

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Randall E. Otto

Justification and Justice: An Edwardsean Proposal

Dr Otto is the pastor of Christ Reformed Church, Trumbauersville, PA. While he was doing his doctoral work at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, he contributed a study of 'The Solidarity of Mankind in Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Original Sin' to our journal (EQ 62, 1990, 205-221), and we are glad to publish this sequel.

The relationship between justification and works has been a perennial source of debate from the days of the apostle Paul. Since the Reformation, however, the debate has been somewhat more clearly defined between Catholic and Protestant perspectives, the Catholic holding to the actualization of righteousness based on infused grace granted in baptism and improved by works of faith, and the Protestant holding to the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ *acceptilatio* in a forensic conception of justification.¹ The

¹ Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1986), 2:54-97 for the Tridentine teaching and post-Tridentine debates up to the early eighteenth century. It is unfortunate that McGrath's thoroughgoing history of the doctrine foregoes discussion of the impact of the Second Vatican Council upon the Catholic discussion of this doctrine. More recent Lutheran-Catholic discussions on justification have apparently elicited significant convergence of thought. Cf. the Malta Report (1972), art. 26 (cited from *Rechtfertigung im Ökumenischen Dialog* [ed. Harding Meyer and Günther Gaßmann; Frankfurt am Main, 1987], 34):

Today a far reaching consensus in the interpretation of the doctrine of justification is drawn. The Catholic theologians emphasize in the question of justification that salvation is a gift of God to believers with no human conditions attached. The Lutheran theologians emphasize that the event of justification is not limited to the individual forgiveness of sins and is not seen as a purely external declaration of the righteousness of the sinner. Instead, through the message of justification the righteousness of God realized in Christ event is transferred (*überreignet*) to the sinner as an encompassing reality and thereby grounds the new life of the believer.

One may well point to Hans Küng's 1957 dissertation on Karl Barth's doctrine of justification as paving the way for this convergence. Cf. Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (2d ed.; Philadelphia, 1981).

impact of liberation theology, with its strong cross-confessional appeal to the biblical mandate for justice, has muddied the waters somewhat, serving to re-open and perhaps broaden the scope of the debate on justification and works. For Protestant proponents of the liberationist perspective, the Reformation understanding of justification as juridical is abstract. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, has eschewed the forensic approach in his social reinterpretation of justification, so that the righteousness of God is 'concerned with the justification of life', the 'universal, all-inclusive eschatology which expects from the future of righteousness a new being for all things'.² 'The humanization of the human condition as a whole' proleptically revealed in the symbol of Christ's resurrection as 'the protest of life against death' thus makes justification a not-yet which can be.³

Summarizing the viewpoints presented at a 1985 Lutheran conference on Justification and Justice, Arland J. Hultgren says:

There are at least two ways of relating the two themes. One is to say that by means of justification a person is set free from any and all preoccupations with seeking God's favor and is thereby directed to the world to seek justice for all of God's children. Another is to say that justification and justice belong together in the singular action of God to set things right—both in the divine-human relationship and in the relationship between people—liberating people from death and recreating life for all; and so the gospel of justification without the summons to justice fails to attend to the totality of the biblical witness concerning God's work and will.⁴

That conference seems to have concluded with Gerhard O. Forde on the first relation, that there is no positive synthesis between justification and justice, but rather opposition.⁵ On this basis the second relation, as espoused by the liberation theologian José M. Bonino, was declared to be a rejuvenated version of Catholicism.⁶

Must justification and justice stand in opposition with no positive synthesis? No. A synthesis between justification and justice may be found in the work of Jonathan Edwards. In his teaching on justification, Edwards declared that *both* faith *and* evangelical obedience (e.g., works of justice) were the necessary *conditions* of justification. If Edwards can properly maintain justification as a gracious and sovereign declaration of God that man is righteous

² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York, 1967), 204.

³ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York, 1969), 59.

⁴ Hultgren, 'Justification and Justice', *Word and World* 7, 1987, 3.

⁵ Forde, 'The Viability of Luther Today: A North American Perspective', *Word and World* 7, 1987, 24-25.

⁶ Robert T. Hoferkamp, 'The Viability of Luther Today: A Perspective from Latin America', *Word and World* 7, 1987, 38.

acceptilatio while also affirming that justification is contingent upon a state of holiness and the performance of justice, he will have balanced the competing concerns evidenced in the historical debate and will have shown us a way toward promoting unity on this critical doctrine.

Edwards' Doctrine of Justification

In 1734, at the time of 'the late wonderful pouring out of the Spirit of God' at Northampton, Jonathan Edwards preached a series of sermons on justification by faith which he then reworked into 'the most elaborate intellectual production he had yet attempted',⁷ the treatise 'Justification by Faith Alone', published in 1738. Although the precise occasion for the writing is a matter of some dispute,⁸ there can be no question whatsoever as to the starting point of Edwards' doctrine: the sovereignty of God. Miller, asserting that Edwards' work was 'the first effort in American history to coordinate with the doctrine of Puritan revelation the new concept of science', errs in speculating that Edwards sought a formulation compatible with Newton's *Principia* and its emphasis on causality, for, as Miller himself next observes, 'the still regnant doctrine [of forensic justification] went back to Calvin himself.'⁹

According to Edwards, God is the infinite, perfect, and eternal Uncaused Cause, on whom all else, being limited, is dependent.

As he is eternal, and receives not his existence from any other, he cannot be limited in his being, or any attribute, to any certain determinate quantity. If any thing have bounds fixed to it, there must be some cause

⁷ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Amherst, 1981), 75.

⁸ Ola Winslow (*Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography* [New York, 1979], 160), followed by Samuel T. Logan ('The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', *WTJ* 46, 1984, 26-27), argues that Arminianism was the key factor in Edwards' work on justification. Thomas A. Schafer, on the other hand ('Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith', *Church History* 20, 1951, 57), asserts, 'Edwards' war against "Arminian principles", however, was not fought on the subject of justification, but on those of the will, original sin, grace and the essence of morality'.

⁹ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 75. Against Miller's allegation that Calvin was the source of the forensic idea in that he 'as usual reduced Lutheran eloquence to legalism' (*ibid.*), McGrath's more thoughtful voice should be heard: 'Although Luther incorporates traces of legal terminology into his discussion of justification, it seems that the origins of the concept lie with Erasmus' 1516 translation of the New Testament' and his Latin translation of the Greek λογίζομαι of Rom. 4:5 by *imputatum* instead of the Vulg.'s *reputatum*, the former carrying by Erasmus' own admission the idea of *acceptilatio* as used by the juriconsults (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:31).

or reason why those bounds are fixed just where they are. Whence it will follow, that every limited thing must have some cause.¹⁰

Edwards used the word 'cause' to signify the antecedent reason or ground for why something is or is not.

The word *Cause* [signifies] any *antecedent*, either natural or moral, positive or negative, on which an Event, either a thing, or the manner and circumstances of a thing, so depends, that it is the ground and reason, either in whole, or in part, why it is, rather than not; or why it is as it is, rather than otherwise.¹¹

It is, therefore, God in his sovereign grace that is the cause or ground of the justification of the ungodly (Rom. 4:5), for 'it is absurd to suppose that our godliness, taken as some goodness in us, is the ground of our justification; as, when it is said that Christ gave sight to the blind, to suppose that sight was prior to, and the ground of, that act of mercy in Christ'.¹² As a supralapsarian,¹³ it is inconceivable to Edwards that there could be anything in or done by the creature to merit or condition the divine determination to salvation and justification. God *alone* is the *cause* of the justification of the ungodly and, since nothing can upset or alter the sovereign determination of God, so the salvation and justification of God's elect is most certain to come to pass.¹⁴

Edwards' supralapsarian view of the unconditioned nature of the divine volition does not imply in Scotist fashion that God may save and justify as a pure act of will. There is, instead, a necessary arrangement founded in the Divine Mind whereby things must work. This arrangement God sees as 'fit'; hence, it is so. 'The wisdom of God in his constitutions doubtless appears much in the fitness and beauty of them, so that those things are established to be done that are fit to be done, and that those things are connected in his constitution that are agreeable one to another one'.¹⁵ God the Father saw fit in a pre-historical inter-trinitarian covenant to give the Son a people for his own possession upon his becoming a man under the law, suffering for them and rising from the dead for his justification

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, 'Divine Sovereignty', in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (2 vols.; ed. Sereno E. Dwight and Edward Hickman; Edinburgh, 1974), 2:107. Cf. also Edwards, 'God's Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men', *Works*, 2:849-54.

¹¹ Edwards, 'A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame', *Works*, 1:15.

¹² Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:622.

¹³ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (New York, 1966), 104.

¹⁴ Cf. Edwards, 'On the Freedom of the Will', *Works*, 1:69-75.

¹⁵ Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:624.

and their own. 'There was a transaction between the Father and the Son, that was antecedent to Christ's becoming man, and being made under the law, wherein he undertook to put himself under the law, and both to obey and to suffer; in which transaction these things were already virtually done in the sight of God; as is evident by this, that God acted on the ground of that transaction, justifying and saving sinners, as if the things undertaken had been actually performed long before they were performed indeed'.¹⁶ On the basis of this eternal inter-trinitarian covenant, it appears that Christ and the elect given him by the Father in that 'transaction' were virtually eternally justified before the actual performance of its conditions.

The justification of Jesus Christ as the federal head and representative of his people, the Second Adam, is the fundamental basis for the justification of the elect. This entails not merely a negation, i.e., the remission of sin, but also a positive, i.e., the imputation of Christ's righteous standing before the Father.

If Adam had finished his course of perfect obedience, he would have been justified; and certainly his justification would have implied something more than what is merely negative; he would have been approved of, as having fulfilled the righteousness of the law, and accordingly would have been adjudged to the reward of it. So Christ, our second surety, (in whose justification all whose surety he is, are virtually justified) was not justified till he had done the work the Father had appointed him, and kept the Father's commandments through all trials; and then in his resurrection he was justified.¹⁷

The justification of Christ in the resurrection thus implies 'his being now judged free of that guilt which he had taken upon him, and also his having now fulfilled all righteousness—his having perfectly obeyed the Father, and done enough to entitle him to the reward of life as our head and surety—and therefore he then had eternal life given him as our head'.¹⁸

Edwards' use of the term 'justification' with regard to the person

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:637.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:623.

¹⁸ Edwards, 'Concerning the Perseverance of Saints', *Works*, 2:597; cf. 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:637. Edwards obviously has in mind here what in Reformed scholasticism had been distinguished as the active and passive obedience of Christ, i.e., his fulfilling the law and his vicarious suffering, respectively. Edwards, however, inveighs against this distinction, saying, 'There is no room for any invented distinction of active and passive', since 'all obedience considered under the notion of righteousness, in something active, something done in voluntary compliance with a command; whether it may be done without suffering, or whether it be hard and difficult' ('Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:638).

and work of Jesus Christ is rather striking. Edwards defines justification as follows: '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'.¹⁹ It seems clear from this definition that Edwards does *not* hold to the common distinction made between objective and subjective justification, between the formal judicial declaration of one as righteous *apart* from the actual subjective condition of righteousness in that person. Edwards makes no distinction between his use of justification as it pertains to Christ and as it pertains to the rest of God's elect. Rather, Christ simply serves as their federal representative in his *active* obedience to the commands of Father in fulfilling all righteousness and in his suffering on the cross, so that in resurrection union with this federal head the elect, too, are justified and reckoned as having done that which entitles them to the reward of eternal life. While Edwards' prooftexts for speaking of the 'justification of Christ' may be somewhat strained,²⁰ it nevertheless seems evident that his main idea of Christ as the federal representative of the elect in their justification is sound. 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners [actively]' (Rom. 5:19). Moreover, although we have argued elsewhere that Edwards' invocation of realism subverts his ostensibly federal view of the solidarity of the human race in Adam's fall,²¹ yet it is nonetheless the case that 'the free gift is not like the trespass' (Rom. 5:15) in that sinners were *not* spiritually united to Adam in his federal headship and 'vicarious sin' as they *are* spiritually and mystically united to Jesus Christ in his federal headship and 'vicarious righteousness'. This incorporation of the elect by the Spirit *into* Christ in salvation and justification may well be described as a realistic union, since there is a participation in Christ's substance and nature among those who by the Spirit are united with Christ and have 'become partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4). 'What is *real* in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of

¹⁹ Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:623.

²⁰ Edwards seems able to cite only one text that actually speaks of the 'justification' of Christ, that being 1 Tim. 3:16, which in the older versions (e.g., AV, ASV) reads 'justified in the Spirit', but which in the modern translations reads 'vindicated in ["by", NIV] the Spirit' (RSV). KEK (ET) says of this verse: 'The sense is: He was shown in His divine glory (as the Logos or eternal Son of God), which was veiled by the $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\kappa\acute{\iota}$ '. Arndt would have this verse (along with Rom. 3:4) rendered 'proved to be right', ('shown to be right', TEV) against the usual uses of $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\acute{\omega}$ as to do justice or pronounce as just.

²¹ Randall E. Otto, 'The Solidarity of Mankind in Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Original Sin', *EQ* 62, 1990, 205-221.

what is *legal*; that is, it is something really in them, and between them, uniting them, that is the ground of the suitability of their being accounted as one by the Judge'.²²

The cause of justification being the sovereign mind of God and his determination of the suitable or fit arrangement of creation, the foundation of justification being *real* union with the justified federal head Jesus Christ, the question now arises as to the conditions of that union. Edwards defines 'condition' as a positive or negative *sine qua non*: 'If it be that with which, or which being supposed, a thing shall be, and without which, or it being denied, a thing shall not be, we in such a case call it a condition of that thing'.²³ Having given this definition of condition, Edwards goes on to specify the conditions of justification and salvation.

Faith is not the only condition of salvation or justification; for there are many things that accompany and flow from faith, with which justification shall be, and without which it will not be, and therefore are found to be put in Scripture in conditional propositions with justification and salvation, in multitudes of places; such are love to God, and love to our brethren, forgiving men their trespasses, and many other good qualifications and acts. And there are many other things besides faith, which are directly proposed to us, to be pursued or performed by us, in order to eternal life, which if they are done, or obtained, we shall surely perish.²⁴

There is, according to Edwards, an *inseparable* connection between faith and 'many other things besides faith' which are 'to be pursued or performed by us', 'which if they are done', 'we shall have eternal life', and 'if not done', 'we shall surely perish'. Here, in unmistakable boldness, Edwards declares that salvation and justification are contingent on faith *and* good works.

What is the role of faith in Edwards' doctrine of justification?

²² Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:626. The reality of the union between Christ and the church is *illustrated* by the relationship of the husband and wife in Eph. 5:21–33 (*not* vice versa; cf. v. 32); the most striking part of the analogy is the *intimacy* of the union described by the quotation of Gn. 2:24: 'and the two will become one flesh' (Eph. 5:31 NIV). It should be further kept in mind that Edwards' pre-critical Greek text would have appended to Eph. 5:30 ('for we are members of his body') the words 'of his flesh and of his bones', which KEK (ET) says 'express this relation as strongly as possible'. 'The derivation relation of Christians to Christ is analogous, of course not physically, but in the spiritual, mystical sense, *inasmuch as the Christian existence as such—the specific being and spiritual nature of Christians—proceeds from Christ, has in Christ its principle of origination, as in a physical manner Eve proceeded from Adam*' (*ibid.*).

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:623.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

What does he mean in entitling his discourse 'Justification by Faith Alone'? What Edwards does *not* mean is that faith is the *instrument* by which God justifies the believer or by which the believer receives justification. For Edwards, speech of faith as the instrument by which justification is conferred is 'obscure', for 'there is a difference between the act and the instrument'. 'If faith be an instrument, it is more properly the instrument by which we receive Christ, than the instrument by which we receive justification'.²⁵ Edwards prefers, however, to speak of faith as an *act* by which the soul unites to Christ:

I suppose there is nobody but what will allow that there may be something that the true Christian does *on his part*, whereby he is *active* in coming into this relation or union; some *uniting act*, or that which is done towards this union or relation . . . *on the Christian's part*. Now faith I suppose to be this act.²⁶

Faith is that *act* by which the Christian comes into union with Christ, the *real* union which serves as the basis for the *legal* relation.

Edwards' use of the word 'act' in regard to faith may initially suggest, as Cherry notes, that 'faith is a holy human prius to justification'. Some of Edwards' statements, e.g., 'Saving belief of truth arises from love, or a holy disposition and relish of heart',²⁷ may lend a certain credibility to Schafer's contention that 'it is mainly Edwards' concern for preserving orthodox forms of expression and for avoiding the conception of 'merit' which keeps him from a practically Roman conception of the place of love in justifying faith'.²⁸ The assertion that Edwards 'ascribes a certain power to faith as an act of the believer' rendering him fit to be justified is,²⁹ however, 'contrary to the thrust of Edwards' thought'.³⁰ As Hodge correctly observed, 'It is not on account of any virtue or goodness in faith, but as it unites us to Christ, and involves the acceptance of Him as our righteousness'.³¹ While Edwards *does* maintain that 'justifying faith is nothing else but true virtue' and that 'love belongs to the essence of saving faith',³² he clearly believes that this 'virtue' and 'love' only follow from faith as a supernaturally given virtue. While a type of faith is common to all humanity in its natural and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:624.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:625.

²⁷ Edwards, 'Concerning Faith', *Works*, 2:585.

²⁸ Schafer, 'Jonathan Edwards and Justification', 61.

²⁹ George N. Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (1899; rep., New York, 1967), 155.

³⁰ Cherry, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 96.

³¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; rep., Grand Rapids, 1981), 3:116.

³² Edwards, 'Concerning Faith', *Works*, 2:588.

unregenerate state, the saving and justifying faith by which one is united to Christ is one 'differing not only in degree, but in nature and kind, from any faith that unregenerate men have'.³³ Justifying faith is, therefore, in standard Calvinistic style, a gift granted according to God's sovereign pleasure apart from anything in or done by the individual. Hence, 'we are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own',³⁴ for justifying faith is *not* a natural virtue, improved or otherwise, but solely the gift of God in regeneration.

Justifying faith is that by which the soul, which before was separate and alienated from Christ, unites itself to him, thereby ceasing to be any longer in a state of alienation. It is the soul's receiving or coming to Christ in a union that is the ground of benefit to the believer. As justifying faith is not a reward for human improvement of natural inclinations, so union with Christ is not the reward for faith.

God does not give those that believe an union with or an interest in the Saviour as a *reward* for faith, but only because faith is the soul's *active* uniting with Christ, or is itself the very act of union, *on their part*. God sees it fit, that in order to an union being established between two intelligent active beings or persons, so as that they should be looked upon as one, there should be the mutual act of both, that each should receive other, as actively joining themselves one to another.³⁵

The interest believers have in the 'mediator that purchased justification' is *not* a 'fit *reward* of faith', or 'a suitable testimony of God's respect to the amiableness and excellency of that grace'; rather, God sees it as suitable, or fit, that Christ's satisfaction and merits should belong to believers because they and Christ are so united that in the eyes of the Judge they may be taken as one. In other words, faith is far from being a *merit of congruity* or any *moral congruity* at all. Rather, the soul's 'active union' to Christ renders it fit to obtain Christ's satisfaction because of a natural congruity, or fitness.

There is a twofold fitness to a state; . . . the one a *moral*, and the other a *natural*, fitness. A person has a moral fitness for a state, when his moral excellency commends him to it, or when his being put into such a good state is but a suitable testimony of regard to the moral excellency, or

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:592. Not only does Edwards assert the impossibility of transforming common faith into saving faith by way of degrees of improvement, but he also refuses to admit the propriety of the distinctions of faith into assent, consent, and affiancement, further distinguishing him from scholastic thought (*ibid.*, 2:587).

³⁴ Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:622.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:626.

value, or amiableness of any of his qualifications or acts. A person has a natural fitness for a state, when it appears meet and condecant that he should be in such a state or circumstances, only from the natural concord or agreeableness there is between such qualifications and such circumstances. . . . It is on this latter account only that God looks on it fit by a natural fitness, that he whose heart sincerely unites itself to Christ as his Saviour, should be looked upon as united to that Saviour, and so having an interest in him.³⁶

There is no moral congruity to faith that would necessitate receiving the benefits of Christ, as if God had special regard to the beauty of the act of faith. Instead, the benefits of Christ are graciously conferred on the basis of the 'agreeableness' of the circumstances involved in the believer and Christ being really united by faith in a naturally fit relation, evincing simply God's regard for the beauty of that order that there is in uniting those things that have a natural agreement, congruity, and 'union' of the one with the other. 'Indeed a moral suitability or fitness to a state includes a natural: for, if there be a moral suitability that a person should be in such a state, there is also a natural suitability; but such a natural suitability as I have described, by no means necessarily includes a moral'.³⁷ Faith does not justify as a work, a righteousness, or a moral goodness. Faith justifies only in the naturally fit relation of the believer's real union with Christ, a relation by which the two beings are viewed as one by God and the believer is thus granted the benefits of the mediatorial head.

The congruity of this naturally fit relation and the benefits derived by the believer from it depend on the union being an abiding one, i.e., one that perseveres. 'The consideration of the perseverance of faith cannot be excluded out of this congruity or fitness, for it is congruous that he that believes in Christ should have an interest in Christ's righteousness, and so in the eternal benefits purchased by it, because faith is that by which the soul hath union or oneness with Christ; and there is a natural congruity in it, that they who are one with Christ should have a joint interest with him in his eternal benefits; but yet this congruity depends on its being an abiding union'.³⁸ The *legal* relation, whereby the believer is reckoned as righteous, depends on the *real* relation, whereby the believer abides in the righteous head as a living member. For the soul to be *presently* in a justified state, it is necessary that it be *presently* in Christ, and not merely that it should have once been in him.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:627.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:641.

Although the sinner is actually and finally justified on the first acts of faith, yet the perseverance of faith, even then, comes into consideration, as one thing on which the fitness of acceptance to life depends. God, in the act of justification, which is passed on a sinner's first believing, has respect to perseverance, as being virtually contained in that first act of faith; and it is looked upon, and taken by him that justifies, as being as if it were a property in that faith. God has respect to the believer's continuance in faith, and he is justified by that, as though it already were, because by divine establishment it shall follow, and it being by divine constitution connected with that first faith, as much as if it were a property in it, it is then considered as such, and so justification is not suspended; but were it not for this, it would be needful that it should be suspended, till the sinner had actually persevered in faith.³⁹

The believer is justified and reckoned as righteous in the first acts of faith *forensically*, i.e., *proleptically*, in view of the certainty that that person will persevere in faithful acts or righteousness. 'It is by faith that we first perceive and know this righteousness [of God, Rom. 1:17] and do at first receive and embrace it; and being once interested in it, we have the continuance of faith in future persevering exercises of it made sure to us'.⁴⁰

Contrary to Hodge, who says justification 'does not produce any subjective change in the person justified',⁴¹ Edwards 'views the *imputation* of righteousness as, in a sense, a *making* man righteous'.⁴² The soul's acceptance of Christ's atoning obedience in faith does 'thoroughly secure holiness of heart and life in the redeemed of Jesus Christ. . . . The faith that justifies the sinner, destroys sin; and the heart is purified by faith'.⁴³ The continuing obedience of faith in love for God and man continues to destroy sin

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:641.

⁴⁰ Edwards, 'On the Perseverance of the Saints', *Works*, 2:598.

⁴¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:117. Evidently Hodge thinks this is Edwards' position, since this point is made after his brief exposition of Edwards who, he says, 'was firm in his adherence to this view of justification' (as distinct from regeneration and sanctification) found in the Lutheran and Reformed churches (*ibid.*, 3:116).

⁴² Cherry, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 103. This Augustinian view of justification was central to the thought of the Swiss Reformers, particularly Bucer, and was reasserted by Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformed of the early Caroline period. See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:32–36, 101–110. Moreover, although Calvin is generally construed as the archetype of the forensic, punctiliar pronouncement of justification, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (rep., Philadelphia, 1960) he offers a chapter that may challenge such a view: 'The Beginning of Justification and Its Continual Progress' (3.14). Cf. also *ibid.*, 3.17.4: 'You can in no way make the Scriptural passages agree unless you recognize a double acceptance of man before God'.

⁴³ Edwards, 'Of the Perseverance of the Saints', *Works*, 2:591.

and purify the heart. Subsequent acts of faith may even have a greater hand in the 'futurition of salvation' than the first act, for, as Edwards observes, Abraham and Noah were both said to be justified in subsequent acts ('after-acts') of faith. Each new act of faithful obedience is, in Edwards' eyes, another reception of Christ who works faith and holiness in his people.

Faith unites to Christ, and so gives a congruity to justification, not merely as remaining a dormant principle in the heart, but as being and appearing in its active expressions. . . . All evangelical works are works of that faith that worketh by love; and every such act of obedience, wherein it is inward, and the act of the soul, is only a new effective act of reception of Christ.⁴⁴

While it may well be said, in accord with Edwards' doctrine of continual creation, that 'God recreates, in each instant, the justified man insofar as he is justified',⁴⁵ Edwards' emphasis is on the believer's continuing dependence on God's grace to abide in real union with Christ in faith and evangelical obedience. Although Edwards thinks 'it is implied in several places of Scripture, that if true believers should fail in persevering in faith, they would be in a lost state',⁴⁶ yet he considers it impossible that the righteous should fall from grace. Things that remain as conditions of salvation and which might seem to prevent the obtaining of salvation have already been completed by Christ, who could not fail to obtain eternal life, and hence the elect are certain of their completion on the ground of Christ's future preservation of his work. Those passages of Scripture which intimate the possibility of the righteous falling away from their righteousness Edwards explains as: (a) warnings of service to the godly to make them wary, (b) those who, while outwardly righteous, are inwardly unconverted, or (c) as hypothetical propositions which may be true, when one or both parts of it are impossible, as the truth of such a proposition consists in the connection of the antecedent and consequent.⁴⁷

Perseverance in faithful union with Christ is thus the basis for the

⁴⁴ Edwards, 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:642.

⁴⁵ Miklós Vetö, *La pensée de Jonathan Edwards* (Latour-Maubourg, 1987), 81. Vetö goes on to assert that the 'ontological pantheism' involved in Edwards' Augustinian (i.e., neo-Platonic) metaphysic results in the 'divinization of the creature', since the person becomes 'a simple extension of the being of God' (ibid., 82). It is important to note here that, however true these accusations may be as they stem from Edwards' doctrine of continual creation (cf. Otto, 'The Solidarity of Mankind', 216–218 for the difficulties this view presents), that doctrine is not integral to the view of justification developed here.

⁴⁶ Edwards, 'Of the Perseverance of the Saints', *Works*, 2:600.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2:600–602.

declaration of one as righteous in the first act of faith. As all the believer's works are only of value as they are done *in Christ* and *because of Christ*, so the believer's good deeds are rewarded *in the light* of justification, not to the *obtaining* of it. There is, however, a *moral* fitness to the rewarding of the virtues of those united to Christ, though this value is founded, as with justification, in Christ and his righteousness.⁴⁸

Justification is twofold; it is either the acceptance and approbation of the judge itself, or the manifestation of that approbation, by a sentence or judgment declared by the judge, either to our own consciences, or to the world'.⁴⁹ Justification understood in the former sense has to do with that by which one becomes fit to be approved, namely by faith. This is the declarative justification of which the apostle Paul speaks. Justification understood in the latter sense has to do with the manifestation of this approbation by evidence of that fitness. This is the manifestative justification of which the apostle James speaks. Notwithstanding his use of this standard demarcation between Paul and James, Edwards concludes with an attempt at synthesis that, with his doctrine of justification, points the way toward a more holistic view of the relation of justification and justice:

If, notwithstanding, any choose to take justification in St. James's precisely as we do in Paul's epistles, for God's acceptance or approbation itself, and not any expression of that approbation; what has already been said concerning the manner in which acts of evangelical obedience are concerned in the affair of our justification, affords a very easy, clear, and full answer. For 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 it first and more immanent acts, but also by the effective acts of it in life, which are the expressions of the life of faith, as the operations and actions of the body are of the life of that.⁵⁰

Faith and evangelical obedience are thus conditions of real union with Christ and the enjoyment of the righteousness that comes from him as it is imputed to the believer and effects purity and holiness in and through him or her. Salvation depends on obedience, that of faith and that of works, though the faith and works are really inseparably connected. So central is evangelical obedience, or the faithful manifestations of real union with Christ, that Edwards can say that the salvation of the elect is dependent on them as though they were justified by them by a *moral* fitness, not a *natural*. 'In

⁴⁸ Edwards 'Justification by Faith Alone', *Works*, 1:643–45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:650.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:652.

accepting of us as entitled to life in our justification, God has respect to this, as that on which the fitness of such an act of justification depends: so that our *salvation* does as truly depend upon it, as if we were justified for the moral excellency of it'.⁵¹ Hence, while it is the state of natural fitness which is the foundation of the imputation and infusion of righteousness into the believer, the forensic justification of the believer is proleptically declared on the basis of the moral fitness that accrues in the course of the believer's perseverance in faithful obedience until death.

Conclusion

The perennial debate over the relation of justification to justice must proceed from the call to emulate Jesus. It was for the purpose of establishing justice that Jesus sacrificed himself. Only in the *actualization* (and not mere *declaration*) of justice does this redemptive work find its complete fulfilment, as van Ruler has observed: 'This atoning sacrifice finds its meaning not in sacrifice as such, and not even in atonement as such (i.e., the removal of guilt between God and humanity), but in God's justice. We are thus directed to its meaning for human life'.⁵² God justifies his elect by really uniting them to Christ by faith unto their continuation of the works he did (e.g., preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovering sight to the blind, and setting at liberty those who are oppressed [Luke 4:18]), as members of his body. God's declaration of his people as righteous through their *natural* union with Christ has in view a righteousness that is tantamount to *moral* union with him in his fulfilment of the works of the law, including the call to justice. 'Justification by faith means . . . our call to a faith that inspires us to spread God's justice in today's world'.⁵³ Jonathan Edwards' doctrine of justification offers a compelling way in which to view the salvation and righteousness of God solely by God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ as the federal head of the elect while still maintaining the salvific necessity of emulating Jesus' public righteousness. Hence, it provides a helpful mediation to the common distinction between justification and justice in continuity with the history of Reformation thought.

⁵¹ Ibid. This clearly evinces the falsity of the view that 'Edwards's insistence on justification "by faith alone" was absolute' (Edward H. Davidson, *Jonathan Edwards: The Narrative of a Puritan Mind* [Cambridge, 1968], 87).

⁵² Arnold A. van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays Toward a Public Theology* (Lewiston, NY, 1989), 110.

⁵³ Hendrik Hart, 'The Just Shall Live: Reformational Reflections on Public Justice and Racist Attitudes', *Christian Scholar's Review* 16, 1987, 273.

Abstract

The historically debated relationship between justification and works has been reopened with the liberationist emphasis on the centrality of justice to justification. In his own doctrine of justification, the great eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards provided a means toward the resolution of this debate in teaching that *both* faith *and* evangelical obedience (e.g., works of justice) are necessary *conditions* of justification. Edwards properly maintained that justification is a gracious and sovereign declaration of God that man is righteous *acceptilatio*, while also affirming that justification is contingent upon a state of holiness and the performance of justice, thus balancing the competing concerns evidenced in the historical debate and showing us a way toward promoting unity on this critical doctrine.