

**Good Works As Expressions of Faith:  
Investigating Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Justification**

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Religion 319: 18th Century Theology

May 1, 2023

In his treatise on the doctrine of justification, Jonathan Edwards states that “we are justified only by faith in Christ, not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.”<sup>1</sup> His main point in this treatise is to demonstrate how God alone is the cause of our salvation. He goes into detail to discuss our dependency on Christ alone for our justification, since there is nothing we as sinful men can do to earn it. From a few points throughout the treatise, however, it seems as though Edwards suggests that after a person’s initial justification, based solely upon the grace of God, his heart is transformed in such a way as to be able to perform works of righteousness acceptable and pleasing to God. Edwards describes God as the sole cause of justification, but faith as a condition of justification. Once elaborated, some parts of his argument appear to contradict the Reformation teaching of justification through Christ alone and to promote a doctrine of justification through Christ and our continued obedience. I will proceed by discussing Edwards’ argument for justification not by any goodness of our own, the ways in which some of his explanations seem to contradict Reformation teaching, the purpose of Edwards’ preaching this doctrine in order to preach imperatives, the view of this doctrine as more of a reliable sign of religious affections—evidence of an already justified person—rather than a key to obtaining justification, and finally the way in which Edwards’ argument makes biblical sense and still adheres to Reformation values.

Edwards’ argument for the impossibility of Christians to earn their initial justification by their own works, and their dependence on Christ alone for their justification, is accomplished by his distinction between natural fitness and moral fitness. Fallen men cannot be morally fit to receive the grace of God; moral fitness assumes that there is something in men that is worthy of

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1. Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 4.

grace, and that God accords merit to good works that we do. But men are sinful by nature, and directly opposed to the grace of God. God cannot reward us for anything of our own good works, for even our good works are stained with sin and abhorred by God. Edwards contrasts this moral fitness, through which we are unfit to receive the kingdom of God, by describing natural fitness, through which we are declared fit to receive the kingdom of God through Christ.

We are deemed fit to be justified because of the uniting aspect of our relationship to Christ; our faith unites us to Him, and it is His righteousness which saves us. We are naturally fit to be justified because of our union with Christ. It is a legal union, as in a marriage: all the belongings of the groom are given to the bride as her very own. The believer's unity with Christ is that by which he is declared justified, and not any works of his own. As Paul writes, "when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might heirs according to the hope of eternal life."<sup>2</sup> It is the work of God to draw sinners to Himself. And since He is the one who gives us saving faith to trust in Christ and to be united to Him, He is the one who gets the glory. "We are justified only by faith in Christ, not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own."<sup>3</sup> Our union with Christ, our faith, is what saves us. Faith in Christ is the grounds of our initial justification.

Yet while Christ alone is the grounds for our justification, Edwards seems to allow for personal works of righteousness to count for a sort of "final justification." One key question comes from a statement early on in his proofs for his main argument. He writes that "it is not

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2. Titus 3:4-7, ESV.

3. Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 4.

suitable that God should give fallen man an interest in Christ and His merits as a testimony of His respect to anything whatsoever as a loveliness in him. This is not suitable because, until a sinner is actually justified, it is not fitting that anything in him should be accepted by God as any excellence or amiableness of his person.”<sup>4</sup> Edwards fundamentally seeks to defend that the sinner is in no way able to earn his justification by his own works, since he is fallen. Any “loveliness” in him is insufficient to obtain the righteousness of Christ, and it is only one’s union with Christ which provides the grounds for his justification. Yet he writes regarding the works of a person, “it cannot be suitable, *till* the sinner is actually justified,”<sup>5</sup> that his works count for anything in God’s sight. This seems to imply that once initial justification has occurred in a person, “any excellency or amiableness of his person” could be accepted of God as merit to reward. Edwards does not specify here whether these works are our own doing or purely motivated by the Holy Spirit in us. In this sentence he comes close to arguing along with pre-Reformation theology that works after justification can earn one’s final justification. As George Hunsinger notes, Edwards essentially writes that “after (initial) justification, faith and other virtues are (subsequently) accepted by God as inherent qualifications that contribute to a person’s acceptance or (final) salvation—in other words, to a person’s being rewarded with heaven itself.”<sup>6</sup>

This indicates a seeming departure from the doctrine of the Reformation that man’s salvation, before *and* after justification, is produced and sustained in and through Christ alone. In an attempt to encourage his congregation to strive for holiness and produce fruit in acts of righteousness, Edwards seems to preach that sanctification is attainable through our own works

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4. Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 23.

5. *Ibid.*

6. George Hunsinger, “Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith Alone,” *WTJ* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 115.

once we have been justified. As Hunsinger writes, “while [Edwards] does exclude works performed before grace, he does not exclude those performed from grace in the renewed.”<sup>7</sup> The initial act of justification is an act of God, but Edwards words can be taken to mean that the proceeding acts are acts of our own intention, a deviation from the traditional views of the Reformation.

Edwards’ thought behind this teaching of his was to defend his use of imperatives during his sermons. Many Puritans did not give imperatives in their sermons, because they did not want to emphasize works too much. They emphasized grace, and did not want to charge people to act on gospel truths in case the congregation thought they could work for their own justification. Yet, Edwards noted the dangerous opposite side of the coin: if nothing a person can do counts toward final justification, then why try to do any good works at all? If you have been justified, why does it matter how you live? If it is your union with Christ which matters, and nothing you have done or can do, why try to live in a way that honors the Lord? Well, there are clear imperatives in Scripture. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,”<sup>8</sup> and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,”<sup>9</sup> are two examples which come to mind. Edwards wanted to encourage his congregation to follow the words of the Bible and live in a way that was glorifying to the Lord.

In making his argument for giving imperatives, however, Edwards appears to have gone too far in the direction of man’s works, by alluding that any “excellency or amiableness” in the man might be credited to him as righteousness after justification. Edwards could have

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7. George Hunsinger, “Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith Alone,” *WTJ* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 117.

8. Matthew 22:37, ESV.

9. Matthew 22:39, ESV.

emphasized his imperatives as reliable signs of justification rather than acts of final justification themselves. Good works are signs of a changed heart. As John writes in 1 John 2:29, “If you know that [Jesus] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”<sup>10</sup> Our works of righteousness are produced from our standing and new birth in Christ. Any good work we may accomplish is solely a work of the Spirit working through us, and that to the glory of God. It is Christ’s righteousness in us that presents us blameless before the Father. Any good work that we do is His work through us. As the old hymn says, “nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”<sup>11</sup> Yes, the clinging is an act. But that clinging is only made possible by the grace of Christ, and that clinging does not carry us to Eternity. Christ carries us to Eternity. Our clinging is worth nothing if Christ is not the one ultimately clinging to us.

We have been called to do good works. This is especially clear from Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”<sup>12</sup> God prepared good works for us to walk in. We must, indeed, follow Christ and the imperatives He calls us to in Scripture. But the distinction, which Edwards does not appear at first to wholly express, is that those works still do not count for anything after justification. The good works we do are works which God has prepared beforehand, and are even then a matter of belief and faithfulness which

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10. 1 John 2:29, ESV.

11. Toplady, *Rock of Ages*.

12. Ephesians 2:8-10, ESV.

He works in our hearts. Our works do not count finally for anything after justification. It is only Christ's righteousness which matters, before and after justification.

Works of obedience are signs of a changed heart. As Samuel T. Logan Jr. writes, "being in Christ produces evangelical obedience because, as Edwards and many others have taught, the law of God is nothing more or less than the objectification of the very nature of God. 'I am the Lord your God,' and therefore, 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Ex. 20;2, 3). Therefore, when one is in Christ, one lives out who he is, and that is evangelical obedience."<sup>13</sup> Evangelical obedience is evidence of a person who is united to Christ by faith. It is not a scale by which to determine the existence or measure of eternal rewards.

The call for the one who is apt to do nothing—in fact, apt to live in works of sin with the belief that he has been justified and no longer needs to do anything to maintain his right standing with God—the call for him is to examine his heart and to consider where his faith lies. The lack of works, I believe, would signify a lack of faith—a lack of initial justification—rather than a failure to fulfill final justification. Justification is not an excuse not to do any works simply because you are in Christ. A Christian's right standing and peace with God is in Christ alone, before and after justification, and that peace with God effects good works, fruits of righteousness in the believer. The believer's union with Christ, enacted by the grace of God through faith, is the sole grounds of his righteousness. Justification is an invitation to do the works "which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."<sup>14</sup> The works following justification are

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13. Samuel T. Logan Jr., "Justification and Evangelical Obedience," in *Jonathan Edwards and Justification*, ed. Josh Moody (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 125.

14. Ephesians 2:10, ESV.

evidence of a changed heart, and are only able to be performed through the Holy Spirit, by the grace of God. Those works do not count, as any form of merit, toward final justification.

Edwards ultimately attempts to address this balance of faith and works before and after justification by defining faith as a disposition toward an end. That faith is a disposition with an end to glorify God makes all of our actions after justification, all of our works once we have been saved, a property of that faith. Good works are an expression of the saving faith which unites us to Christ. So when Edwards writes in his *Miscellanies* that “not only the first act of faith but after acts of faith & perseverance in faith do justify the sinner,”<sup>15</sup> he means to express that the works occurring after justification are all a result of the initial faith which is the sole ground of our justification. It is not the works which save, but the faith from which the works flow.

What Edwards writes later on in this same Miscellany is what we cannot leave out of the conversation: “so far as the act [of justification] is plain, it gives us evidence from God for our dependance, both for continued acts of faith & also the salvation that is connected with them.”<sup>16</sup> We are continually dependent on God for any good works that follow our justification. They are works which He has given us to do, and they do not actually effect anything after our initial justification. Our good works are signs of a changed heart, and evidence of the faith that we have. The good works are expressions of faith. Edwards drew this conclusion from the Bible, as he saw that multiple acts of Abraham were counted to him as his justification; at which point, Edwards wondered, was he actually justified? He concludes by arguing that each instance was an

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15. Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellany 729,” Yale University Library Online, accessed May 1, 2023, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10867343>.

16. *Ibid.*



outworking of Abraham's faith, so that each moment of justification counted toward his final salvation. While the line must be maintained between the works that one accomplishes after justification counting toward his justification, or those that are a response flowing from the work God has already accomplished in his heart, Edwards makes the case for his doctrine of justification by faith in describing that works are outward expressions of an inward faith.

Though some of the ways Edwards describes his understanding of justification by faith are unclear and seem to contradict Reformation beliefs, Edwards' meaning behind this doctrine lends itself to faithful Scripture interpretation and a reformed theology, in that works are expressions of an already-enacted faith. Edwards sought to give imperatives in his sermons; he did not want his sheep to sit idly by, perhaps falsely assured of their salvation. Works done out of faith are fruits of Christ's righteousness in the believer. There are imperatives in Scripture, such as loving God and loving your neighbor, and we must follow those things which God has called us to in humble obedience. But those imperatives are only doable by the grace of God, and do not count finally toward justification. The works are expressions of faith. They cause us to be dependent on God, to give Him the glory in all the work He has called us to do. We can only do works pleasing to Him out of the faith He has given us. We are fully dependent on Him, before and after justification.

When we fail, or when we don't do good works, the Lord sees our hearts. And there, if we have truly been united to Him, He sees Christ. Even after justification, our failure does not discount us from His kingdom. And even after justification, our success does not earn us anything. Any rewards we reap from works sown in this life are all Christ's. Our works are pleasing to Him because they are works He is doing in us. Truly, "we are justified only by faith

in Christ, not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.”<sup>17</sup> And that faith has its expression in good works accomplished after our justification. Praise God for the work Christ accomplished on the cross, that by graciously giving us the gift of faith and uniting us to Christ, we are justified, and we stand forgiven, to do the works He has called us to do; to depend on Him, and to glorify and enjoy Him forever. “For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen!”<sup>18</sup>

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17. Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 4.

18. Romans 11:36, ESV.

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