

God's Flamming Glory – Post 15 – God's Glory in Dependence, According to Jonathan Edwards

In the last post, we saw the glory of God in the believer's union in Christ. That union is the marrow of Christian existence. Now we will see the blood that runs through the veins of the Christian: trust in God. This, too, reveals the glory of God.

God's Glory in Dependence

This union was the foundation for Edwards' view of sanctification, and the whole of the Christian life. Union with Christ produces ever-increasing closeness to Him and conformity to Him. In this union, Christians see and cherish the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The Spirit indwells believers and transforms them, not by self-effort (the flesh) but by faith in Jesus through the Spirit's work in the heart. This faith, or *dependence* or *reliance* on God, was central to an individual's union with Christ at the inception of spiritual life:

we have from time to time the glorious bridegroom exhibiting Himself with His great love that is stronger than death, appearing clothed in robes of grace, and engaging Himself, with all His glory and love, and its infinite benefits, to be theirs, who receive Him: and here we have His spouse accepting this bridegroom, choosing Him for her friend, her only Saviour and portion, and *relying* on Him for all His benefits¹

It seems, however, that many readers and scholars of Jonathan Edwards today have lost sight of this. Instead of seeing Edwards' doctrine of growth in Christlikeness (his doctrine of sanctification) as founded centrally on *dependence* upon God, they see him as emphasizing *discipline*. After all, is it not true that one of the things Edwards is famous for is his list of

¹ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1816. Emphasis mine.

resolutions that focused on his own, disciplined effort?² Yes; but this *emphasis* is assumed and misplaced. Edwards undeniably emphasized discipline as vital in the Christian life, but discipline was *subsidiary* to something more essential to Christian growth.³ Because God's glory is not centrally *theatrical* but essentially *relational*, performance cannot glorify or please Him. Only dependence can do that (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 8:8). And dependence is where Edwards emphasis rests, first and foremost.⁴

Faith, Edwards thought, "is not working; it is looking."⁵ Neither affections (pleasure in God or love for others), nor performance-obedience, nor self-centered and self-dependent faith can unite us to Christ so that we are justified or indwelt. No, it is the union with Christ in the Spirit *by the faith which the Spirit gives*, that justifies sinners and glorifies God. From that union the Christian grows in both likeness and nearness to Christ.

This was Edwards' central doctrine of Christian growth and the way in which God is glorified: "God is glorified in the work of redemption in this, that there appears in it so absolute

² Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 24-30.

³ Edwards did, in fact, often lose his balance in this area. The contention of this essay is not that Edwards always maintained an emphasis on *dependence* rather than *performance*; nor that throughout the corpus of his work kept *dependence* rather than self-effort as the "dominate theme in his theology of the Christian life" [Dane Ortlund (2014). *Edwards on the Christian Life*. Crossway. Wheaton, Illinois. p. 179]; nor that his doctrine of sanctification sometimes seems devoid of dependence for godliness itself. In this way, those theologians who make the aforementioned claim have good reason to do so, especially when comparing Edwards to Martin Luther or David Brainerd, as Dane Ortlund does excellently in his book [Dane Ortlund (2014). *Edwards on the Christian Life*. Crossway. Wheaton, Illinois. p. 182-184]. The contention of this essay is that Edwards' theology is generally inclined towards dependence on God in every context. Though it did not surface as often in his theology as his theology should have produced it, and though often Edwards' dominate theme may well have been an efforts-based approach to godliness, dependence is the silver-vein running throughout *all* of his theology.

⁴ Other theologians have held this view. God being glorified by dependence rather than performance was not a novel doctrine of Edwards' making. Take Thomas Goodwin's remarks, for example: "Who ever thought He should choose to match so low as with us? All this makes for us still the more love, for it was the more free. And the more unlikely it is that He could love such as we, the more His love is commended. The less we could do for Him or for ourselves, the more it would appear He did for us. He is honoured more in our dependence than our service. He hath regard to the lowness of his spouse and handmaids, and lets the mighty go, principalities and powers..." [Thomas Goodwin (n.d.). *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D., Volume 5*. John Greig and Son. Old Physic Gardens, Edinburgh. p. 14].

⁵ Dane Ortlund (2014). *Edwards on the Christian Life*. Crossway. Wheaton, Illinois. p. 139.

and universal a dependence of the redeemed on Him.”⁶ This dependence is both *absolute* and *universal*. The Christian life, from before conversion and continuing after their glorification, is of an entirely dependent nature in every way. Furthermore, it is a

dependence on each person in the Trinity for all our good. We are *dependent* on Christ the Son of God, as He is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. We are *dependent* on the Father, who has given us Christ, and made Him to be these things to us. We are *dependent* on the Holy Ghost, for it is of Him that we are in Christ Jesus; it is the Spirit of God that gives faith in Him, whereby we receive Him, and close with Him.⁷

As has already been shown, in redemption, God is to be glorified in such a way that no one else should glory in their own efforts in His presence.⁸ He alone is to be depended upon and gloried in so that His saints might participate in His glory. And in redemption, Edwards included “converting, justifying, sanctifying and glorifying them.”⁹ In short, nothing that is true of the Christian in Christ is outside the sphere of God’s redemption. Therefore, the Christian life is God glorifying because nothing is true of the Christian outside of dependence on the “great God and Savior Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13 ESV). His glory is their life in Christ.

In the Fall of man, mankind was brought into ruin and death through sin. But “The design of God was, to restore the soul of man to life and the divine image in conversion, to carry on the

⁶ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 6.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 6. Emphasis mine.

⁸ Edwards emphasized this point often: “It seems to have been very much on this account, that it was requisite the doctrine of the Trinity itself should be revealed to us; that by a discovery of the concern of the several divine persons in the great affair of our salvation, we might the better understand and see how all our dependence in this affair is on God, and our sufficiency all in him, and not in ourselves; that he is all in all in this business, agreeable to 1 Corinthians 1: 29-31” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2372].

⁹ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2044.

change in sanctification, and to perfect it in glory.”¹⁰ This sanctification, this progression towards Christlikeness, is no more the work of human effort than is conversion, or that work of being glorified and made perfect. It depends on Christ and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The Christian responds in continuing faith, said Edwards, which by the Spirit in them bears the fruit of obedient discipline as “instituted by Christ.”¹²

This is why everything in the Christian life is to be done in Christ’s Name, which means that it is done “in a dependence on Him as [the Christians] head and mediator, and... for His glory.”¹³ Furthermore, all growth in discipline for Christlikeness is the “sanctifying influence of the Spirit of God,” who works in the heart to bring about repentance (a change of affections)¹⁴ and faith (the soul casting itself on Christ). That is “the chief excellency” of the saints on earth: to have “the Holy Spirit given in His sanctifying influences.”¹⁵ These “sanctifying influences” consist primarily in participation with the Trinity, and particularly in participation in the Spirit of holiness. For, as it is impossible to be in water and not be affected by it; or be in fire and not be consumed by it; so it is impossible for the Spirit to be in the believer and not make the believer holier through communion with the whole Triune God. As Edwards wrote,

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2046.

¹¹ For this reason “Every man is as his God is” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 281].

¹² Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 322.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1704.

¹⁴ “The sanctifying influence of the Spirit of God rectifies the taste of the soul, whereby it savours those things that are of God, and naturally relishes and delights in those things that are holy and agreeable to God’s mind; and, like one of a distinguishing taste, it chooses those things that are good and wholesome, and rejects those that are evil” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1669].

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1667.

the Spirit of God, dwelling as a vital principle in the souls... communicates himself in his own proper nature. Holiness is the nature of the Spirit of God, therefore he is called in Scripture the Holy Ghost. Holiness, which is as it were the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature, is as much the proper nature of the Holy Spirit, as heat is the nature of fire, or sweetness was the nature of that holy anointing oil... The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of the saints, that he there, as a seed or spring of life, exerts and communicates himself, in this His sweet and divine nature. He makes the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ, in thus having the communion or participation of the Holy Ghost.¹⁶

Thus, the Triune God's greatest good (the Spirit) is imparted by the will of the Father in union in Christ. The Spirit unites believers to Christ through faith, and transforms them through reliance upon their God and Savior. Apart from all human merit, God saves sinners. Apart from all demerit, God gives them greater likeness to Christ and nearness to Him. He ordained to do so in His great design of redemption, and in *this* way to glorify Himself in all three Persons, sanctify His people, and bring His elect to participate in His glory.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1280.