

Edwards and the Covenant: Historical Model for a Contemporary Debate¹

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It is perhaps somewhat bold to assert within the title of this lecture that Edwards' teaching on the covenant serves as a model from history of what is a contemporary debate. On the one hand the very stature of the man forces us to consider him where he has spoken on an issue. Revered while living, the passing of time since his death has served to enhance his stature and reputation. Praised by his disciples, even an unsympathetic foreigner could call him "The greatest metaphysician America has yet produced."² And the contemporary testimony? "Some regard him as one of the greatest thinkers of all Christian history."³ He is called "the greatest intellect of the Awakening, and probably of colonial America generally,"⁴ and "the most eminent of American Calvinists."⁵ It is remarkable that an 18th century Puritan can be acknowledged in the mid-twentieth century by no less an authority than Perry Miller to be "the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene."⁶

The other reason that Edwards is significant as an historical "model" is the tremendous attention given to him in our generation. The renaissance of Edwardsean studies is truly remarkable in light of the prevalent historical and theological views of the past century. Centering around the critical edition of Edwards' *Works* being published by Yale University Press, there is a great volume of literature now available on Edwards.

If there are two reasons why Edwards is an effective "model," there is also a dual aspect of the model itself. That is, I am suggesting we can see in such a study two models for two debates. The first model relates more to form (or historical interpretation), and the second relates to substance (the relation of divine sovereignty to human responsibility).

¹ Much of the material in this paper is found in the reprint of my 1975 doctoral dissertation as Vol. 9 of Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University's Jonathan Edwards Classic Studies Series. Carl W. Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

² Quoted in "Edwards and the New England Theology," B.B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 515.

³ Douglas J. Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 2-3.

⁴ James Hastings Nichols, *History of Christianity: 1650-1950*, (New York: Ronald, 1956), p. 75.

⁵ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 362.

⁶ In "Editor's Introduction," *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, Vol. I of *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller and John E. Smith, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 2.

I. HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The first model is the phenomenon of Edwardsean studies itself. The renaissance of the study of Edwards has resulted in a kind of rehabilitation of the man in modern eyes, and the contemporary debate illustrated by this is the whole question of historical interpretation. Both Biblical studies and historical theology today are effected by an approach utilizing historical interpretation.

The principle is valid and important! What is the context? What is the historical setting? What did the author really mean, not what does a superficial reading in modern America mean. In exegesis, for example, what does it mean when Jesus in Matthew 24 says, “The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky.” Is that seen in light of the development of languages from pictures to symbols and the way such language is used of Babylon and Egypt in Isaiah 13 and Ezekiel 32, or in the un-historical way Hal Lindsay would see it? Or in the history of doctrine, are “person” and “substance” used in Trinitarian formulations in the same way these words are used today? One could also consider how Berkouwer and others have used “historical interpretation” with regard to Scripture and Confessions to bring in new content. There is also the liberal Roman Catholic theologians who by “historical interpretation” make Rome’s outworn dogma palatable to modern Roman Catholics.

The issue, however, to which a study of Edwards should alert us is whether historical interpretation is honored or abused. We may speak of changeable form and unchangeable content, but the danger of new or different content is real. Consider, for example, persons today who claim to be Calvinists and churches who claim to be true to their confession, but via historical interpretation have effectively emptied those words of meaning. One may deny or reinterpret, as well as adhere to a confession.

Concerning the renewed interest in Edwards, I have used the word “renaissance.” There is a vastness to the scope of these studies. One scholar attempted to find all works on Edwards from 1979 to 1991. He found around 450 publications, and there is no reason to expect even that many or more since 1991.⁷ There are dissertations, journal articles, and popular books. But one theme is frequently present – an effort to penetrate the centuries and find the true Edwards. In other words, historical interpretation.

While not wanting to absolutize generalizations, it is nevertheless true that earlier periods often failed in this regard. Publication of Edwards’ writing during and after his lifetime was frequently for polemical reasons. What was published did not reflect the range of his thought. On the other hand, enemies of Calvinism saw in Edwards a personification of the enemy and were vehement in their protest and given to caricatures. These problems are above and beyond the sometimes critical license editors and publishers took in early editions.

With great rejoicing, then, one welcomes the renewed appreciation for Edwards. But

⁷ David F. Coffin, Jr. in John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol 3 (Powhatan, Virginia: Berean Publications, 1962-1963), pp. 668-698.

appreciation at what cost? Brilliant scholars have rediscovered Edwards and instinctively see an intellect of the highest sort. Such intellect should be seen and appreciated. But the form, the clothing, of that intellect is unacceptable to our enlightened age. Not only was he a theologian, but a Calvinist theologian. So we can be honest with Edwards, or under the guise of historical interpretation, we can rehabilitate him via a form-content distinction.

Ola Winslow exemplifies this view. Edwards' mistake, she says, was that of "choosing to speak through an outworn, dogmatic system instead of letting the new truth find more appropriate form of its own." You understand Edwards "once his thought is taken out of the theological idiom."⁸ There is nothing wrong with Edwards; it's the form that is "outworn." In the current debate a parallel would be: The only thing wrong with Calvin is his Calvinism. How many of our theological ancestors are either put down as slaves to a philosophical frame of reference or rehabilitated as neo-orthodox before their time by removing their orthodox "form." Gerstner's three volume work on Edwards attacks this prejudice head on: *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. To substitute fideism for Edwards' rational theology is to miss Edwards.

Perry Miller, who more than any one else is responsible for renewed interest in Edwards, grounded his rehabilitation of Edwards on the thesis that there is a discrepancy between what Edwards said and wrote and what he really thought.⁹ The form-content distinction is there. But what is as incredible as it is brilliant is the way Miller argues that it is an intentional hiding of the content in the form. According to Miller, Edwards' writing "is an immense cryptogram"; "there was an occult secret in them," "something hidden," something to be "read as a cipher." Edwards is thus an artist who uses words. My, that sounds very erudite! But is it honest?

According to Miller the medium is theology; it is not paint or music or literature. The objective content thus becomes a "form," but it is of secondary importance. The "intellect behind the doctrines" impresses Miller. It is an interesting way to make an eighteenth century Puritan palatable to "modern" thought. George Marsden properly relates the downplaying of a distinctive Christian emphasis to Edwards' rehabilitation. Marsden writes:

Miller all but ignores the most crucial aspect of any Christian system – that of the person and work of Christ By minimizing Scripture, systematic doctrine, and the role of Christ, Miller in effect seems to be engaging in a kind of demythologizing, or more properly "de-Christianizing," of Puritanism. This process is not . . . a fully developed thesis, but it is an undeniable subtle tendency.¹⁰

⁸ Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758*, (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 326, 329.

⁹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, (Cleveland: World, 1964). Cf., for example, pp. 50, 51, 262-263, and 328.

¹⁰ George M. Marsden, "Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans: a Critique," *Church History XXXIX*, (March, 1970), pp. 95-96.

This approach by Miller and others is a bold thesis. The use of the word “model” is relevant in that here we see a dramatic example of contemporary abuse of the concept of historical interpretation. A right method has been abused rather than used.

A fundamental thesis growing out of my work on Edwards is that there was a great need for an historical interpretation, one that honored Edwards’ own intentions. It’s not my purpose here to defend that thesis, but I do want to summarize the issue as I saw it. The starting place must be the prominence of religious interests for the Puritans and a hearing of what their self-testimony says. The prejudice in favor of non-theological interpretations of Edwards was such that I was called upon by my Dutch professors to vigorously argue this point. Theology was primary for Edwards; it was not a secondary concern. We need to listen to what Edwards says, not what we suspect he really meant behind the words. The question of integrity, of Edwards and his interpreters, is at stake.

Perhaps the best way to summarize what I want to set before you is to remind you of the fundamental and life-changing character of Edwards’ conversion. This gathering would be sensitive to that without my arguing the point as I would in a dissertation. I was deeply moved, spiritually and academically, the first time I ever read Edwards’ own account of his conversion. I have many times since seen in his later writing a reflection of the spirit and understanding implicit in his conversion. These are the words of his own account:

From my childhood up, my mind has been full of objections against the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, in choosing whom He would to eternal life; and rejecting whom He please It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me There has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, with respect to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, from that day to this I have often since had not only a conviction, but a *delightful* conviction

The first instance, that I remember, of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading these words, 1 Timothy i.17. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.* As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before

From about that time I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by Him.¹¹

This conversion was fundamental in Edwards’ life. He never seemed seriously to consider any other vocation than a minister of the Christian gospel. By inclination, by training, by preaching and writing, Jonathan Edwards gave his whole life to the service of the Christ of Scripture. It is historical interpretation run wild that finds any significant duality of doctrine and

¹¹ Quoted in a “memoir” by Sereno Dwight in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols., (London: William Tegg, 1879), hereafter cited as *Works*, I, liv-lv.

meaning behind the doctrine. As life long students of Scripture, church history, and historical theology we must always be alerted to a valid historical method being a subtle vehicle for importing a new and illegitimate interpretation that suits the interpreter but does not honor the canons of interpretation.

II. DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

We want to consider now the other model to which we alluded, namely, the substantive issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I mentioned earlier that Edwards was a significant model because of his stature and the revival of interest in him. The covenant of grace as a theological locus is also of importance in this discussion. The covenant of grace has been central to Reformed theology and is a description of how the saints are related to God in faith. No issue is more fundamental to our understanding. Sovereignty and election, faith and obedience, grace and the Holy Spirit, all come into the discussion in their relation to Christ as mediator of the covenant. Center stage is the crucial issue of “unconditional election” and the “conditionality” of faith. The terrain is not unfamiliar, especially for the theologians of the Reformation. Then and now divine sovereignty and human responsibility are the primary focal points for debate on the covenant of grace.

Historically, Edwards’ use of the covenant concept developed against the backdrop of the controversy between the so-called “consistent Calvinism” with its unconditional election and the increasingly expanding inroads of Arminianism in New England. Edwards, and I believe Reformed theologians in general, saw in the covenant of grace a way of affirming consistent Calvinism without neglecting the Scriptural teaching on human responsibility. Most errors of interpretation of Edwards’ position result from misunderstanding how the covenant functions.

The covenant idea is common to Scripture, and Edwards’ use of this idea corresponds to the heritage out of which he came. According to Calvin the reason why the spiritual alliance between God and man is comprehended under the word covenant is “because they be articles’ on both God’s side and man’s side.¹² I found this same terminology in both the Continental Reformers and Puritan theology. Edwards would totally reject the dilemma of faith *or* election. These are aspects of God’s sovereign activity. Philippians 2:13 states: “It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” Writing on efficacious grace, with this verse in mind, Edwards sets forth the following declaration:

In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some, and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what he produces, namely our own acts. God is the only proper author and foundation; we only are the proper actors. We are, in different respects, wholly passive and wholly active.

In the Scriptures the same things are represented as from God and from us. God is said to convert, and men are said to convert and turn. God makes a new heart, and

¹² John Calvin, *The Sermons of Master John Calvin upon the fifth booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, Trans. Arthur Golding, (London, 1583), p. 177.

we are commanded to make us a new heart. God circumcises the heart, and we are commanded to circumcise our own hearts; not merely because we must use the means in order to the effect, but the effect itself is our act and our duty. These things are agreeable to that text, “God worketh in you both to will and to do.”¹³

Passive, yet active; from God yet from us. “God does all, and we do all.” Joseph Haroutunian rightly says that “such a statement deserves a whole volume as a commentary.”¹⁴

Regarding sovereignty and responsibility Edwards was a both/and theologian. He was a Calvinist who taught the covenant of grace. Much of current scholarship correctly asserts the pure Calvinism of Edwards but errs in claiming he abandoned the covenant of grace. Similarly, those concluding that Edwards is a covenant theologian are indeed correct, but many of them err in further concluding that he thereby deserted Calvinism. It is a gratuitous assumption which sees in the “naked sovereignty” and “unconditional election” of Calvinism an exclusion of the covenant of grace. Edwards was one who maintained the covenant doctrine while most insistent upon the absolute sovereignty of God.

Jonathan Edwards, as a covenant theologian, provided us with valuable insights into the way the sovereign God relates to fallen man. Central to Edwards’ doctrine is his conviction that the covenants of redemption and grace are essentially one, yet distinguished. In a manuscript sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16, Edwards writes that the covenant of grace as Christ’s last will and testament “is a twofold covenant of God relating to the salvation of men by Christ that ought not to be confounded but carefully distinguished.”¹⁵ The one is a “covenant that God the Father makes with Christ . . . wherein believers are looked upon as in Christ”; the other is “the covenant that is between Christ and believers themselves.”¹⁶

In a published sermon on Hebrews 13:8 Edwards further explains their relationship:

Another covenant that Christ has regard to in the execution of His mediatorial office, is that covenant of grace which God established with man God . . . make[s] His promises which He makes to His creatures, His rule to act by: i.e., all His actions are in an exact conformity to His promises, and He never departs in the least degree from them But God’s promises are consequent on His purposes, and are no other than the expressions of them. And the covenant of grace is not essentially different from the covenant of redemption: it is but an expression of it: it is only that covenant of redemption partly revealed to mankind

¹³ “Miscellaneous Remarks,” *Works*, II, 557.

¹⁴ Joseph Haroutunian, “Jonathan Edwards: A Study in Godliness,” *The Journal of Religion*, XI, (July, 1931), p. 415.

¹⁵ Sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16, Yale MSS, p. 3. The manuscript sermons and “Miscellanies” notebook entries identified as Yale MSS are located in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and are used with their kind permission.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

for their encouragement, faith, and comfort . . . therefore the fact that Christ never departs from the covenant of redemption, infers that He will never depart from the covenant of grace; for all that was promised to men in the covenant of grace, was agreed on between the Father and the Son in the covenant of redemption.¹⁷

Everything in the covenant of grace then is already founded in the eternal covenant of redemption, and in this light any activity in the application of this in history is anchored in the sovereign activity of the Triune God before creation.

The eternal nature, both past and future, of God's sovereign work of salvation is described in a manuscript sermon on Hosea 13:9. "Thus God is the sole author of the salvation of those that are saved even from the very first beginning of it in the eternal covenant of redemption even to the end and consummation of it in the eternal glory of the saints."¹⁸ In a manuscript sermon on Proverbs 8:31 Edwards states that Christ not only "delighted in the thought of saving poor sinners before the world was made," he "was appointed to save sinners and undertook it before the world was made."¹⁹

Though faith as well as unbelief takes place in time, an act of responsible, active persons, and though it may "appear" inconsistent with God's electing from eternity, Edwards, in a sermon on Ephesians 3:10, sees it as rather displaying the wisdom of God.

At the very time that God uttered the threatening, "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die;" and at the time that Adam had first eaten the forbidden fruit; there was then an existing promise, that many thousands of Adam's race should obtain eternal life. This promise was made to Jesus Christ, before the world was. What a difficulty and inconsistency did there seem to be here? But it was no difficulty to the wisdom of God, that the promise and the threatening would be both fully accomplished to the glory of God's truth in each of them. Psalm 85:10. "Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other."²⁰

In a sermon on 1 Peter 2:9 Edwards relates this electing from eternity to a covenant between the Father and Son.

In election, believers were from all eternity given to Jesus Christ. As believers were chosen from all eternity, so Christ was from eternity chosen and appointed to be their Redeemer, and he undertook the work of redeeming them. There was a

¹⁷ Sermon on Hebrews 13:8; *Works II*, 950.

¹⁸ Sermon on Hosea 13:9, Yale MSS, p. 11.

¹⁹ Sermon on Proverbs 8:31, Yale MSS, p. 1.

²⁰ "The Wisdom of God, Displayed in the Way of Salvation," *Works*, II, 149.

covenant respecting it between the Father and Son.²¹

Divine election is not other than the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and that election stands indissolubly related to the covenant of redemption.

One should be put on guard against any notion of the covenant of grace that would reflect despairingly upon the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. In a series of sermons on John 16:8 (one manuscript notebook) Edwards at one point presses relentlessly on the theme that any possibility of salvation by our own righteousness would mean the covenant of redemption was unnecessary.

And what a reflection do you cast upon them as the contrivers of this wonderfully [sic] way. The persons of the Trinity . . . consulted from all eternity about it, as being the main work of divine wisdom. The Father entered into a covenant of redemption with the Son before the foundation of the world; and if your way be true, it was all for nothing; it was only a frivolous notion. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost . . . busied themselves about it needlessly. You by your practice reflect upon them, as tho they made a great ado, and consulted to do some great and strange thing to no purpose, but only to surprise and amuse the world.²²

He continues at length in this sermon to show how a self-righteous scheme of salvation disparages each person of the Trinity. Everything pertaining to our salvation is traced back to the sovereign pleasure of God. God is glorified, says Edwards, in man's dependence.

The covenant of redemption, with qualifications, contains the covenant of grace within its boundaries. According to Edwards, "the covenant of grace is not essentially different from the covenant of redemption: it is but an expression of it . . ." ²³ Edwards wrote: "The covenant that God the Father makes with believers is indeed the very same with the covenant of redemption made with Christ before the foundation of the world or at least is entirely included in it."²⁴

However, Edwards is clearly as concerned to keep the twofold covenant distinguished as he is to insist upon its essential unity. In a major entry in the "Miscellanies" on the "Covenant of Grace" he writes a considerable amount about the similarities and differences of the two covenants. He begins by stating:

It seems to me there arises considerable confusion from not rightly distinguishing between the covenant that God makes with Christ and with His church or believers in Him, and the covenant between Christ and His church or between Christ and men. There is doubtless a difference between the covenant that God

²¹Sermon on 1 Peter 2:9, *Works*, II, 938.

²² Sermon on John 16:8, Yale MSS, pp. 60-61.

²³ Sermon on Hebrews 13:8, *Works*, II, 950.

²⁴ "Miscellanies," No. 1091, Yale MSS.

makes with Christ and His people, considered as one, and the covenant of Christ and His people between themselves These covenants are often confounded and the promises of each called the promises of the covenant of grace without due distinction.²⁵

Both covenants are similar in that there are promises. They differ, however, in what the promises are.

The sum of what is promised by the Father in the former of these covenants is Christ's reward for what He has done in the work of redemption . . . and the sum of what is promised in Christ's marriage covenant with His people is the enjoyment of Himself and communion with Him in the benefit, He Himself has obtained of the Father by what He has done and suffered.²⁶

Edwards prefers the analogy of marriage to illustrate the covenant of grace between Christ and His bride, and the covenant of redemption then becomes analogous to "the covenant that a father makes between a son and his wife . . . considered as one."²⁷ When we speak of promises and conditions of the covenant it is important to keep these distinctions clear. In an unpublished note Edwards writes:

Hence it appears that many of the things promised in both these covenants are the same, but in some things different so that those things that are promises in one of these covenants are conditions in another. Thus regeneration and closing with Christ is one of the promises of the covenant of the Father with Christ but is the condition in the covenant of Christ with His people. So on the other hand the incarnation, death and sufferings of Christ are promises in Christ's covenant with His people, but they are the conditions of the covenant of the Father with His Son.²⁸

On the one hand the covenants are closely related; on the other they are "entirely different and not at all to be confounded."

Jonathan Edwards was concerned about time as well as eternity. Sinners needing salvation are in time. Edwards humbled himself before the sovereign God as reverently as any theologian, believing that what occurs in time is rooted in eternity and serves the ultimate glory of God. The covenant of grace is the historical implementation of the eternal covenant of redemption, and it involved the human response, not contrary to, but in the framework of, absolute sovereignty.

²⁵ "Miscellanies," No. 617, Yale MSS.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

The hope for sinners is founded in the relationship between the two covenants. In a manuscript sermon on 2 Samuel 23:5 Edwards states: “The covenant of grace is every way so ordered as is needful in order to its being made firm and sure.”²⁹ The basis of this, according to Edwards, is “the covenant of redemption, which God made with Christ from all eternity.” “Surely God will fulfill the engagements that he from all eternity entered into with His own Son.”³⁰

Without the covenant of redemption there would be no covenant of grace. Whether the covenant of grace is “firm and sure” is an irrelevant question if there is no covenant of redemption. It is equally true, however, that the covenant of redemption without the covenant of grace would be a charlatanic doctrine as far as man’s hope of salvation is concerned. It would be a plan to accomplish redemption without a plan to apply that redemption. Consequently, the fact of the covenant of grace – call it by whatever name you will – is fundamental in the revelation of the Gospel of salvation.

I think you can see the divine sovereignty and human responsibility parallels in the relation of these two covenants which are really one covenant. Since faith is man’s part in the covenant of grace, the fundamental Reformation doctrine of justification by faith is at the heart of covenant theology. Edwards unmistakably united faith and the covenant in his well-known discourse, “Justification by Faith Alone.”

. . . By the covenant of grace we are not thus justified by our own works, but only by faith in Jesus Christ. It is on this account chiefly that the new covenant deserves the name of a covenant of grace, as is evident by Romans 4:16. “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace.”³¹

Since man cannot be justified by works, and since the essence of the covenant of grace is our union with Christ, and since faith alone is that which unites one to Christ, Edwards says, “Faith (on our part) is the great condition of salvation.”³²

The gratuitous nature of faith with its emphasis on believing rather than doing does not negate the fact that it is man who believes. The doctrines of sovereignty and grace, as well as the doctrine of faith, in no way jeopardizes the biblical emphasis on man’s being active and responsible. It is precisely the fact that man is active in faith which makes the covenant concept a legitimate form for expressing the relationship between God and the elect. Man is thus active in faith, but his faith is a gift of God. Union with Christ is a fruit, not the root, of God’s grace.³³

²⁹ Sermon on 2 Samuel 23:5, Yale MSS, p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

³¹ “Justification by Faith Alone,” *Works*, I, 653.

³² “Miscellaneous Remarks,” *Works*, II, 598.

³³ Sermon on Zechariah 4:7, Yale MSS, p. 12.

Consistently Edwards equates the elect with those who are united to Christ via the covenant of grace. Edwards writes: “Jesus Christ is the great medium and head of union in whom all elect creatures in heaven and earth are united to God and to one another.”³⁴ In a sermon on Galatians 3:16 the importance of the covenant and Christ as the covenant head is indicated. “All the rewards God promised to Christ were promised to Christ’s mystical [body],” and the members of that body were “chosen in Christ before the world began.”³⁵ “Christ and His elect church are respected as one mystical person in the purchase that Christ made.”³⁶ Christ acted not only for Himself but “for them as one,” and “all that Christ purchased was for Christ’s mystical [body].”³⁷ And the wisdom of God is displayed in salvation in that Christ also purchased for the elect **the faith** which is given them, “whereby they shall be [actively] united to Christ, and so have a [pleadable] title to His benefits.”³⁸ Our faith, therefore, is a merited reward for Christ, but it is a gift to us!

The covenant implications follow. Saving faith is not only union with Christ; it is “joining the covenant.”

But the union, cleaving, or joining of that covenant, is saving faith, the grand condition of the covenant of Christ, by which we are in Christ. This is what on our part brings us *into the Lord*. For a person explicitly or professedly to enter into the union or relation of the covenant of grace with Christ, is the same as professedly to do that which on our part is the uniting act, and that is the act of faith. To profess the covenant of grace, is to profess it, not as a spectator, but as one immediately concerned in the affair, as a party in the covenant professed; and this is to profess *that* in the covenant which belongs to us *as a party*, or to profess *our part* in the covenant; and this is the soul’s believing acceptance of the Savior. Christ’s part is salvation, our part is a saving faith in Him; not a feigned, but unfeigned faith; not a common, but special and saving faith; no other faith is the condition of the covenant of grace.³⁹

Before concluding I want to say a word about Edwards’ use of the marriage covenant as illustrative of both God’s sovereignty and man’s response in salvation. It is of course a Scriptural illustration, used by Paul in Ephesians 5:32. It is this “marriage” between Christ and the elect sinner that bridges the gap between God offended and man offending. The prime covenant is between God the Father and Christ, but it is Christ as united with His church. Thus the eternal decree is manifested in time only when the members of that church become united

³⁴ Sermon on Ephesians 1:10, Yale MSS, p. 5.

³⁵ Sermon on Galatians 3:16, Yale MSS, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “The Wisdom of God, Displayed in the Way of Salvation,” *Works*, II, 146-147.

³⁹ “An Humble Inquiry,” *Works*, I, 443.

with Christ. To be outside of the “marriage covenant,” the covenant of grace, is to be outside the covenant of redemption.

God the Father makes no covenant and enters into no treaty with fallen man distinctly by themselves. He will transact with them in such a friendly way no other way than by and in Christ Jesus as members and as it were parts of Him. The friendliness and favour shall not be to them in their own name, but it shall all be to Christ and all acts of friendship and favour shall all be to Him and all promises made to Him and the fulfilment of promises also shall be to Him and to believers only as being in Him and under the covert of His name and as being beheld and reckoned as parts of Him.⁴⁰

From man’s perspective all the covenant promises are contingent upon his being in Christ, and to be in Christ is to be in the covenant of grace.

Edwards elaborates on this in a sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16 where he uses the illustration of a king covenanting with his son and his son’s wife together as one party with the promise contingent upon the son’s fulfilling a certain condition.⁴¹ Note here that the covenant from Christ’s perspective is a covenant of works. He must fulfill a meritorious condition on behalf of His spouse. This distinguishing of covenants is illustrated also by the father who “gives an estate to his son and his future wife” and by the son who in turn “in the marriage covenant gives himself and his estate to her that he takes” as his wife, “yet the covenants are entirely different.”⁴²

The union between Christ and His bride, with each party sharing with the other all they possess, has tremendous soteriological implications. If the righteousness of Christ with its merited blessings belong to believers by means of this covenant, it is also true that the believers’ sin with its merited punishment belong to Christ. That is the way Christ took our sins upon Himself. The sinner’s debt became Christ’s debt in their marriage, and the cross was where Christ paid off the debt in full.

The historical aspect of the covenant of grace is seen in Edwards’ insistence that the “offer of the gospel is not properly called a covenant till it is consented to,” even as an offer of marriage is only an offer and not the covenant of marriage itself.⁴³ The promise of the covenant of grace is thus conditional, though Edwards is not totally pleased with the word and is careful to affirm man’s lack of power to autonomously fulfill “conditions” for salvation. The marriage analogy as union with Christ illustrates the nature of faith more clearly than the traditional “conditional” or “instrumental” language. Edwards expressed this in his great work, “Justification by Faith Alone.”

⁴⁰ “Miscellanies,” No. 1091, Yale MSS.

⁴¹ Sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16, Yale MSS, pp. 4-6.

⁴² “Miscellanies,” No. 617, Yale MSS.

⁴³ Ibid.

It is certain that there is some union or relation that the people of Christ stand in to Him, that is expressed in Scripture, from time to time, by being *in Christ*, and is represented frequently by those metaphors of being members of Christ, or being united to Him as members to the head, and branches to the stock, and is compared to a marriage union between husband and wife.⁴⁴

The marriage union thus illustrates the non-meritorious nature of faith.

. . . We are not united to Christ as a reward of our faith, but have union with him by faith, only as faith is the very act of uniting or closing *on our part*. As when a man offers himself to a woman in marriage, he does not give himself to her as a *reward* of her receiving him in marriage. Her receiving him is not considered as a worthy deed in her for which he rewards her by giving himself to her; but it is by her receiving him that the union is made, by which she hath him for her husband. It is *on her part* the union itself How contrary to the gospel of Christ their scheme is, who say that faith justifies as a principle of obedience⁴⁵

Faith is our non-meritorious uniting with Christ and is attributed to the grace of God.

The marriage covenant is no abstraction but a vivid Biblical truth. “The covenant . . . between God and a professing people is like a marriage covenant” where they “profess and oblige themselves to renounce all others” and to belong to each other forever.⁴⁶ When Christ performs the condition of His covenant with the Father, says Edwards, “the condition is as if it were performed by them.”⁴⁷ One recognizes in this critical “as if” a parallel with the “as if” involved in the doctrine of imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer “as if” it were his own.

As with his theological ancestors Edwards’ insistence on the necessity of faith is not in conflict with his proclamation of salvation by grace, but it stands instead in closest harmony with the Gospel of grace. In a sermon on the text, “Therefore it is of faith that it might be by grace” (Romans 4:16), Edwards expounds this doctrine: “That the grace of God in the new covenant eminently appears in that . . . it proposes justification only by faith.”⁴⁸

In this sermon Edwards teaches that the “great and main design of God in the gospel” is “to magnify the riches and sovereignty of his grace.” The means to that end is salvation by faith alone, and persons trusting in their own righteousness “exceedingly derogate from the glory of

⁴⁴ “Justification By Faith Alone,” *Works*, I, 624.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

⁴⁶ Sermon on Hosea 3:1-3, Yale MSS, pp. 1-3.

⁴⁷ “Miscellanies,” No. 2, Yale MSS.

⁴⁸ Sermon on Romans 4:16, Yale MSS, p. 3.

the gospel or new covenant.”⁴⁹ If the new covenant, which Edwards calls the covenant of grace in this sermon, were not of pure grace, if faith as the condition of the covenant implied any merit at all, Jonathan Edwards would disown the doctrine of the covenant of grace on the basis of this sermon. That he did not disown the covenant of grace as a theological doctrine illustrates the firm conviction of Edwards that this doctrine in no way conflicts with the Biblical *sola fide*.

Man’s role in the covenant is to believe, but Edwards never suggested that occurred outside the divine initiative in which God granted the elect the gift of faith. What makes Edwards such an interesting “model” in the ongoing debate over the relationship of sovereignty and responsibility is his reputation as a consistent Calvinist stressing the absolute sovereignty of God. He was not only a “predestinarian,” but he was a “predestinarian evangelist.” He taught the absolute sovereignty of grace, but he used the covenantal framework to do it, with all the implications for man’s role in the covenant. For Edwards the covenant of grace, properly understood, implies no compromise with Arminianism.

We should appreciate the fact that it is precisely the emphasis on God’s sovereignty that provides our comfort. The covenant of grace, Edwards preached, “is only that covenant of redemption partly revealed to mankind for their encouragement, faith, and comfort.” The reason he gives is this: “Christ . . . will never depart from the covenant of grace; for all that was promised to men in the covenant of grace, was agreed on between the Father and the Son in the covenant of redemption.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁵⁰ Sermons on Hebrews 13:8, *Works*, II, 950.