

Justified by Works Via the Covenant of Grace¹

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In selecting the title *Justification by Works Via the Covenant of Grace* I hope to achieve two results in addition to simply provide a title. I would hope, first of all, that the phrase “Justification by Works” would raise some eyebrows in such a bastion of Reformed theology. I would also hope, however, that you would be way ahead of me in seeing where I am going by the qualifying phrase, “Via the Covenant of Grace.” This is not a novel idea within the Reformed tradition; it is indeed a fundamental feature of the doctrine of justification. Jonathan Edwards frames this debate within the covenant.

Before turning to Edwards, let me say a word to show the relevance of this topic and to help lower any eyebrows that may still be raised. One need not spend much time establishing as a principle of Scripture what is explicit in Romans 3:20: “By works of the Law no flesh will be justified in God’s sight.” “God saved us,” we read in Titus 3:5, “not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy.” The absolute declaration of salvation by grace and not works permeates Scripture, and I assume I need say no more in that regard to this group.

The same truth became the touchstone of our own Reformation heritage, popularly expressed in the slogans of “grace alone” and “faith alone.” The doctrine of solifidianism, justification by faith alone, is frequently referred to as “the article by which the Church stands or falls.” Acceptance of the terminology, however, does not guarantee a correct understanding. In fact, in a day when existential philosophy and theological subjectivism pervades the intellectual community, the danger at the grass roots level is that faith will be defined in terms of one’s experience, and the true foundation of faith in an objective atonement will be lost. The “testimony service” finds one in their testimony lifting up their experience rather than lifting up Christ. Justification by faith is understood as equivalent to justification by one’s inward experience which he calls faith. And since one’s experience is equated with faith, the one thing needful for salvation, doctrinal differences suddenly become rather unimportant. The result we see today is an amazing ecumenism in areas hitherto unheard of, based upon a subjective view of faith as manifested uniquely in the charismatic movement. It is an ecumenism among the “neo-trio” – neo-pentecostalism, neo-evangelicalism, and neo-catholicism.

Justification by faith meant something completely different in Reformation theology. In fact, if we were to be precise with our use of language we could not say justification is by faith. In my teaching ministry as a pastor I remind our people periodically on just this point. When we affirm with great zeal that we are justified by faith alone, we must remember that this is really shorthand. We are justified only **by the merit of Jesus Christ which is imputed to us and**

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).

received by faith alone. It is the righteousness of Christ that saves us, not our faith. Our faith is simply our receiving Christ and His righteousness, or, to use the terminology preferred by Edwards, faith is our union with Christ through which we are one with Him and His righteousness. Recognition that justification by faith means justification by Christ and His merit is the framework for the aspect of Edwards' covenant doctrine to which we now turn.

In the first hour we saw how Edwards related the covenant of redemption to the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is primarily a manifestation in history of the eternal covenant of redemption. Though inseparably united in Edwards' thought, they are still distinguished. The covenant of works is another covenant, a third covenant, in the context of what Edwards called a twofold covenant pertaining to our salvation. In the chronology of historical revelation, however, the covenant of works is called the first covenant, and the covenant of grace, though founded in eternity, is called the second covenant, or new covenant.

Such a designation takes the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace in their unity rather than in their dual aspect and compares it as one covenant beside another covenant of works. But Edwards qualifies even this legitimate distinction. Viewed from one perspective the "three" covenants are neither three nor two but one only. In a significant unpublished note in the "Miscellanies," Edwards writes:

The covenant of grace or redemption (which we have shewed to be the same) cannot be called a new covenant, or a second covenant, with respect to the covenant of works; for that is not grown old yet, but is an eternal, immutable covenant, of which one jot nor tittle will never fail. There have never been two covenants, in strictness of speech, but only two ways constituted of performing of this covenant: the first constituting Adam the representative and federal head, and the second constituting Christ the federal head; the one a dead way, the other a living way and an everlasting one.²

The basis for such a statement will become more apparent when we compare the covenant of works with the covenant of grace. Edwards is careful to show the works aspect within the covenant of grace, to which obedience must be perfect.

Whether we speak of two ways of performing one covenant or, as Edwards normally did, distinguish them as two covenants, the covenant of works was that covenant which God made with Adam before the fall. Adam was the federal head of the covenant of works analogous to the federal headship of Christ in the "second" covenant, or the covenant of grace. In his notes on Genesis 1:27-30 Edwards clearly states that the blessings referred to in these verses were "given to Adam as the public head of mankind" and "given him in the name of the whole race."³

² "Miscellanies," No. 35, Yale MSS. 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.

³ Jonathan Edwards, "Notes on the Bible, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols., (London: William Tegg, 1879), hereafter cited as *Works*, II, 689.

It would be a complete misrepresentation of Edwards, however, if one concluded from a comparison of the two covenants that the covenant of works ceased to be in effect after Adam's sin. We know that Edwards freely spoke of the covenant of redemption, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of works as three separate covenants. Yet we also know that he viewed the three covenants as two or one, depending on what aspects were under consideration. As I quoted just a moment ago, Edwards says the covenant of grace or redemption is not a new covenant in the sense that the covenant of works "is not grown old yet, but is an eternal, immutable covenant." The two covenants are seen by Edwards as "two ways constituted of performing of this covenant." According to Edwards "the covenant God made with man stating the condition of eternal life" is "the covenant of works." This, he says, was never abrogated, and "the covenant of grace is not another covenant . . . but a covenant made with Christ to fulfill it."⁴

Christ, as the federal head, takes the place of Adam and fulfills the covenant of works. Those united with Christ via the "marriage covenant," the covenant of grace, thus possess as their own, the merited blessings their spouse receives as the promise of the covenant of works. The covenant of works was thus abrogated as far as man's ability to succeed in its desired end. It was not, however, abrogated as being the only means provided by God to grant the blessing of eternal life to man.

It is apparent that this truth is at the very foundation of the whole biblical teaching of the atoning works of Christ. When Scripture says, "Was it not necessary?" when it speaks of Christ's suffering and death, we are reminded of the fact that the covenant of works has indeed "not grown old yet."

Not surprisingly we find the emphasis of Christ fulfilling the work which Adam and the rest of mankind have failed clearly taught in Edwards' great treatise on justification.

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.⁵

Christ suffered not as a private person but as a representative, but what He did, He did as fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works. When Christ agreed to His redeeming work in the covenant of redemption, the fulfilling of the condition of the covenant of works was contained in the condition of the covenant of redemption.

In this same treatise on justification Edwards writes:

⁴"Miscellanies," No. 30, Yale MSS.

⁵*Justification by Faith Alone*, Works, I, 623.

Justification by the righteousness and obedience of Christ, is a doctrine that the Scripture teaches in very full terms; Romans v. 18, 19. "By the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." . . . We have justification by Christ's righteousness⁶

Edwards sees in this both a propitiation, or "bearing a penalty of a broken law in our stead," and a "voluntary submitting" to this suffering as a positive and righteous obedience to the Father.⁷

According to Edwards the covenant of works is very broad precisely in its simplicity.

There is indeed but one great law of God, and that is the same law that says, "If thou sinnest, thou shalt die;" and "cursed is everyone that continues not in all things contained in this law to do them." All duties of positive institution are virtually comprehended in this law It may moreover be argued, that all sins whatsoever are breaches of the law or covenant of works, because all sins, even breaches of the positive precepts, as well as others, have atonement by the death of Christ: but what Christ died for, was to satisfy the law, or to bear the curse of the law

So that Christ's laying down his life might be part of that obedience by which we are justified, though it was a positive precept not given to Adam.⁸

In short, "what Christ did was to fulfil the covenant of works."⁹

The covenant of works had to be fulfilled either by man himself or for him by another acceptable to God. In one of the "Miscellanies" where Edwards contrasts the two covenants he writes:

The covenant of works and the covenant of grace as to their condition or that which they propose to be complied with by us in order to eternal life are in some respects the same tho in other respects exceeding diverse. They propose the very same duties, tis the same law, the revelation of the same holy God, and in general the same holy acts and exercises that are now proposed to us as the way to our possession of eternal life that was before in the covenant of works¹⁰

The very important difference, however, is that the covenant of works is what we give to God, "something acceptable and well pleasing to Him," but the covenant of grace is "an

⁶ Ibid., p. 638.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 639.

⁹ Ibid., p. 646.

¹⁰ "Miscellanies," No. 1030, Yale MSS.

expression of acceptance of something offered by God to us most profitable and good for us.”¹¹

This difference, which is of the utmost importance for the sinner, must not cause us to miss the unchangeable demands of the covenant of works.

But yet the dispositions and acts by which both one and the other of these covenants is complied with are fundamentally the same, because it is still the same God that we have to do with in both There is implied an agreeableness between us and this God in either case whether we offer to God that which is acceptable, amiable to the will of infinite majesty and holiness, or whether we on the other hand entirely and sincerely yield to the offers he makes of himself to us as our beneficent friend, Saviour and all sufficient portion. This can't be without an agreeableness between us and him, so that tis the same agreeableness to the same glorious God that is requisite in both cases, but this agreeableness includes all holiness, and all our duty that we are directed to both under the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.¹²

The holiness and justice of God could not be compromised. The covenant of works would be fulfilled, or the just consequences would result. Salvation, or eternal life, depends upon its fulfillment.

The good news of the Gospel is that Christ provided the condition, the fulfillment, of the covenant of works. A manuscript sermon on Psalm 40:6-8 has as its doctrine, “that the sacrifice of Christ is the only sacrifice that is upon its own account acceptable to God.”¹³ The burden of this sermon is to show how the Old Testament sacrifices were not acceptable on their own account and how and why the sacrifice of Christ is.

The doctrine of the covenant of grace, as it functions in the theology of Edwards, is a doctrine of comfort and assurance. This was seen when the covenant of grace was expressed as “firm and sure” because it is a manifestation of the covenant of redemption, and the covenant of redemption is between divine Persons who are eternal and unchanging.

Because Christ is the party of the covenant of redemption, we can depend on His covenant faithfulness. So also Christ is a party to the covenant of works, a substitute for the first Adam who represented us, and since it is God Himself representing the sinner, we can be infallibly assured that he fulfilled the condition of the covenant of works for us if we are united with Him in the covenant of grace. As long as eternal life depended upon “man's free will and good works,” uncertainty prevailed. Once Adam sinned, perseverance became a moot point, since all were in a state of condemnation. The covenant of grace, however, promised salvation. Not only did it restore man to a right relationship to God, it removed the uncertainty of the covenant of works. Because the covenant of gracedepends upon God and not man, cannot fail.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sermon on Psalm 40:6-8; Yale MSS, p. 5.

It is something of an historical curiosity to me that such expressions of certainty on the part of a believer have been subjected to the criticism that it somehow impinges upon the sovereignty of God. The issue concerns the “binding” of the parties of the covenant. The critic’s question is whether a sovereign God who arbitrarily predestinates is not incompatible with the idea of God being a party to a covenant in which He is bound. Edwards, of course, would say “no.”

In his excellent study of the evangelistic message of Edwards, John Gerstner provided an excellent summary of the issues involved:

Many students seem to assume that the two doctrines are incompatible. It is said by some that according to the doctrine of election God is sovereign and arbitrary while the covenant involves God in a contract and confines and limits him. One has God bound – the other, unbound. Many students of historical theology see the post-Calvin development of the covenant doctrine as a short-circuiting of the absolute predestinarianism of John Calvin. Some even represent Edwards as virtually eliminating the doctrine of the covenant (which we have already shown is clearly not the case), returning to the purer Calvinism of Calvin.

If God elected, he therein bound himself. He was arbitrary in electing to be sure. That is, he did not need to elect at all. But as soon as he did elect to save some, he bound himself to save by some covenant or no covenant. He would have been bound by nothing but his own veracity; but he would have been bound by that.¹⁴

The critics, however, saw only conflict.

Two secular historians, Samuel Eliot Morison and Perry Miller, popularized the thesis that New England covenant theology is a departure from Calvinism, and Jonathan Edwards is an exception to that because he repudiated covenant theology. As you may know it was precisely the prominence of such a wrong view that motivated my area of research. Such a false dichotomy between Calvinism and covenant causes many errors. The problem centered in equating predestination with fatalism, or in terms of our first hour’s lecture, in declaring sovereignty and responsibility to be incompatible. In this light they conclude that Puritan covenant theology modified Calvinism. The outcome, says Miller, “Was a shamelessly pragmatic injunction,” with God becoming “chained.”

Such language is found in much of the literature. Sovereignty is “not quite as arbitrary,” and covenant theology “softened the rigor of Calvinistic teaching.” I was amazed at the following statement from Ola Winslow’s biography of Edwards:

The “covenant of grace” amounted in effect to a contract, almost as binding on God as on man. Salvation was on terms. God bestowed it. Man did not deserve it, but he might know the terms, and if he chose to fulfill them, God was virtually in his power Generally speaking, the arbitrariness of an inscrutable Deity had

¹⁴ John H. Gerstner, *Steps to Salvation: The Evangelistic Message of Jonathan Edwards*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 185.

been brought within predictable bounds. Neither the sovereignty of God nor the depravity of man has been denied, but both had been decidedly bleached.¹⁵

As we have seen Edwards explain the covenant, however, Miss Winslow's statement that the covenant of grace is "almost as binding on God as on man" shows a misunderstanding of the doctrine. For covenant theologians the very assurance of salvation was founded on God's being absolutely bound to the covenant, not through man's power, but because of whom God is and the fact that He bound Himself. God's boundness to the covenant is equivalent to the statement that God's promises are absolutely and infallibly trustworthy.

The same historical interpretation prejudices are thus present which suggest election and covenant cannot rightly co-exist. This further statement by Gerstner shows the fallacy in such an alleged dilemma:

. . . The covenant of grace is nothing other than the way by which God decrees to carry out what he has committed himself to do. He is already bound by his decree; this covenant can bind him no tighter. It binds him more specifically. That is, it binds him with respect to a particular plan, which he has imposed upon himself. The covenant in no sense "relieves" the doctrine of the decrees.¹⁶

If one grasps the fact that the covenant binds God "no tighter" than His decree and that the covenant does not "relieve" the doctrine of unconditional election, he will be at the heart of Edwards' theology.

Looking to Edwards himself we find a consistent expression of "boundness" within the framework of election. According to Edwards God's "faithfulness" or "boundness" was the result, not the cause, of election.

So that perfection of God which we call his faithfulness, or his inclination to fulfil his promises to his creatures, could not properly be what *moved* him to create the world; nor could such a fulfilment of his promise to his creatures be his *last end* in giving the creatures being. But yet *after* the world was created, *after* intelligent creatures are made, and God has bound himself by promise to them, then that disposition, which is called his faithfulness, may move him in his providential disposals towards them; and this may be the end of many of God's works of providence, even the exercise of his faithfulness in fulfilling his promises, and may be in the *lower* sense his *last end* Thus God may have ends of particular works of providence, which are ultimate ends in a lower sense, which were not ultimate ends of the creature.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758*, (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 154-155.

¹⁶ Gerstner, *Steps to Salvation*, p. 185.

¹⁷ "The End For Which God Created the World," *Works*, I, 96.

What is significant here is the reference of God binding Himself in a work devoted to what God as Sovereign proposed to do in the first instance before the creation. A sermon on Romans 9:18 is one of the clearest and strongest statements by Edwards on the sovereignty of God. The whole sermon is given over to expounding that one doctrine. Significantly, it is in the application of this sermon that we find one of Edwards' strongest statements on God binding Himself.

Hence we learn what cause we have to admire the grace of God, that he should condescend to become bound to us by covenant; that he, who is naturally supreme in his dominion over us, who is naturally proprietor, and may do with us as he pleases, and is under no obligation to us; that he should, as it were, relinquish his absolute freedom, and should cease to be merely sovereign in his dispensations towards believers, when once they have believed in Christ, and should for their more abundant consolation, become bound. So that they can challenge salvation of this Sovereign; they can demand it through Christ, as a debt. And it would be prejudicial to the glory of God's attributes, to deny it to them; it would be contrary to his justice and faithfulness. What wonderful condescension is it in such a Being He hath bound himself by oath.¹⁸

In Calvinist fashion Edwards emphatically rejects the notion that a believer has any righteousness of his own with which to demand salvation from God as a debt. In those terms Edwards would find the whole notion obnoxious. But a legitimate use of debt or boundness is not thereby excluded. God is bound, but He binds Himself. Man does not bind God.

Boundness involved in covenantal relations is closely tied to the nature of God. In a manuscript sermon on Numbers 23:19 Edwards makes the following doctrinal statements: "That God never changes his mind"; "he never repents of anything that he has done"; and "God never changes his mind with respect to the rules which he fixed for himself to act by."¹⁹ Concerning these statements Edwards writes: "What I have principally respect to is the covenants that God has entered into with his reasonable creatures."

The covenants Edwards mentions are the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works is "an eternal rule of righteousness," and God will never depart from it. "God in the covenant fixed perfect obedience as the condition of eternal life, and he will never depart from it." It was on this basis that Edwards could in one sense reduce all covenants to this one with differences only in how they were fulfilled.

Edwards applies this same doctrine of the unchangeableness of God to the covenant of grace which God entered into with respect to men. According to Edwards the "promises and threatenings are rules which God has fixed to himself, and he never will change his mind concerning 'em." Edwards lists three causes which could result in a change in God's mind: "either ignorance or error or change of nature." He quickly shows the hypothetical nature of such a statement. "It cannot be from ignorance or error because God is omniscient; he knows all things that ever have been or are or shall be." So also "God's nature and disposition is never

¹⁸ Sermon on Romans 9:18, *Works, II*, 854.

¹⁹ Sermon on Numbers 23:19; Yale MSS, pp. 2-9.

changed.” Such a change in God would imply a dependency upon a cause outside of Himself, a situation Edwards would utterly reject.

In a note in his “Interleaved Bible” on 2 Samuel 23:5 concerning the certainty of the “everlasting covenant,” Edwards sees “an illusion to a legal ordering of a covenant bond . . . so ordered every way according to law that there is no flaw or defects or room for any evasion.”²⁰ As is often the case, the practical application is not separated from the doctrine but a part of it. On the one hand sinners should be awakened to the fact that God’s threatenings are for real and change not; on the other hand there is comfort in the certainty of the promises.²¹

In the covenant of grace the attribute of righteousness brings joy and certainty of salvation, rather than terror and certainty of damnation. The arbitrariness and unsearchableness of the Almighty is within certain defined areas, limited by God Himself. He binds Himself to a rule that is self-imposed. In “Miscellany” No. 453 Edwards writes:

The righteousness of a judge consists in his judgment according to law, or to the rule of judgment which has been fixed by rightful legislators But God, in the blessings He adjudges to His people, judges according to the fixed rule of judgment which is His covenant. God shows His holiness by fulfilling His promises to His people. God’s faithfulness is part of His holiness, and this is what is meant by righteousness.²²

Without infringing His sovereignty God establishes a covenant relationship with the elect. They are, as it were, given a bill of inviolable rights, but the provision, the condition, and the fulfillment of the condition all originate in the sovereign and gracious plan of God.

In the beginning of “A History of the Work of Redemption” Edwards attributes the happiness of the church to the covenant of grace, but he makes it clear that this is dependent upon God’s “righteousness” in fulfilling the covenant. Though he emphasizes that in the first instance it was “free and sovereign grace,” a grace “altogether undeserved,” that provided the covenant and its blessings, “yet as God has been pleased, by the promises of the covenant of grace, to bind himself to bestow them, they are bestowed in the exercise of God’s righteousness or justice.”²³

This in no way denies the fact that Edwards explicitly denies that God is indebted to man. In his discourse on “Justification by Faith Alone” Edwards emphatically teaches “that justification respects a man as ungodly.”²⁴ The sinner is justified as sinner, not as righteous. If

²⁰ “Interleaved Bible,” Yale MSS, p. 258.

²¹ Sermon on Numbers 23:19, Yale MSS, pp. 14-16.

²² In *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from his Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend, (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press, 1955), p. 184.

²³ “A History of the Work of Redemption,” *Works*, I, 533.

²⁴ “Justification by Faith Alone,” *Works*, I, 622.

the sinner wants to speak to God about debts, the result is disastrous. In a sermon on Romans 3:19, “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners,” Edwards teaches that God is under no obligation to redeem any sinner and that He could justly decide to save none.²⁵ Thus God was not bound to save anyone. In a sermon on Psalm 46:10 with the published title, “The Sole Consideration, that God Is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty,” Edwards says objecting to God saving some and not others is based on a wrong view of sovereignty.

With this sinners often quarrel; but they who upon this ground quarrel with God, suppose him to be *bound* to bestow his grace on sinners. For if he be bound to none, then he may take his choice, and bestow it on whom he pleases; and his bestowing it on some brings no obligation on him to bestow it on others. Has God no right to his own grace? . . . for a person cannot make a present of that which is not his own, or in his own right. It is impossible to *give a debt*.²⁶

Here is Calvinism with its unconditional election.

Yet as we have already seen, such disavowal of God owing salvation to sinners in no way caused Edwards to throw out the covenant concept or the notion of debt and boundness inherent in it. Man may “challenge salvation” from God in faith not because man deserves it but because God promised it. The very faith in which salvation is “challenged” or “demanded” from God is a faith the essence of which is acknowledgment that God was under no obligation to save.

The Christological foundation is very evident in Edwards’ writing. It was clear in the covenant of redemption which presupposes the covenant of grace, and it was evident in the ongoing validity of the covenant of works which only Christ fulfills. The sinner who by faith demands salvation does so only through Christ. His union with Christ provides the believer with the perfect holiness – and imputed holiness – which God must reward with salvation since He is just and righteous.

The binding of God in relation to His sovereignty and its Christological foundation is seen in the sermon on Romans 9:18:

. . . God’s sovereignty in the salvation of men implies . . . that God can either bestow salvation on any of the children of men, or refuse it, without any prejudice to the glory of any of his attributes, except where he had been pleased to declare, that he will or will not bestow it Concerning some, God has been pleased to declare either that he will or that he will not bestow salvation on them; and this to bind himself by his own promise But God exercised his sovereignty in making these declarations. God was not obligated to promise that he would save all who believe in Christ But it pleased him so to declare.²⁷

²⁵ “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners,” *Works, I*, 668-679.

²⁶ Sermon on Psalm 46:10, *Works, II*, 110.

²⁷ Sermon on Romans 9:18, *Works, II*, 850.

In a manuscript sermon on John 3:8 Edwards refers to the covenant of redemption in which the elect “are spoken of as given in Christ before they are converted. John 17:2 . . . And so God’s grace is said to be given to the elect in Christ before the world began. 2 Timothy 1:9.”²⁸ Edwards here indicates the priority of election even with regard to the covenant of redemption.

But however the persons of the Trinity may be obligated one to another, that obligation is only within God himself. But he lies under no obligation to any creature

And with respect to those hidden promises of the Father to the Son in the covenant of redemption, God is arbitrary in them. The Father was under no obligation to make such promises to the Son of conversion to such and such persons.²⁹

In the sermon on Deuteronomy 32:35, where the plight of sinners in the hands of an angry God is vividly set forth, Edwards makes it very clear that God is under no obligation “to keep any natural man out of hell one moment.” Outside of the covenant of grace they “are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell,” and because God is not obligated, in the words of the text, “their foot shall slide in due time.” Here is some of what Edwards says in this sermon:

God has laid himself under *no obligation*, by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell one moment. God certainly has made no promises either of eternal life . . . but what are contained in the covenant of grace, the promises that are given in Christ, in whom all the promises are yea and amen. But surely they have no interest in the promises of the covenant of grace who are not the children of the covenant, who do not believe in any of the promises, and have no interest in the Mediator of the covenant.

. . . Whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, . . . God is under no manner of obligation . . .

. . . Neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment All that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance, of an incensed God.³⁰

The application begins with the statement: “[such]is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ.” The ever present assumption in Edwards’ covenantal theology is that “in Christ,” in the covenant of grace, God has obligated Himself. There is no hope outside of that covenant; there is certain hope within it. Because of the infinite condescension of God in Christ, sinful man can enter into a covenant relationship with the Creator. The Creator was under no obligation, but He willingly bound Himself and became obligated to the covenant of grace. This self binding of God in the covenant brings the assurance motif to light. Edwards writes in *Religious Affections*:

²⁸ Sermon on John 3:8, Yale MSS, p. 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sermon on Deuteronomy 32:35, *Works, II*, 9.

And the nature of the covenant of grace, and God's declared ends in the appointment and constitution of things in that covenant, do plainly show it to be God's design to make ample provision for the saints having an assured hope of eternal life, while living here upon earth.³¹

He refers to Hebrews 6:18 which states "it was impossible for God to lie" and speaks of the command to Christians to obtain assurance.

The manuscript sermon on Isaiah 55:3 states that "the excellency of this covenant and the great desirableness of an interest in its blessings is set forth here by two things: 1) that it is an everlasting covenant, and 2) that the mercies promised in it are sure."³² In a manuscript sermon on Psalm 111:5, having indicated how God is faithful in fulfilling the covenant engagements, he states the primary application is "confidently to trust God."³³

Without the covenant "binding" God there would be no assurance. But because of that covenant, because it depends solely on Christ, there is certainty. Edwards sees the certainty of salvation via the covenant as illustrative of the "Wisdom of God."

Yea, it is so ordered now that the glory of these attributes *requires* the salvation of those that believe. The justice of God that required man's damnation, and seemed inconsistent with his salvation, now as much required the salvation of those that believe in Christ, as ever before it required their damnation. Salvation is an absolute debt to the believer from God, so that he may in justice demand it, on account of what his surety has done It is a thing that may be challenged And again, the believer may demand eternal life, because it has been merited by Christ, by a merit of condignity Justice that seemed to require man's destruction, now requires his salvation.³⁴

Strong as Edwards makes this language, it is never a reason for presumption. All is of grace, even the assurance that the covenant provides.

In a sermon on 2 Samuel 23:5 Edwards declares: "'Tis only through our unbelief and our sinful . . . disposition of heart that we stand in need of . . . confirmation."³⁵ But faith which is covenant faith is not something we bring in our hands as our contribution to the covenant. True faith understands the covenant and by grace knows that the decision does not rest with us.

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John Smith, Vol. II of *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller and John Smith, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 169.

³² Sermon on Isaiah 55:3, Yale MSS, p. 2.

³³ Sermon on Psalm 111:5, Yale MSS, pp. 8-10.

³⁴ Sermon on Ephesians 3:10, *Works, II*, 149.

³⁵ Sermon on 2 Samuel 23:5, Yale MSS, p. 18.

Justification is by faith alone precisely because justification is by works. Edwards as a Puritan defender of solifidianism believed the only ground for justification is actual righteousness, without which none will inherit eternal life. Justification by faith is really justification by the works Christ did for us. In that context Edwards writes, “God will neither look on Christ’s merits as ours, nor adjudge his benefits to us, till we be in Christ: nor will he look upon us as being in him, without an active union of our hearts and souls to him.”³⁶

Apart from union with Christ in the covenant of grace by which the sinner and Christ are looked upon as one person, there would be no righteousness in any creature, and none would ever be justified. Justification is by faith alone because faith alone unites the sinner with Christ. The blessing of the covenant of grace, analogous to the marriage covenant, is that all our sin and unrighteousness are Christ’s, and all His blessings and righteousness are ours. Those who have fulfilled the condition of the covenant of grace, who by faith are united with Jesus Christ, may know with certainty of God’s Word, which cannot lie, that they shall inherit eternal life.

³⁶ “Justification by Faith Alone,” *Works, I*, 627.