derivative worthiness. (CNJ, p. 367)

[WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 116]

Much as in the 1734/1738 treatise Edwards here distinguishes primary “worthiness” from secondary “worthiness.” The latter he sees as a distinct, though inferior, ground for the reward of eternal happiness and eternal life (not just for degrees of glory). Perhaps the most important new element is the unexpected admission that the believer’s “inherent holiness” is now said to have “great moral value in the sight of God” with respect to salvation. In the 1734/1738 treatise, when explaining how he had avoided espousing “congruent merit,” Edwards scrupulously distinguished between “natural” and “moral” fitness, placing inherent holiness strictly in the former category. It was never entirely clear, however, how this distinction could be sustained, since “natural” fitness involved such qualities as holiness, excellency, and beauty—none of which, it would seem, can be merely amoral in Edwards’s dispositional ontology. In any case, the strictness of the distinction now seems to be abandoned. The secondary ground of eternal life, Edwards now maintains, is not merely natural but moral fitness.

The distinction, in effect, between primary and secondary saving righteousness unfortunately fits in with the way Edwards argues, in his 1734/1738 treatise, for a version of “justification by works.” As a foil against which to appreciate Edwards here, Francis Turretin’s position on the same question is instructive. Like Edwards, Turretin is concerned to harmonize Paul’s teaching on justification with that of James.

Turretin follows the main lines of the Reformation as initiated by Luther. First, he argues that Paul and James do not use the word *faith* in the same sense. “Paul speaks of a living and efficacious faith; James of an idle and dead faith which cannot be demonstrated by works” (JET, 682). Second, he argues that works

confirm justification but do not cause it. “Paul rightly urges faith alone for justification. . . . James properly commends the necessity of works for the confirmation of justification” (*JET*, 682). Works demonstrate saving faith without contributing to it. “If works are required as concomitants of faith, they are not on that account determined to be causes of justification with faith or to do the very thing which faith does in this matter” (*JET* 680). Finally, he argues that faith is saving in itself; it does not need to be completed by something else in order to be efficacious. “All works are entirely excluded by Paul; not only the ceremonial, but also the moral; not only those performed before grace, but also those performed from grace in the renewed” (*JET*, 678). “A man cannot be justified by two righteousnesses (one in himself, the other in Christ)” (*JET*, 673).

A careful reading of the 1734/1738 treatise shows Edwards diverging from Turretin on all three points. First, where Turretin and the Reformation had concluded that Paul and James use the *word faith* differently,¹³ Edwards concludes that it is not the word *faith* that is used differently, but rather the word [\[WTJ 66:1 \(Spring 2004\) p. 117\] justify](#). After citing the sentence, “By works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (Jas 2:24), Edwards comments: “one of the terms, either the word *faith*, or else the word *justify*, is not to be understood precisely in the same sense, as the same terms when used by St. Paul” (p. 231). Over against his Arminian opponents, who think it is the word *faith* that is differently used, Edwards states: “We on the other hand suppose that the word *justify* [in James] is to be understood in a different sense from the apostle Paul” (p. 231). The implication is that *faith* is used in the same sense by James as by Paul.

Second, while Edwards agrees that works demonstrate saving faith and so confirm justification, he disagrees that good works are not essential to the definition of faith; thus he also disagrees that works make no essential contribution to justification.¹⁴ Like Turretin, Edwards argues that works are spoken of by James “as justifying evidences” (p. 232). Unlike Turretin, however, Edwards goes on to insist that good works are “necessary to salvation” (p. 234).¹⁵ While faith alone is “the fundamental condition” (p. 235), it is not the only condition. For works are “signs of what is inward” (p. 233), and what is inward is not sufficient for salvation. Only the inward in conjunction with the outward is sufficient. Faith alone is not enough.

Edwards here crosses the fine line laid down by the Reformation. He moves from affirming that faith is not without works to the very different insistence that works, as the external expression of faith, play a role in justification. “A man is not justified by faith only,” Edwards states, “but also by works; i.e., he is not justified only by faith as a principle in the heart, or in its first and more immanent acts, but also by the effective acts of it in life, which are the expressions of the life of faith” (p. 236). Works are not excluded from justification, ultimately because justification has a double ground: not only in Christ, but through Christ also in us. Faith is that “in us” by which “we become fit to be accepted and approved” (pp. 233-34), and works are the “proper evidence of that fitness” (p. 233). They manifest “what is in the heart” (p. 233). Since works are the external form without which faith is not faith,

it is proper to speak of “justification . . . by works as an evidence” (p. 235). Works are not just external evidence that faith exists. They are necessary to the efficacy of faith.

Finally, unlike Turretin, Edwards clearly holds that faith must be expressed or completed by works in order to be efficacious. He does not exclude works entirely from justification. While he does exclude works performed before grace, he does not exclude those performed from grace in the renewed. Turretin notes that faith [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 118] as such can be said to justify only “improperly and metonymically” (*LET*, 670). He is thereby in a position to uphold that justification has only one ground—in Christ alone (*LET*, 652–53). Edwards, by contrast, ascribes a proper, though secondary, efficacy to faith (“fitness”) which is not merely figurative. It thereby becomes impossible for him not to ascribe efficacy also to works as faith’s outward expression or completion.

In discussing how works are related to saving faith, Edwards blurs the declaratory/contributory contrast. He asserts, in effect, that works not only declare but also complete or contribute to the efficacy of faith. One reason for this move may be that Edwards implicitly operates with a category that, for him, is more fundamental than either faith or works. They are both expressions of what he calls “disposition.”

“‘Tis [aman’s] disposition that saves him,” wrote Edwards in an early “Miscellany.” “. . . The disposition and principle is the thing God looks at.”¹⁶ “The disposition is all that can be said to be absolutely necessary.”¹⁷ In Misc. 218 the idea of disposition is related to “justifying faith.” A person’s disposition is exercised, Edwards argues, under various diverse aspects, and so “‘tis the same agreeing or consenting disposition that . . . is called by different names.”¹⁸ Among these names are chiefly those of “faith,” “hope,” and “love”; but of particular interest is the remark that when the disposition is exerted “toward commands,” it is called “obedience.”¹⁹ No sharp contrast can be maintained between faith and works, because the heart’s disposition is necessarily exercised in them both. “The graces of the Spirit,” Edwards explains, “. . . are so nearly allied that they include one another; and where there is exercise of the one, there is something to 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.”²⁰

Applied to the doctrine of justification, this mutual consort is described as follows:

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.²¹

If “the graces are all the same in principle,” then while the grace of faith may have a certain strong priority in justification (as Edwards always upholds), it is nonetheless

not different in principle from other graces, such as those involved [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 119] in “true repentance,” “evangelical humiliation,” and, it would seem, evangelical obedience. By contrast to Turretin (and the main Reformation tradition), faith for Edwards is not sufficient in itself, or in its acceptance of Christ, such that works of obedience merely declare it, while in no way adding to its sufficiency. Faith is instead only one exercise (necessary but not sufficient) of a person’s disposition, regardless of how primary, while obedience, another such exercise, becomes, in the end, as necessary to salvation as is faith.²²

If men have a mind to say that we [are] justified partly by obedience, and explain themselves, that . . . obedience is a part of the reception of Christ and the gospel, [since] acts of evangelical obedience are acts of reception; why, it does not alter the case at all as to the doctrine of justification and free grace; there is nothing that it is worth the while in the least to controvert about.²³

Just as faith without obedience is not sufficient for salvation, so is obedience, like faith, “a part of the reception of Christ and the gospel.” Though different in weight and expression, obedience and faith are essentially the same in principle, since both count as exertions of the saving disposition. It seems fair to sum up by saying that what Edwards finally teaches is justification by disposition alone.

One last point. In interpreting Edwards on justification, much depends on what kind of focus one brings to the texts. If one brings a soft focus, Edwards can end up sounding very much like the Reformation, as he himself clearly intended and often, it should be added, carried out. If one brings a crisper focus, however, as Turretin might have done, to the whole range of his texts, the picture comes out rather differently. The soft focus, which works well at the higher levels of generality, would seem to be a suitable note on which to end.

The notion of the freeness of the grace of God to sinners, as that is revealed and taught in the gospel, is not that no holy and amiable qualifications or actions in us shall be a fruit, and so a sign of that grace; but that it is not the worthiness or loveliness of any qualification or action of ours which recommends us to that grace; that kindness is shown to the unworthy and unlovely; that there is great excellency in the benefit bestowed and no excellency in the subject as the price of it; that goodness goes forth and [WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 120] flows out, from the fullness of God’s nature, the fullness of the Fountain of Good, without any amiableness in the object to draw it. And this is the notion of justification without works (as this doctrine is taught in the Scripture) that it is not the worthiness or loveliness of our works, or anything in us, which is in any wise accepted with God, as a balance for the guilt of sin, or a recommendation of sinners to his acceptance as heirs of life. Thus we are justified only by the righteousness of Christ, and not by our righteousness.²⁴

This was the position from which Edwards always began and which he always intended to uphold as he thought his way into a more technical, complex, and subtle account that would do justice to his dispositional soteriology.

1 Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 19, Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738* (ed. M. X. Lesser; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 143–242. (Hereafter page numbers cited in the text.) The first form of the treatise was presented in 1734, while the final, longer version was not published until 1738.

2 According to Maarten Wisse, "it is difficult to find a definition of faith in Reformed theology which describes faith in terms of a disposition." If so, then Edwards would appear to be an important exception. But perhaps he merely represents a variant of the close interrelation between habit and act (with respect to faith) that Wisse finds to be normal in post-Reformation Reformed theology. See Wisse, "Habitus fidei: an essay on the history of a concept," *SJT* 56 (2003): 172–89; on p. 185 n. 45.

3 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:652. (Hereafter cited in the text as *IET*.)

4 John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 10:81–82.

5 Martin Luther, *Comm. on Ps. 51:8*, in *Luther's Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 12:368. (Works from this series hereafter cited in the text as *LW*.)

6 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 229 (trans. alt).

7 Luther, cited by Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 229 (see WA 40/III, 38).

8 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). (Hereafter cited from this edition in the text.)

9 For an interpretation of Edwards along these lines, see Samuel T. Logan, Jr., "The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *WTJ* 46 (1984): 26–52. Logan admirably draws upon a wide mastery of Edwards's texts while also placing Edwards's argument in its historical context.

10 This sentence from Edwards's treatise is often quoted: "What is real in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is legal...." But the

continuation is often omitted: "... 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" (p. 158). Although the pronouns in the continuation are difficult, I take the phrase "it is something" to refer to faith, the phrase "really in them" to refer to a qualification in believers, and the phrase "between them" to refer to faith as a relation between believers and Christ. "Faith" is therefore "what is real in the union" and "the foundation of what is legal." It is at once a qualification and a relationship. As such faith is the "ground" that makes it suitable for Christ's righteousness to be imputed to the believer.

11 Edwards distinguishes being "actually justified" from being "virtually justified." "Actual" justification, though "final," is also "virtual" in the sense that it is prospectively and perpetually efficacious throughout the rest of the believer's life. Only in retrospect, however, at the end of a person's life, will it have passed from being virtual to being completely fulfilled or realized (or so Edwards seems to imply) (pp. 192, 202-4). It is perhaps because justification is conceived as being at once actual and yet still also virtual that Edwards can admit secondary and derivative (inherent) qualifications as contributing to a person's salvation by God.

12 "'Controversies' Notebook: Justification," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 21, Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith* (ed. Sang Hyung Lee; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 366. (Hereafter cited as *CNJ* in the text.)

13 Luther judged that Paul and James were using the term *faith* differently (see Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 246). This then became the position in the "Apology of the Augsburg Confession" (4.249) and the "Solid Declaration" of the *Formula of Concord* (Article 3.42). (See *The Book of Concord* [ed. Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 142-43, 547.) Calvin argued that *faith* and *justify* were each used differently by James than by Paul (*Inst.* 3.17.11). The "Second Helvetic Confession" (15.6) and "The Westminster Confession of Faith" (11.2) both focused on the difference between "dead" and "living" faith. (See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [New York: Harper and Row, 1931], 3:267-68, 626.)

14 A similar conclusion is drawn by Amy Plantinga Pauw: "Fruits of obedience are intrinsic to saving faith, not merely external evidence for its existence." See "Editor's Introduction," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 20, The "Miscellanies" 833-1152* (ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 26. Pauw cites a number of "Miscellanies" from the years 1740-1751 that support this conclusion. (She sees a countervailing tendency, however, in Edwards's anti-Arminian arguments [see 26 n. 5].)

15 In context Edwards states this idea in a double negative: James's opponents were in *error* to suppose "that good works were *not* necessary to salvation" (p. 234, italics added).

16 Edwards, Misc. 27b, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 13, The "Miscellanies" a-500* (ed. Thomas A. Schafer; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 214.

17 Ibid., 213.

18 Ibid., 345.

19 Ibid., 345 (Misc. 218).

20 Ibid., 458 (Misc. 393).

21 Ibid., 458.

22 There is some precedent for Edwards's position in the Reformed tradition, though it would seem to be a minority viewpoint. For example, Martin Bucer had taught a twofold justification, first and primarily of the godless, then secondarily of the pious. In the 17th century Francis Burmann set forth a fairly elaborate idea of "twofold justification": "The former may be called the first, the latter second justification. The former rests on the imputed righteousness of Christ, the latter on the inherent holiness of a man; the former is that of the godless, the latter that of the righteous.... The former is perfect, the latter is imperfect. The former in short is achieved by faith, the latter proceeds from works. Both rest on the righteousness of Christ...." See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 563. While others took a similar view, it was usually considered too close to Catholicism. The Lutheran tradition, for its part, pointed strongly in the opposite direction. See Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 434–35.

23 Ibid., 516-17 (Misc. 474).

24 Edwards, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 2, Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 455.

[WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004) p. 121]

In Christian theology, justification is God's righteous act of removing the guilt and penalty of sin while, at the same time, declaring the ungodly to be righteous, through faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice. The means of justification is an area of significant difference amongst the diverse theories of atonement defended within Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant theologies. Justification is often seen as being the theological fault line that divided Roman Catholicism from the Lutheran For example, John Piper constantly refers to Edwards and was very much influenced by his writings. However brilliant and helpful Edwards is, there are some troublesome spots in his theology and philosophy. There was an article in the WTJ years ago by George Hunsinger which described Edwards' "dispositional soteriology" and his weakness when it came to sola fide. I can see echoes of this in Piper as well. Pastor Fonville has put the WTJ article by Dr. Hunsinger on line, it's worth a read: <http://www.paramountchurch.com/blog/post/dispositional-soteriology:-jonathan-edwards-on-justification-by-faith-alone>. A Jonathan Edwards Warning Label | LIGHT in the Darkness says The Judaizers said we are right before our Creator through faith in Jesus and our obedience to the Law, but for Paul this amounts to our being justified by our own efforts. As John Calvin comments, 2:15-16 shows that "either nothing or all must be ascribed to faith or to works." For Peter to imply in his actions that Gentiles must live like Jews to be true Christians was hypocritical because even he, a Jew, did not live like a Jew (v. 14). A more detailed look at the works of the Law, the ground of justification, and so on will come in due time. Before we press on, however, we see clearly that we are declared righteous before God through faith in Jesus alone (Gal. 2:15-16). Coram Deo.