

**5,000 word essay:**  
***“In what ways does Edwards advance  
our understanding of justification?”***

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## ABSTRACT

In answering how Edwards advances our understanding of justification, we firstly survey briefly where the topic featured in his writings and preaching. We find that it had an important place. The essay then sets Edwards in his context to answer where justification had progressed to by his time, and what the significant questions were which influenced his defence and preaching of the doctrine. This then helps us to see Edwards' particular contributions and emphases. The thesis of this essay is that Edwards was not a conservative but an innovator. He was thoroughly committed to his predecessors' Reformed understanding of justification by faith alone, but he advanced the historic arguments with other biblical exposition and theologically informed philosophical reasoning.

The main section of the essay explores the doctrine of justification by faith alone, with particular reference to Edwards' emphasis on imputation and Christ's active and passive obedience, and his particular contribution to understanding how faith relates to salvation. We also explore Edwards' concern for the right connection to faith of a life of good works. The distinctive contributions he makes here come through his ideas of union with Christ, fitness, and non-causal conditions. Edwards' language and arguments caused him to express some things differently to his predecessors. This has led some to question Edwards' orthodoxy, or even deny it. Rather than advancing our understanding of justification, they suggest Edwards moves it dangerously towards Roman Catholicism. We apply our findings about Edwards' theology to these objections and conclude they are unfounded, and that Edwards has been misunderstood.

The essay finally reflects on how the content, manner of preaching, and biblical-historical framework of justification advance our understanding of the role justification plays in evangelism and mission for individual and societal transformation.

We contend that Edwards' work is a powerful and important moment in the historical progression of clarifying and defending biblical doctrine. His is an exposition of such clarity and depth that all succeeding generations will benefit from carefully coming to grips with his arguments and critiquing them.

## Introduction

Many doctrines were important in Jonathan Edwards' preaching and writing ministry, and left a significant contribution to Christian thought. The doctrine of justification was one of them. His Masters Thesis was on the subject.<sup>1</sup> He also chose to defend justification by grace through faith at the Yale commencement address in 1723. According to Edwards, the beginnings of the revival in Northampton in 1734-35 were sparked by sermons on justification.<sup>2</sup> These sermons are included in the volume of his preaching he had published, and the importance of the theme of justification is highlighted by Edwards in its preface.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, his notes are replete with entries and essays dealing with the topic of justification by faith.<sup>4</sup> Schafer suggests that Edwards gave it little emphasis in the last 20 years,<sup>5</sup> yet a number of essays and notes on justification were written in those years.<sup>6</sup>

One reason justification remained a key topic for Edwards was because of the continued theological challenges to it from various quarters. Indeed, understanding the context in which Edwards formulated and preached this doctrine will help to clarify his distinctive emphases. The question of how Edwards advances our understanding of justification demands us first to ask the question 'Advances *from* what'? Where had the understanding of justification progressed to? And what were the influences on the theological thinking of Edwards' day? Edwards was an inheritor of the Reformation doctrine of justification.<sup>7</sup> He is also regarded as the last of the

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, J. 'A Sinner is not Justified in the Sight of God except through the Righteousness of Christ Obtained by Faith'. Pages 60-66 in *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*. WJE 14. Edited by Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, J. *Sermons and Discourses 1734-1738* (WJE 19; ed. M. X. Lesser; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 795.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, 'Preface to *Discourses on Various Important Subjects*', in *Sermons and Discourses 1734-1738*, 793-798.

<sup>4</sup> For example, no. 1354 focuses on the topic in Jonathan Edwards, 'Miscellany 1354', in *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. 1153-1360)* (WJE 23 ed. D. A. Sweeney; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 506-543.

<sup>5</sup> Schafer, T. A. 'Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith'. *Church History* 20 (1951) 55-67, 57. His conviction is that certain elements of Edwards doctrine of justification 'cause it to occupy an ambiguous and somewhat precarious place in his theology.' These are the prominent attention to the role of faith over the doctrines connected with satisfaction and imputed righteousness, 58. But Gerstner is surely right that Edwards shifted his strategic defence against Arminianism to the root in the libertarian, voluntaristic view of the will. Gerstner, J. H. *Jonathan Edwards - A Mini-Theology*. Tyndale House, Illinois, 1987, 81.

<sup>6</sup> The Controversy Notebooks were written 1740s to the 1750s. See especially Jonathan Edwards, "'Controversies" Notebook: Justification', in *Writings on the Trinity, Grace and Faith* (WJE 21; ed. S. H. Lee; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 328-413. *Miscellanies 1153-1360* cover the period from 1751-1758 from whence I have already mentioned entry 1354 on the topic (see footnote 4 above). 1250, 1260a, 1279-80, 1346, also are on the nature of justification and faith.

<sup>7</sup> For a good summary analysis of the Puritan developments see McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. Cambridge: University Press, 2005, 111-121.

Puritans and the first Evangelical. He had to defend the doctrine of justification amidst the challenges of Enlightenment thinking. In addition, the three threats to the purity of Reformed belief and practice in Edwards' time and place were Catholicism, Arminianism and Antinomianism. We will answer the essay question with these influences in view. Cherry avers that each generation was called upon to interpret the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith for his or her own time and place.<sup>8</sup> It is the contention of this essay that Edwards did so upholding fully the Reformation doctrine of justification as he engaged with his context and yet advanced the understanding of the doctrine in several ways to deal with the contemporary questions. He:

1. had a comprehensive understanding of justification in terms of what Christ's work achieved for the believer.
2. addressed the complex issues of how faith relates to justification, by developing more precisely the Reformed understanding of union with Christ and explaining the relationship by his notions of fitness and conditions.
3. used the same categories to argue for post-justification obedience as a fitting response, and more sharply than any showed that a holy life was a natural outflow of justification by faith. In this regard he also explained how any valid sense of reward should be understood.
4. He made justification the centrepiece of evangelism.
5. His vision for a renovated world meant his preaching of justification was not just promoting individual renewal but transformation of the world.

### **Edwards' social and religious context**

Edwards' writing and preaching on justification addressed Arminianism and Antinomianism in particular. Antinomianism was a 100 year old threat since Anne Hutchinson was banished for her errors. Arminianism was a new movement lapping

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<sup>8</sup> Cherry, Conrad. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 90.

at American shores' in the early eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Catholicism was an even older Puritan enemy, though was not an immediate threat in the way the above two were.

'Arminianism' was the term for a growing theological trend, whose adherents found attractive the idea that humans can contribute something towards salvation. Goen clarifies the term saying 'it had less to do with Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), the Dutch theologian from whom it took its name, than with a mood of rising confidence in man's ability to gain some purchase of the divine favor by human endeavor'.<sup>10</sup> Minkema adds that Arminianism maintained the free will of humankind to accept or reject the grace of God.<sup>11</sup> This religious view and its individualistic ideas were evidence of the Enlightenment *Zeitgeist* influencing New England. In marshalling his intellectual resources against Arminianism Edwards was not only combating notions of justification by human works, but also notions which would unravel the Puritan vision of a community of mutual relationships and responsibilities.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards' public debate against Arminianism began at his Yale days. His Commencement address on justification was in the context of growing fears that Arminianism would infiltrate the university following its Rector Timothy Cutler who had the previous year been fired for his Arminian leanings.<sup>13</sup> Closer to home, in the period just before Edwards stepped into his Northampton pulpit to deliver his revival sermons, Edwards writes of the 'great noise in this part of the country, Arminianism'.<sup>14</sup> He is probably referring to the disturbance precipitated by two nearby ministers with unorthodox views. Into this social and religious context we also remember that Puritan Preparationism could be seen to give sanctification priority over justification. Goen writes that an imperceptible shift in church life to moral striving in New England resulted in many orthodox ministers unknowingly

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<sup>9</sup> Cherry, *Theology*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Goen, Clarence C. 'Editor's Introduction'. Pages 1-95 in *The Great Awakening*. WJE 4. Edited by Clarence C. Goen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Minkema, Kenneth P. 'Preface to the Period'. Pages 3-46 in *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*. Works of Jonathan Edwards 14. Edited by Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Covenants promoted mutual obligations not individual self-expression. For examples of New England Church Covenants see 'A copy of ye covenant made at ye Gathering of ye first chh: in Reading, in New England, about ye yr 1644'. *Reading, Mass., Church Records, 1644-1769*. Reading supplied for MA via Ridley Melbourne; and "Copy of a Covenant, Entered into and Subscribed, by the People of God at Northampton . . . March 16, 1742" (*WJE*, vol. 39).

<sup>13</sup> He had effectively declared his decision to join the Anglican Church For several reasons Anglicanism was particularly abhorrent to many New England Puritan minds. For example to some it was synonymous with Arminianism. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards, A Life*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. 'A Faithful Narrative'. Pages 97-211 in *The Great Awakening*. WJE 4. Edited by C. C. Goen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 148.

'encouraging a subtle form of salvation by works.'<sup>15</sup> Edwards' own parish may have been affected by these alternative formulations of the gospel. Justification was certainly a controversial subject to be preaching. Some of his own congregation members opposed the theme in the pulpit.<sup>16</sup> At least in England Arminianism was beginning to find some aspects of the interpretations of the doctrine of justification by faith offensive, such as the notion of it being 'apart from works'. There was an increasing demand for God to be fair and give just recognition of effort.<sup>17</sup>

The other movement causing concern was Antinomianism. It emphasised that assurance comes upon conversion and is not dependant on visible sanctification. According to Winthrop one of Anne Hutchinson's errors was that 'no sanctification can help us to evidence to us our justification.'<sup>18</sup> Amidst the debates of the day surrounding the connection of God's saving work and its visible signs, Edward's grandfather had begun to relax the criteria for admission to the Lord's Supper. In effect, he had begun to sever the connection between justification and sanctification.<sup>19</sup> It may be that when Edwards arrived at Northampton he entered a situation where, ecclesiologically, a type of antinomianism was present.<sup>20</sup> Antinomianism was feared for its apparent weakening any imperative for persevering in godliness, and its potential undermining of order because it gave priority to direct divine inspiration.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, these two movements were clearly in danger of opposite errors: salvation through works on the one hand, and justification without works on the other. As Edwards wrote and preached, he sought to address questions such as 'How is a person justified exactly?'; 'Why must it be by faith alone?'; and 'What role do human

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<sup>15</sup> Goen, 'Editor's Introduction,' *WJE* 4:10.

<sup>16</sup> Ola Winslow notes some of the more influential members of his congregation opposed strongly, particularly Israel Williams. In Logan, Samuel T., Jr. 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards'. *Westminster Theological Journal* 46/1 (1984): 26-52, 26. See also Edwards, J. *A Faithful Narrative*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Jenson, Robert W. *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 55. See also Holifield, E. Brooks. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. New Haven/London, Yale Press, 2003, 114.

<sup>18</sup> John Winthrop's journal, '*History of New England*', cited in Logan, "The Doctrine of Justification", 28.

<sup>19</sup> Logan suggests this was in a manner similar to Anne Hutchinson, Logan, Samuel T., Jr. 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards'. *Westminster Theological Journal* 46/1 (1984): 26-52, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Logan, *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> See for example, *The Examination of Mrs. Ann Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown, 1637*, 5. Notes supplied for MA class, Ridley Melbourne, 2010.

faith and obedience play in the process?' His comprehensive case steers a course between the two opposing debates, which allowed neither a place.<sup>22</sup>

### **The nature of justification**

What Edwards does is to powerfully affirm the Reformation understanding of justification by faith, yet, he clarifies the aspect of their teaching about imputation of righteousness.

From Romans 4.5, Edwards argued that God justifies the ungodly apart from any works of their own, but on the basis of faith alone. In the face of Arminianism it was important for Edwards to stress that God regards the unjustified as ungodly, so that it cannot be said that any goodness in a person is the ground for justification nor can the Spirit's work be accounted a cause of justification. The truths of divine sovereignty and human inability remain constant anti-Arminian themes for Edwards' ministry.<sup>23</sup> The doctrine which Edwards finds in Rom 4.5 is summarised as:

“That we are justified only by faith in Christ and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.”<sup>24</sup>

Edwards teaches the Reformation truth, that Christ imputes the benefits of justification to the believer. However, what Edwards does, is to place justification by grace through faith within the larger frame of Christ's whole life and not just his death. Edwards argues that 'from his incarnation to his resurrection, the purchase of redemption was made'.<sup>25</sup> Christ was obedient to his Father when he went to the cross to die for our sins. Yet Christ was also obedient every day of his earthly life. He positively fulfilled all the righteous demands of the law. As a result of Christ's righteousness his sacrifice satisfied the punishments required by the law for sin. Christ's righteousness is also imputed to the believer. So he or she is not only forgiven, but receives God's approval.<sup>26</sup> Edwards calls these two functions of Christ's work in his death and life Christ's passive righteousness, and Christ's active righteousness respectively. He says:

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<sup>22</sup> Or, in Logan's words, 'Edwards sought to walk the razor's edge of biblical truth while avoiding the illusory appeal of both Arminianism and Antinomianism.' Logan, *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Logan, *Ibid*, 310.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, J. 'Justification by Faith Alone'. Pages 143-242 in *Sermons and Discourses 1734-1738*. WJE 19. Edited by Max X. Lesser. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (WJE 9; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 295.

<sup>26</sup> For a good summary of what is significant about Edwards view of the atonement see Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 93.

... there can be no doubt that justification is a certain act of positive favor that not only frees a person from sin but is also understood in fact as the approval of him as righteous through the righteousness of Christ, both active and passive in both obedience and satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

Edwards insisted on the necessity of both for the atonement, and stressed Christ's active obedience for justification against those who denied it. Arminianism taught that God took care of sin, and so removed the obstacles to a good life, so that we now must get on with it.<sup>28</sup> But Edwards summarises:

... Some suppose that nothing more is intended in Scripture by justification than barely the remission of sins; if it be so it is very strange....

Then Edwards reiterates his two-fold view of the atonement...

A person is said to be justified when he is approved of God as free from the guilt of sin, and its deserved punishment, and as having that righteousness belonging to him that entitles to the reward of life

that a believer's justification implies not only remission of sins, or acquittance from the wrath due to it, but also an admittance to a title to that glory that is the reward of righteousness, is more directly taught in the Scripture, as particular in Rom 5;1-2, where the Apostle mentions both of these, as joint benefits implied in justification...<sup>29</sup>

An Arminian view tells half the story and gives God half the glory. Edwards says:

to suppose that all that Christ does is only to make atonement for us by suffering, is...to rob him of half his glory...for if so, all that he does is to deliver us from hell; he does not purchase heaven for us.<sup>30</sup>

So Edwards teaches a very fulsome and positive view of what Christ achieved for the believer. Works are necessary for justification, but not our own but Christ's. It is not possible that imperfect obedience can be sufficient to a holy God. God doesn't lower

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Edwards, 'A Sinner is not Justified in the Sight of God except through the Righteousness of Christ Obtained by Faith', in *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729* (WJE 14; ed. K. P. Minkema; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Jenson, R. *America's Theologian*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', 150, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', 240.



or change the standards, as Arminians were want to argue, so that God can accept our faith as a work. No, infinite guilt on our part, requires infinite righteousness, and for that God has provided Jesus for us. The mindset of being self-made persons is still a challenge today, even more so than in Edwards' day, so a doctrine of total dependence on God for our past, present, and future salvation will still be uncongenial.<sup>31</sup> Edwards' emphasis is a lesson for us.

### **By faith alone**

Edwards also advances our understanding of how justification relates to faith. Whilst the forensic understanding of salvation maintains the gift character of it, we must adequately portray the act of the human recipient.<sup>32</sup> Logan says that in Edwards' suggestion for understanding the particle 'by' "lies a major portion of Edwards' contribution to the discussion."<sup>33</sup> Edwards says the word 'by' faith does connote conditionality of justification, however he distinguishes between causal and non-causal conditionality. Christ's atoning work is the sole causal condition of justification for the believer. But faith is a non-causal condition for justification. Edwards:

in one sense Christ alone performs the condition of our justification and salvation; and in another sense, faith is the condition of our justification...there is a difference between being justified by a thing, and that thing universally, necessarily, and inseparably attending justification;...<sup>34</sup>

For Edwards a cause is an antecedent on which the event depends. It is the reason or ground for something being. God's grace is the only legitimate cause for justification. Faith is unique among non-causal conditions and is of a different order to the conditionality of anything else.<sup>35</sup> Faith does what nothing else can do. Significantly, to explain this Edwards develops the notions of union with Christ and fitness. Firstly, Edwards finds that the traditional way of understanding faith as an instrument

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<sup>31</sup> Jenson, *America's Theologian* 55

<sup>32</sup> Cherry, M. *Theology*, 91-92.

<sup>33</sup> Logan, S.T. 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 32. See also Cherry who says that it is here, at the point of the linkage between faith and its reality, that Edwards interprets the substance of the doctrine of justification and delineates the meaning of salvation. Cherry, *Theology*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Justification by Faith*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> Cherry, *Theology*, 100-101.

inadequately represents the role of faith in justification. It is an 'obscure way of speaking'.<sup>36</sup>

If faith be an instrument, it is more properly the instrument by which we receive Christ, than the instrument by which we receive justification.<sup>37</sup>

The unique role of faith is that by faith we are united to Christ, which union forms the foundation upon which God's justifying verdict is based.<sup>38</sup> Edwards notes the importance of such biblical imagery as marriage, and the tree and the branches as evidence of this vital union. All the benefits which come to the believer are grounded on this union. Thus by faith we receive Christ and being united to Christ we are pronounced justified by God.

Edwards further explains the relation of faith to justification, and faith and union with Christ, in terms of natural 'fitness' or 'suitability'. He sees these relationships as ontologically grounded.<sup>39</sup> God sees it fit in his divine ordering of the world, that they belong together. Faith is naturally fitted to justification yet that does not have to mean cause and effect. It is a reflection of God's love for order. In Edwards' words:

God will neither look on Christ's merits as ours, nor adjudge his benefits to us, till we be *in* Christ: nor will he look upon us as being *in* him, without an active union of our hearts and souls to him; because he is a wise being, and delights in order, and not in confusion, and that things should be together or asunder according to their nature; and his making such a constitution is a testimony of his love of order ...<sup>40</sup>

It is also an expression of God's nature to treat persons as intelligent active relational beings. So it is right that for a union there be:

a mutual act of both, that each should receive the other, as actively joining themselves one to another...'. Christ the Mediator has already purchased justification so it is 'meet that believer should have this purchased benefit assigned to him'. 'Faith includes the whole act of union to Christ as a Saviour.

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<sup>36</sup> Edwards, *Justification by Faith*, 152-154.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, *Justification by Faith*, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Logan, 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 34.

<sup>39</sup> Logan, *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', 161.

The entire active uniting of the soul, or the whole of what is called coming to Christ, and receiving him is called faith in Scripture.<sup>41</sup>

So faith does not merit union with Christ and union with Christ does not merit justification; instead they are naturally fit or appropriate relations, part of Jonathan Edwards's view of beauty in the divine order.

We also note Edwards' very active understanding of faith. The believer is not a mere passive bystander in this satisfaction-merit exchange between God and the Mediator. Faith is different to Calvin's 'empty vessel' which receives imputed righteousness.<sup>42</sup> Edwards develops metaphors beyond the common Reformation legal ones to describe the relationship of humans to Christ and the human involvement in the affair. He uses mercantile metaphors. To our modern ears they may not sound relational but Holmes is probably right that they were meant so given that Edwards is using them in a pre-Capitalist society.<sup>43</sup> For example he turns to the metaphor of 'patron-client' to argue for the reasonable and natural proceedings of justification. We are like a needy client-friend who flies to Christ the beloved patron seeking favour in his name. Christ intercedes to God on behalf of his needy friend. As a result of this intercession, the patron's entire merit is transferred to the client-friend. The human part in the affair does involve a genuine human act, but there is a natural fitness of faith between the believer and Christ.<sup>44</sup> And because of our spiritual union of love, it is most natural for God to apply Christ's benefits to us.<sup>45</sup> So, the idea of union and fitness gives a very dynamic and relational understanding of Christ and the believer without making the role of faith a moral fitness or work.

The Reformers were not necessarily meaning to be mechanical by using words like instrument, empty vessel, or the forensic metaphor but as Gerstner states Calvinist theologians didn't usually stress faith as a uniting with Christ in the penetrating way that Edwards did.<sup>46</sup> Edwards' notions of union and fitness also advance our understanding of how to persuade people of the notion of imputation

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<sup>41</sup> Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', 156, 157, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xi, 7. Cited in Cherry, *Theology*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, Stephen R. *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000, 146-147. Holmes also argues that Edwards' metaphors are all attempting to show that a personal/relational rationality underlies the Christian doctrine of the atonement.

<sup>44</sup> Cherry, *Theology*, 94

<sup>45</sup> Holifield, E. Brooks. 'Edwards as Theologian', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*. Edited by Stein, Stephen J., Cambridge/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 144.

<sup>46</sup> Gerstner, G.H. *Steps to Salvation: The Evangelistic Message of Jonathan Edwards*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, 141

today. Holifield states that by the time Edwards wrote his sermon on 'Justification by Faith Alone' (1734), English Arminians had begun to ridicule the notion of imputation. Edwards defended its reasonableness by his notions of union, symmetry and fitness.<sup>47</sup> Edwards models the need to find faithful yet innovative ways to persuade sceptics of traditional truths in our day.

### **Obedience**

Edwards uses this language of fitness and condition to make a clear connection between justification and transformed living. In fact Edwards gave much attention in his writings on justification to this very debate brought about by Arminianism and Antinomianism. Edwards argues that obedience is a second order non-causal condition. Edwards strongly asserts that faith and obedience is a necessary connection.

The tendency of grace in the heart to holy practice is very direct, and the connexion most natural, close and necessary. True grace is not an inactive thing...<sup>48</sup>

Edwards sees obedience as a result of the Spirit's work and not a cause of justification. He sees no contradiction between the message of Paul and James. He interprets James as describing the manifestation of justification not cause of justification. So, we can insist that our obedience necessarily accompanies our justification as its condition, without being charged with works-righteousness.

Union with Christ is also the foundation from which to view post-justification blessing. Good works by the believer who already stands in Christ, appropriately merits God's reward. It is after justification and because we are in Christ that evangelical obedience has a rightful place as 'moral fitness.' Even then our works are Christ's works. The positive imputation of Christ's righteousness continues for the regenerate person even after justification.<sup>49</sup> The value of good works is founded in and derived from Christ's worthiness.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Holifield, E. Brooks. 'Edwards as Theologian', 114.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, J.E. Religious Affections, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/affections.txt>, no page no.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, Sang Hyun. 'Grace and Justification by Faith Alone'. Pages 130-146 in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*. Edited by Sang Hyun Lee. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, *Justification by Faith*, 190-191, 215.

So union with Christ plays a vital role in Edwards' attempt to preach the Bible accurately as well as resolving the debates concerning causation between faith, justification and obedience. It is our union with Christ, which provides the right foundation of both our justification and our sanctification. To the Arminian it makes clear that no ground exists for human boasting before God, and to the Antinomian it makes clear that obedience is an absolute necessity. Edwards' well known quote sums up his argument well:

God don't give those that believe, an union *with*, or an interest *in* the Savior, in 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 ... 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 ...<sup>51</sup>

According to Perry, Edwards' soteriology in relation to union with Christ, and use of fitness and conditions to rightly explain causality, was a mix of Newton and Locke's philosophical thinking. However as Cherry and Logan argue, Edwards stood consciously within the parameters of Reformed orthodoxy and was compatible with Calvin.<sup>52</sup> Edwards teaches us the right order between careful theology and philosophical thought. His purpose 'was not to reformulate eighteenth century ideas in terms of Christian thought but to restate Christian thought in eighteenth century ideas.'<sup>53</sup>

Edwards' arguments are effective for his case in proving that the belonging of faith to union with Christ is founded in the very nature of God. So, it is not a strange phenomenon required but is connected to God's ultimate purpose, design, and delight and so glorifies Him.<sup>54</sup> It also appears that in the history of God's redemptive work faith and obedience belong together. Edwards placed justification by faith alone firmly in the covenant of grace.<sup>55</sup> However Edwards wants to demonstrate that holiness of life is still God's desire for those under the new covenant as it was under

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<sup>51</sup> Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone,' 158. Bold type mine.

<sup>52</sup> Logan, 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 35-36. Cherry, *Theology*, 98.

<sup>53</sup> Bogue, Carl.F. *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace* Cherry Hill: Mack Publishing Company, 1975, 12, citing Elwood, *Elwood the Philosophical Theology of Edwards*, New York : Columbia University Press, 1960, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, 'Grace and Justification,' 145.

<sup>55</sup> Bogue, C. *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace*, 238.

the old. Even though delivered in a different manner under the two covenants, the commands to holiness are the same and emerge from the predictable nature of God:

That God hath so ordered the covenant of grace that it should agree with a mere covenant of works [in] that respect, that ... justification is always connected with holiness in the person justified ... arises from the holiness of God and from his love to holiness and hatred of sin ... Because God was holy, and delighted in holiness and hated sin, therefore he would appoint no way of justification but such as tended to promote holiness.<sup>56</sup>

### **Criticisms of Edwards and Justification**

Having mentioned many positive contributions so far it is necessary to raise some possible objections to Edwards' attempts to understand justification.

Some commentators appreciate the emphasis on union for its relational reality. However they wonder whether Edwards' soteriology lacks Luther's gospel promise, which Christ speaks to us.<sup>57</sup> The fact that some of Edwards' followers became liberal demands asking why. Does Edwards' highlighting the new inward perception of union with Christ end up downplaying the objective imputatory nature of justification? Perhaps. Some might also suggest Edwards gets the order wrong. Instead of what is 'real' being the foundation of what is 'legal', it should be the other way around. Some say that Edwards' choice of words to describe the 'one holy act of faith', carries too much of the idea of faith as an inherent good or disposition in the believer prior to justification, which sounds too close to making faith a sanctified act worthy of reward. In fact Schafer is one of those who accuses Edwards of that.<sup>58</sup> Some add that making persevering faith a second act of faith necessary for final justification makes Edwards too Roman Catholic.<sup>59</sup>

But surely they misunderstand Edwards. I agree with Cherry that 'one holy act of faith' as the condition of salvation is an unfortunate choice of words and may

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<sup>56</sup> Edwards, "'Controversies" Notebook: Justification, WJE 21: 365.

<sup>57</sup> Jenson is one such example. Jenson, *America's Theologian*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Schafer, T. A. 'Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith', 155-156.

<sup>59</sup> Schafer, *Ibid.* Morimoto agrees that Edwards is in full harmony with the historic reformed doctrine of sanctification but argues that Edwards shows affinities with the Roman Catholic soteriology, and so can build a bridge to ecumenical debate. Morimoto, A. *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

obscure the statement that it is the ungodly who is justified.<sup>60</sup> However Edwards' language of fitness is better, and transcends the limitations of the former, showing clearly that Edwards makes justification and sanctification inseparable, and that the good act of faith does not merit justification. In addition, we have seen that the first 'holy' act of faith, as well as holiness after justification can be accepted as holiness by God only by means of a positive imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness.<sup>61</sup> Edwards' arguments are indeed nuanced, and require us to take the time to understand him properly as he seeks to make these useful distinctions, whilst we also recognize the limitations of all language.

We conclude this essay with two reflections on how Edwards advances our understanding of justification in relation to its place and importance to evangelism and mission.

### **Justification and Evangelism**

We mentioned earlier that Edwards attributed the beginnings of revival in his town to the preaching of justification by faith, and that the surprising fruit was a sign of God's approbation of the doctrine. Edwards' *Faithful Narrative* of that revival was read around the world. In it Edwards writes:

The following discourse of justification, that was preached (though not so fully as it is here printed) at two public lectures, seemed to be remarkably blessed, not only to establish the judgments of many in this truth, but to engage their hearts in a more earnest pursuit of justification, in that way that had been explained and defended; and *at that time*, while I was greatly reproached for defending this doctrine in the pulpit, and just upon my suffering a very open abuse for it, God's work wonderfully brake forth amongst us, and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Savior in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified. So that this was the doctrine on which this work in its beginning was founded, as it evidently was in the whole progress of it.<sup>62</sup>

This argument suggests the importance of this doctrine in the context of the Holy Spirit's work of church renewal. Interestingly however, Edwards may not have

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<sup>60</sup> Cherry, *Theology*, 96.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, 'Grace and Justification by Faith Alone'. 144.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative*, 148-9.

intended to make the doctrine of justification the centrepiece in evangelism.<sup>63</sup> His preaching which had such surprising results at the time of the Great Awakening was in many ways a critique of religion.<sup>64</sup> However Edwards certainly at least later made the connection between justification and promoting revival, and went on to describe it in the *Faithful Narrative* and to publish the sermons as ways to model to and inspire others to seek revival.

It was both the substance and style of Edwards' sermons that gave them impact. Firstly, in terms of content, it is surely a massive understatement when Edwards says that there was no 'real worth' in his sermons.<sup>65</sup> Obviously Edwards brought great acumen to bear in explaining and defending the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. Edwards not only brought clarity to his congregation on the gospel they perhaps already knew, but he brought unique contributions to the way it was explained and understood.<sup>66</sup> He caused people to think more deeply about theological truths. Many of those fine distinctions and contributions were highlighted above. He cleared the confusion and roadblocks and made it simple and clear for people to come to Christ for salvation. Edwards' formulation of justification did not depend on the many set steps to salvation practiced by traditional Puritan Preparationists. Nor did it depend on any status or education or human virtue as was implicit or even explicit in the Enlightenment or Arminian gospel. Edwards' preaching on justification by faith alone opened the door wide and people came flooding through it to Christ. Wheeler argues that for Edwards, his gospel of equality, and his doctrine of original sin put all on the same level and encourages mutual compassion.<sup>67</sup>

Secondly, Edwards argued also for the 'easy and plain' manner in which he preached these sermons. He suggests that it was the 'frame in which they heard the sermons' which had impact on his hearers.<sup>68</sup> Edwards appears to be commending direct, plain speech in contrast to the preaching style of Arminian sermons which Edwards described as 'too much encumbered with speculative niceties...they have a

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<sup>63</sup> Gerstner, J. H. *Jonathan Edwards – A Mini-Theology*. Tyndale House, Illinois, 1987, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Jenson, *America's Theologian*, 63

<sup>65</sup> Edwards, *Preface to Sermons and Discourses*, 794.

<sup>66</sup> Patricia Tracy makes comment on the clarity of his revival preaching. Tracey, Patricia. *Jonathan Edwards Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton. The Jonathan Edwards Classic Studies Series. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006*, 79. Edwards himself acknowledges the need for accurate distinctions and clear application of thought, Edwards, *Preface to Sermons and Discourses*, 796.

<sup>67</sup> Wheeler, R. 'Edwards as Missionary', *Cambridge Companion*, 205, 207.

<sup>68</sup> Edwards, J. *Sermons and Discourses*, 796.



show of learning in obscure words, but convey no light to the mind.’<sup>69</sup> Edwards appears to advocate that an unpretentious, plain, direct style will promote the content and meaning of justification.

Therefore, Edwards commends to us an understanding of the central place of justification to revival, as well as the clear and compelling way we should preach it.<sup>70</sup> It also commends Christ’s life and death both as necessary to evangelism.

### **Justification and the Transformation of Society**

Not only did Edwards situate justification in the fuller setting of Christ’s whole life, death and resurrection, he set it in the wider frame of God’s redemptive work in history from the Fall to the final Consummation. In Edwards’ *History of the Work of Redemption*, Christ’s redemptive life and death forms the central juncture. This full biblical-historical scope showed that Edwards conceived of the gospel eschatologically, not just existentially. Individual appropriation of the gospel was essential but he also wanted his people to see their dynamic place in God’s redemptive purposes for the entire creation.<sup>71</sup>

The preaching of justification, then, was not just central to renewing individuals, but renewing society. As described above, his frame of redemption was comprehensive and his connection between justification and sanctification inseparable. Edwards promoted revivals more widely, even internationally. When writing about the results of revival in his own town he describes not just the change to individuals’ lives but to the whole community.<sup>72</sup> Northampton was filled with God’s presence, love, and joy like never before. Whole households were transformed. Marsden also notes that old rivalries between people in the town ceased, and they had allowed residents to cut much needed wood on private land.<sup>73</sup> Edwards saw God bring wonderful order and blessing through the doctrine of justification preached in the revivals. This corporate renewal is an important framework in which to see the revivals because Edwards could be misunderstood to preach merely an individual experience of salvation from sin and wrath. But his preaching was in the context of a

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<sup>69</sup> Sermons and Discourses, 795.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson H. Kimnach, ‘Edwards as Preacher’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. S. J. Stein; Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 114.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards took his congregation through a very long series of sermons outlining this meta-narrative

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative,’ 151, 158-159.

<sup>73</sup> Marsden, George M. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 293.

society structured by covenants.<sup>74</sup> Theologically and socially, people understood themselves collectively rather than individually, and salvation naturally had social implications. In Edwards' mind, preaching of justification may well have also been a strategy to counter the threats to order by an Arminian gospel and Enlightenment self-determination. Given that Edwards also had a progressive view of history leading to the millennium,<sup>75</sup> revivals were optimistic signs of progress. Regardless of whether a Christian today shares Edwards' millennial views, Edwards still challenges us to view preaching justification by faith alone as a Kingdom strategy to restore individuals and, by implication, society. This is at the heart of God, and a priority for us at all times until Jesus returns and God is all in all (1 Cor 15.28).

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that Jonathan Edwards has left a positive legacy for theological and scholarly debate on this doctrine of justification. He was a man of the eighteenth century who defended traditional doctrines in distinctly modern ways.<sup>76</sup> He sought to engage with the society in which he lived and employed the philosophical thinking of his day to advance understanding of justification by faith alone. But he was not just a thinker, he was a pastor, and the purpose of his deliberations were always practical. He wanted his people to have the comfort and assurance and joy of Christ in salvation and know the blessing of a life lived in him. His defence of the doctrine in the face of the enemies of his day was to preserve 'the old Protestant doctrine'<sup>77</sup>, not only for the sake of individuals, but for the sake of the transformation of society, and to bring forth the Kingdom of God. Edwards' theology may be relevantly applied to our myopic theological and social vision and Western individualism, which influence the preaching of a truncated gospel. Edwards' wide theological vision helped to place the work of Christ in its larger setting of the redemption of the world. He develops the familiar Reformed understanding of the two-fold work of Christ – his obedience in death and obedience in life – to preach Christ's comprehensive and completed cross-work which brings salvation from our past, and for our present and future life. Christ's positive righteousness is a salutary reminder for us today, for the moment a church or Christian loses the vision of this positive salvation of Christ, Christianity

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<sup>74</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>75</sup> Marsden, *A Life*, 193.

<sup>76</sup> Marsden, *A Life*, 456

<sup>77</sup> Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 795.

becomes a religious insurance scheme.<sup>78</sup> Edwards emphasises this full-orbed gospel. Edwards also provides the right foundation for understanding evangelical obedience as an expression of justification. His main contribution is clarifying the role that human faith plays to justification, and he brings insight to the question by advancing the biblical concept of union with Christ. This was not a new doctrine but Edwards gives it an increased emphasis,<sup>79</sup> and further precision.<sup>80</sup> He highlights the relationality of it as well as making our union with Christ the focus of all the benefits of Christ. This is also helpful for us as we seek to find new ways to explain the work of Christ to complement the traditional legal metaphors. Edwards' use of philosophical thinking and terms like fitness and order also help explain that our act of human faith is not on the level of merit but on a different level of God's natural character. In the same sense holiness is to be seen as a moral fitness flowing out of God's consistent design and eternal purposes for the world. Edwards' attempt to explain aspects of justification via cause-condition distinctions may sound strange and difficult to modern ears, and is not perfect,<sup>81</sup> however one advantage is that it maintains the 'is' *and* the 'ought' of the gospel, the indicative *and* the imperative.<sup>82</sup> This is also necessary for our times.

Indeed Edwards encourages the need for accurate distinctions and application of thought to the doctrine of justification today, when he says, in speaking of the doctrine, 'though they (the scriptures) contain something that is easy...that even the weakest Christian can understand..., yet they contain great mysteries, and there is room for progress in the knowledge of them, and doubtless will be to the end of the world...' <sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Jenson, *America's Theologian*, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace* 241

<sup>80</sup> Gerstner, *Mini-Theology*, 83.

<sup>81</sup> See Logan who says 'the cause-condition distinction works well (not perfectly – just "well"). Logan, 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 47.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Edwards, *Preface to Sermons and Discourses*, 796.

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