

Redemption of the Trinity

Elijah Kwong

REL 315

Professor Westblade

April 26, 2021

Few things are as difficult to understand as God's triune nature and God's role in human redemption. For Jonathan Edwards, these two topics went hand in hand. Edwards' understanding of the Trinity was heavily influenced by his philosophical idealism, which got him in a lot of trouble, but also gave the world an entirely new way of contemplating the triune God of Scripture. Edwards argued that God's actions are preceded by his nature, which eventually led to him suggesting that the covenant of redemption is a direct outflow from his Trinitarian being. By grounding his understanding of the covenant of redemption in the explicit roles of each Person of the Trinity, Edwards builds a robust system that ultimately serves as a defense of the doctrines of grace (i.e. TULIP).

As was just mentioned, Edwards' understanding of the covenant of redemption is deeply rooted in his understanding of God as Trinity. For Edwards, the former proceeds from the latter, which is why we must start by unpacking his theology of the Trinity. Those that have studied Edwards are swift to note that his interpretation of the Trinity is a hybrid between the Augustinian tradition and philosophical idealism.¹

Philosophical idealism was made popular in the eighteenth century by philosophers such as Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. Although the term 'idealism' now has several different connotations within philosophy, the idealism of Edwards' time can best be described as metaphysical or ontological idealism. In this framework, that which is mental (i.e. things related to the mind, spirit, reason, or will) is said to be "the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality."² Unlike the ideas formed in the minds of men, which are never perfect, Edwards argues that God's ideas are absolutely perfect. From this, he concludes that "God's

¹ Ralph Cunnington, "A Critical Examination of Jonathan Edwards's Doctrine of the Trinity," *themelios* 2, no. 39, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/a-critical-examination-of-jonathan-edwards-s-doctrine-of-the-trinity/>.

² "Idealism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/idealism/>.

perfect idea of himself is so real and substantial that it ‘generates’ a person—the Son.”³

Similarly, the mutual delight that exists between the Father and the Son is also perfect, generating another person—the Holy Spirit.

By appealing to idealism, Edwards strayed from the Western Trinitarian tradition established by Augustine, which advocated for divine simplicity, or the notion that the three Persons of the Trinity all have the same attributes. Augustine emphasized divine simplicity so as to guard the Faith against Arianism,⁴ but in doing so, he opened the door to modalism—a belief system that taught that God takes on three different roles (i.e. Father, Son, and Spirit), but is only one Person. Edwards likewise had to be careful when describing the Trinity, for by calling the Son the perfect idea of the Father and the Spirit the perfect delight that exists between the Father and the Son, he ran the risk of promoting a view of God that made the Son and Spirit ontologically inferior to the Father. Many of Edwards’ opponents attacked his theology of the Trinity for this very reason, stating that this kind of thinking would lead people to conclude that only the Father could truly be called God.⁵

The fundamental difference between Augustine and Edwards is their understanding and use of the term ‘personhood’ when describing God. For Augustine, personhood means that God’s being is made up of three individual entities. For Edwards, personhood means that God is in a “dynamic and relational state of being.”⁶ While Edwards’ definition does not contradict Augustine’s, it puts less emphasis on how each Person can be distinguished within the one being of God and more emphasis on what unifies the three Persons as one being. Neither definition is

³ Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 194.

⁴ A recurring heresy that denied the divinity of Christ.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 20, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 30-31.

⁶ Ralph Cunnington, “A Critical Examination of Jonathan Edwards’s Doctrine of the Trinity.”

wrong, but Edwards highlights something that Augustine completely overlooks, which is God's need for relationship within and among his three Persons.

One very important aspect of Edwards' Trinitarian theology is his emphasis on necessity. Unlike Creation and Redemption, which were planned out according to God's wisdom, the role of each Person in the Trinity came out of necessity. It was not an arbitrary decision. Edwards explains this at the start of his 1062nd miscellanies entry:

“The Persons of the Trinity of their own will have as it were formed themselves into a society for carrying on the great design of glorifying the Deity and communicating its fullness, in which is established a certain economy and order of acting; yet this agreement establishing this economy is not to be looked upon as merely arbitrary, founded on nothing but the mere pleasure of the members of this society, nor merely a determination and constitution of wisdom come into from a view to certain ends.”⁷

Edwards saw the Trinity's arrangement as something that was *required* to be “fit and decent.”⁸ It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that all three Persons consented to this order and established it by agreement, enjoying “what is in itself fit, suitable, and beautiful.”⁹ Flowing from this subsistent necessity is the role of the Father, the role of the Son, and the role of the Holy Spirit. Although each of these Persons are equal in glory and excellence, the Father is the head of the Trinity, with the Son beneath him, and the Spirit beneath them both.¹⁰

A common objection to Edwards' theology of the Trinity was that his understanding of the Godhead made the Holy Spirit entirely impersonal. The Father and the Son, people argued, were the only two members of the Trinity with actual personhood. If the Spirit was just the manifestation of the Father and Son's love for one another, then how could the Spirit be said to have understanding and will? Edwards tried to combat this attack by appealing to perichoresis, or

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062: Economy of the Trinity and Covenant of Redemption,” 431.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “Discourse on the Trinity,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 135.

the idea that each Person is made ‘complete’ by being in relation with and having access to the other members of the Trinity.¹¹ Many people erroneously concluded from this that Edwards believed that each member of the Trinity was lacking certain attributes, which was not Edwards’ point or goal. By appealing to perichoresis, Edwards was simply trying to explain how the three Persons of the Trinity “eternally coexist and coinhere,” for each Person is involved in what the others are doing.¹² To see perichoresis as Edwards’ way of asserting some bold ontological claim about the inter-dependence of the Trinity is a huge mistake.

Another error that Edwards had to correct was the notion that the economy of the Trinity was formed after the covenant of redemption was established in order to bring about its accomplishment. Edwards’ primary defense against this claim was that it is within God’s nature to want to glorify himself. “God’s determination to glorify and communicate himself [comes] prior to the method that his wisdom pitches upon as tending best to effect this.”¹³ In other words, God’s desire to glorify himself already existed before Creation, when God could only act ‘ad intra’ or towards himself. This means that God was able to perfectly glorify himself through the Trinity and that God’s decision to glorify himself through “the redemption of a certain number of fallen inhabitants of this globe... [was] a thing diverse from God’s natural inclination to glorify and communicate himself in general.”¹⁴ To further prove his point, Edwards highlighted the fact that the economy of Trinity will remain after redemption is complete, which points to the fact that the Trinity subsists for reasons other than redemption or even Creation.

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Discourse on the Trinity,” 133: “The Father understands because the Son, who is the divine understanding, is in him. The Father loves because the Holy Ghost is in him. So the Son loves because the Holy Spirit is in him and proceeds from him. So the Holy Ghost, or the divine essence subsisting in divine love, understands because the Son, the divine idea, is in him.”

¹² Ralph Cunnington, “A Critical Examination of Jonathan Edwards’s Doctrine of the Trinity.”

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 432.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In addition to trying to prove that the covenant of redemption came after the Trinity's formation and existence, Edwards also wanted to assert that the covenant of redemption was developed and executed by the Trinity. Keeping in line with their eternal roles as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Edwards taught that there was subordination among the Persons of the Trinity even as they charted man's redemption.¹⁵ The office(s) that each Person would assume in bringing about man's redemption flowed from, but was not equal to, the natural economy of the Trinity.

As the head of the Trinity, the Father is the first and last Person to act. He has the final say in all matters, including those which pertain to redemption. The Father is the one who is most injured by sin, whose wrath is kindled, and "whose justice and vengeance is to be executed and must be satisfied."¹⁶ He is also the one that determines whether or not redemption will even be offered, and for whom it will be applied to. Most importantly, however, the Father is the one that appoints the Son and the Spirit to their respective offices. The Son is made Redeemer and Mediator just as the Spirit is made Emissary and Consummator.¹⁷

It is at this point that we encounter one of the most perplexing aspects of redemptive history. How can we say that the Father sent the Son when Scripture so clearly articulates that the Son voluntarily came? Apparently, this was a question on Edwards' mind as well, because he tries to answer it in his 1062nd miscellanies entry. For Edwards, the only way this apparent contradiction could be solved is if the Father first made a proposal to the Son in which he outlined the cost and reward of becoming man's Savior. In this proposal, the Father "offers him authority for the office, proposes precisely what he should do as the terms of man's redemption,

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies Entry 1062," 430.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies Entry 1062," 433.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies Entry 1062," 434.

and all the work that he should perform in this affair, and the reward he should receive.”¹⁸ By offering such a deal, the Father is not forcing the Son into a position that he does not want, but because they have the same will, the Son voluntarily takes the Father up on this deal without hesitation. From there, the Father then sends the Son to accomplish what has been asked of him, and in this way, it can be said that the Father sent the Son and the Son voluntarily came.

This deal between the Father and the Son to bring about man’s salvation is what Edwards is referring to when he describes God’s covenant of redemption. In this covenant, the Father warns the Son that he will be subjected to intense humiliation and suffering, wherein he will have to descend far “below the infinite glory of a divine person.”¹⁹ In return, however, the Father promises the Son multiple rewards. After redemption is accomplished, the Son is given the throne of his Father and the authority “to rule in his name and as his vicegerent.”²⁰ So while the Father is “economically the King of heaven and earth, Lawgiver and Judge of all,” these powers are committed to the Son as a gift “for a season.”²¹ One thing that many people overlook but that Edwards wants to emphasize is the temporal nature of these rewards. In Psalm 110, we hear the Father’s words to the Son after his ascension into heaven, which are, “Sit at My right hand / Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”²² Notice the word ‘until.’ The Son gets to sit at the right hand of the Father and exercise his authority until the end of the age. We see this again in John 5:27, in which Jesus declares that his Father has given him authority to execute judgment. This authority ultimately belongs to the Father as the head of the Trinity, but the Son will wield it until history reaches its end and the covenant of redemption is complete. At that point, “things will return to be administered by the Trinity only according to their economical

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 436.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 437.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 439.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Psalm 110:1 (NASB1995).

order.”²³ The Son will give up his position at the right hand of Father, as well as all the powers granted to him by Father. Again, Edwards would point to Scripture to back this up. “Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father... When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.”²⁴

Interestingly enough, the Holy Spirit’s role in the covenant of redemption is twofold. One of these roles is temporary, but the other is eternal. Like the other gifts given to the Son by the Father, the Spirit is put under the subjection of the Son until the end of the age. It is for this reason that in John 16:7, Jesus is able to tell his disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit after his ascension. There is, however, another way in which the Spirit is subjected to Son, and this way will last for all eternity. As the God-man, Jesus is both the husband and head of the Church, and for this reason, the Spirit will be the “vital good that this vital head will eternally communicate to his church.”²⁵ Edwards points out that as the embodiment of love, the Spirit does not just enable believers to *have* communion with the Father and the Son, he *is* communion with the Father and the Son. Consequently, the Bible never says that we are to have fellowship with the Spirit, for the Spirit is himself fellowship with the Father and Son.”²⁶

So what is my point in saying all of this? To affirm Edwards’ theology of the Trinity and his understanding of the covenant of redemption is to affirm the doctrines of grace, for better or for worse. Edwards was, of course, a Calvinist, and so his theology reflects that. His system of theology is a closed circuit that requires all five points to be accepted. Total depravity is affirmed by Edwards through his assertion that the Father must decide whether or not he should offer

²³ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 439.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:24,28 (NASB1995).

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies Entry 1062,” 440.

²⁶ McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 195.

redemption to man. Not only does this demonstrate that man needs saving, but that man is also incapable of saving himself. Unconditional election is affirmed when he says that the Father chooses who will benefit from his redemptive plan. Limited atonement is affirmed when Edwards describes the Father charge to the Son to become the Redeemer/Mediator for those that he has chosen. Irresistible grace is affirmed when he describes the Spirit's role, in subjection to the Son, as the Emissary, or the one who calls those whom the Father has chosen and the Son as atoned for. Perseverance of the saints is affirmed by Edwards' description of the Spirit as the Consummator, or the one that sees God's people to the end.

To deny any of these points is to suggest that the three Persons of the Trinity are capable of failing or messing up their own plans, or even worse, are disunified as the Godhead. Did the Father elect more people than the Son was willing to die for? Did the Son fail to atone for all the souls which the Father entrusted him to redeem? Or did the Spirit fail to gather some of God's people and see others to the end? What ridiculous questions to ask. The answer to all of them is most assuredly, "Of course not!"

Jonathan Edwards believed that both God and the gospel were Trinitarian. To try and disconnect either of these topics from a proper understanding of the Trinity leads only to heresy. The modern Church has been blessed with two millenia's worth of Christian thinking and problem solving. Jonathan Edwards stands out among these giants of the Faith as a man with unwavering commitment to the Scriptures and to the Lord. While philosophical at times, he never said anything that the Bible could not defend on its own. We must carry on his legacy by remembering his work and by keeping our eyes on Christ, wherever he may be found.

Works Cited

- Cunnington, Ralph. "A Critical Examination of Jonathan Edwards's Doctrine of the Trinity." *themelios* 2, no. 39. Retrieved from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/a-critical-examination-of-jonathan-edwards-doctrine-of-the-trinity/>.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Discourse on the Trinity." In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21, edited by Sang Hyun Lee. London: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Editor's Introduction." In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 20, edited by Amy Plantinga Pauw. London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- "Idealism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/idealism/>.
- McClymond, Michael J. and Gerald R. McDermott. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.