

Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Original Sin

Jonathan Edwards' treatise "The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended" begins with the following definition:

"By original sin, as the phrase is most commonly used by divines, is meant the innate sinful depravity of the heart. But yet when the doctrine of original sin is spoken of, it is vulgarly understood in that latitude, as to include not only the depravity of nature, but the imputation of Adam's first sin; or in other words the liableness or exposedness of Adam's posterity, in the divine judgment, to partake of the punishment of that sin."¹

This paper will outline Edwards' understanding of these elements of "original sin", particularly as set forth in his treatise on the subject. Edwards very much affirms that humanity as a whole is both inclined towards sin, and also guilty of and punishable for the first sin of Adam. Edwards also discusses how these two truths relate to each other.

The human nature of Adam

Central to Edwards' understanding of original sin is the idea of a human nature or inclination. This is the principle that governs all the choices of a human being,

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, Clyde A. Holbrook ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 107.

disposing a person towards certain choices and conduct, whether good or bad.² Such a propensity or inclination makes it “necessary” that a person act in a certain way.³ Edwards refers both to human “affections” and “instincts” in order to explain why this should be so. Sometimes a person will simply do what they desire to do. At other times they might not be conscious of making a deliberate choice, but will simply act on instinct. In either case the person’s choices will flow from the underlying (and preceding) inclinations of their heart. Such inclinations make up what could be called a human “nature.”⁴

In Edwards’ view, God created the first two human beings with a “moral rectitude of heart”, meaning that from the very beginning they possessed a good and holy nature.⁵ However, when Adam was led into “delusion and error” in the Garden of Eden, a new inclination arose in his heart, disposing him to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁶ Adam then proceeded to act in accordance with this new disposition, eating the fruit just as he wished to do.

In Edwards view, this new disposition, together with the act that followed from it, constituted a single act of sin which rendered Adam guilty before the Lord and subject to punishment.⁷ In large part this punishment was to be an eternal separation from God in hell. However a more immediate punishment was that the

² Edwards, *Original Sin*, 225.

³ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 221.

⁴ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 231.

⁵ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 223.

⁶ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 228 footnote 6.

⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390.

Lord confirmed the new inclination in Adam's heart, so that it remained in him as an established principle.⁸ Thereafter Adam was not able to choose, by his own effort, to act rightly again. Nor was he able to recover the original inclination towards righteousness which he had lost.

A difficulty in Edwards' doctrine here is in explaining how it was that an inclination towards good in Adam should have allowed for the arising of an opposite inclination towards evil.⁹ Edwards does not deal at length with the point, acknowledging that some degree of "mystery may be supposed in the affair."¹⁰ Edwards seems to have believed that there was something transitory about the inclinations in Adam and Eve as originally created, such that it was possible for them to fall away under the influence of new ones. Indeed Edwards elsewhere speculates as to possibility of a later point of "confirmation" after which it would

⁸ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390. According to Edwards, God confirmed the inclination by withdrawing the "spiritual, holy and divine" principles which he had originally placed in Adam in order to keep his natural human appetites in check. These "inferior" appetites would not have caused Adam to sin as long as the "superior" principles remained in place. Once God withdrew them, however, Adam "set up himself, and the objects of his private affections and appetites, as supreme; and so they took the place of God." Edwards appears to develop this distinction between inferior and superior principles in order to show that God was able to confirm Adam in his depravity without "putting any evil into his heart, or infusing any corrupt principle...and so becoming the author of depravity". Only the action of withdrawing the superior principles was required. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 381-383.

⁹ Sam Storms, "The Will: Fettered Yet Free (Freedom of the Will)" in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*. John Piper and Justin Taylor eds. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004), 214. Holbrook, in his introduction to the Yale edition of *Original Sin*, states that Edwards ends "lamely" in his discussion of this point. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 52.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 394.

have been impossible for Adam to sin.¹¹ Clearly, however, Adam and Eve had not yet reached this point at the time they ate the forbidden fruit.

A similar difficulty would be why, once a new nature had arisen in Adam, it would have been necessary for the Lord to exert a positive act of judgment in order to confirm it. Elsewhere, Edwards states that a “nature is an abiding thing”, suggesting that it would have continued in Adam without any action on the Lord’s part.¹² Nevertheless, Edwards states in his treatise that:

“The depraved disposition of Adam’s heart is to be considered two ways (1) As the first rising of an evil inclination in his heart, exerted in this first act of sin, and the ground of the complete transgression. (2) An evil disposition of heart continuing afterwards, as a confirmed principle, that came by God’s forsaking him, which was a punishment of his first transgression.”¹³

The nature of humanity generally

Edwards goes on to show how the human race as a whole was affected by this sin, with the result that every human thereafter (with the exception of Christ) would have an “innate depravity of heart”, and also be liable to “partake of the punishment of that sin.”

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies No 501-832*. Revised edition. Ava Chamberlain ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 51.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*. John E. Smith ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 341.

¹³ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390.

Crucial to Edwards on this point is his view that Adam and his descendants together constituted one metaphysical unity, such that in a very real sense they were, and are, one.¹⁴ Edwards thus speaks of a “union” or “identity” between Adam and the human race.¹⁵ He uses the illustration of a tree to explain how this might be so. Just as a tree has a root and many branches (yet is one tree), so Adam and his posterity are one, with Adam the root and his descendants the many branches.¹⁶ This is the case notwithstanding that Adam and his descendants have lived in different places and at different times.¹⁷

Edwards admits to some mystery here too, noting that the Lord who established such a union “gives none account of any of his matters”, and is one “whose ways are beyond finding out”.¹⁸ Edwards essentially bases his view on scripture, particularly Romans chapter 5 and Genesis chapters 1-3, which he interprets as revealing that all of humanity was essentially *in Adam* when God dealt with him in the Garden of Eden.¹⁹

Edwards also appeals to a subtle metaphysical argument concerning the nature of personal identity, arguing that the moral union God established between Adam and his posterity is essentially no different to the moral union he establishes between

¹⁴ Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 161.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390-1.

¹⁶ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 389.

¹⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 392 (note).

¹⁸ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 409.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 260, 346.

all the different moments of a person's life.²⁰ In Edwards view, God is not able simply to create something and then let it continue in existence without any further creative activity on his part.²¹ Each new moment of the thing's existence requires a new creation as it were. In the case of a human being, God joins each new moment to the old one, such that a continuous identity exists, and inclinations in one moment will carry over into the next. Similarly, when God creates a new human being, he joins that person into a union with Adam, so that Adam's inclinations flow through to his descendants.

Edwards might perhaps be criticized on this point for attempting to explain things which the Bible is content to leave unexplained. Edwards certainly reveals the age in which he lived – one where so called “rational” thinking was highly prized in both religious and philosophical circles.²² His theory of the union of Adam and humanity nevertheless enables him to explain how the sinful inclinations arising in Adam came to be shared by his posterity. Because Adam and his descendants essentially coexisted, just as the root and branches of a tree would co-exist, any pollution in Adam naturally extended to his descendants. It was “as if, in every step of proceedings, every alteration in the root had been attended, at the same

²⁰ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 397-405.

²¹ Paul Helm, “A Forensic Dilemma: John Locke and Jonathan Edwards on Personal Identity”, in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*. Paul Helm and Oliver eds. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 54.

²² George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 435.

instant, with the same steps and alterations throughout the whole tree, in each individual branch”.²³

Therefore, when Adam first inclined to eat the forbidden fruit, the hearts of all his descendants inclined to eat the fruit also. And when, shortly afterwards, the Lord confirmed this first evil inclination in Adam, he confirmed it (through Adam) in all his descendants as well.²⁴ Consequently the whole human race would be born not just with a transient tendency to sin (which might be resisted or reversed), but a fixed and settled propensity to sin – one which could only be reversed by the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ. In this manner Edwards deals with the first limb of his definition of original sin – that all humanity shares “an innate sinful depravity of the heart.”

The guilt and punishment of Adam’s sin

The preceding analysis also enables Edwards to explain how Adam’s sin could be “imputed” to all of humanity, such that every human being could be justly punished for that sin. Here Edwards deals with the persistent problem of how a person can be rightly punished for a sin which they did not personally and individually commit.

²³ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 389-90.

²⁴ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390.

Edwards' answer, essentially, is that when Adam was willingly eating the fruit, all his descendants were willingly consenting to his doing it.²⁵ Each individual gave their full concurrence to what he was doing, and thoroughly approved of his action.²⁶ This, as we have seen, is because their hearts were joined with Adam's in a moral union which God had established, such that any inclination in Adam's heart naturally and instantly flowed through to theirs.

Consequently Edwards claims that Adam's descendants actually "participated" in Adam's sin²⁷. With respect to the imputation, therefore, Edwards is able to say that "the sin...is not theirs, merely because God imputes it to them; but it is truly and properly theirs, and on that ground, God imputes it to them."²⁸

At least in his treatise *Original Sin*, Edwards seems to fall short of saying that Adam's descendants actually ate the forbidden fruit with him.²⁹ For Edwards their offence seems to be one of *approving* of the action rather than actually doing it. On the question of justice, Edwards seems content to view such approval as the moral equivalent of actually committing the deed.

²⁵ Oliver Crisp, "On the Theological Pedigree of Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Imputation", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003), 323-4.

²⁶ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 391.

²⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 391.

²⁸ Edwards, *Original Sin*, 408.

²⁹ Gerstner cites an earlier sermon in which Edwards states that humanity did eat the fruit with Adam, making his failure to mention the point in his treatise something of a curiosity. It is possible that Edwards had refined his thinking on the point by the time of writing, particularly given that he completed it within the last year of his life. John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 1992), 327.

Edwards' view compared to others

Much later analysis of Edwards' doctrine has focused on the extent to which he lends support to various established schools of thought in the matter of original sin.³⁰ An analysis of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, however a brief comparison may assist in clarifying Edwards' view.

Firstly, Edwards' doctrine appears to be somewhat different from what is usually known as the "realist" understanding of the unity between Adam and humanity. On this understanding, humanity consisted of a single human nature which was initially reposed entirely in Adam. This nature was then individualized as more and more people were born, such that it eventually spread throughout the globe.³¹ In a very real sense, therefore, the "nature" of each individual was in Adam when he sinned, and consequently each individual ate the fruit just as much as Adam did.

Edwards by contrast sees the union of Adam and humanity as a number of different people all joined together, rather than one individual essentially being

³⁰ For example Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, reprinted 1982), 207; Benjamin B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology: Volume 9, Works of Benjamin B Warfield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 530.

³¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 158.

split apart.³² Hence, as we have seen, Edwards seems to fall short of saying that each individual human actually ate the forbidden fruit.

Furthermore, Edwards holds that humanity's willingness to approve of Adam's action was itself a consequence of Adam's willingness to undertake the action. As the root of the tree Adam's sinful inclination *caused* the corresponding sinful inclination in all the tree's branches. On the realist view, however, no single person's inclination could be said to have caused the sinful inclination of any other. It would be more accurate, on this view, to say that every individual *jointly* inclined to sin in Adam.

Edwards' view is also somewhat different to the theory of immediate imputation offered by proponents of the so called "federal" view of the union between Adam and humanity. On this view, Adam stood as a representative of humanity under a legal covenant ordained by God, one where God promised to give to Adam's descendants whatever Adam merited on their behalf.³³ If Adam obeyed, then he would earn for them eternal life. If he disobeyed, then he would earn for them eternal ruin and punishment.

On this view, once Adam sinned then God immediately counted Adam's descendants guilty of the sin, and decided that each individual should be punished

³² W.G.T Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology, Volume 2*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 32.

³³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 242.

for it. Part of the punishment would be suffering to be born with an innate depravity of heart.

This view is similar to that of Edwards in that, as we have seen, Edwards holds that God only confirmed humanity's depravity of heart *after* Adam had sinned. But it will be remembered that on Edwards view, a sinful inclination had already arisen in the hearts of humanity even before such a confirmation occurred. This was the somewhat transient inclination which originally disposed Adam's descendants to endorse his action of eating the fruit. This for Edwards, was the basis of God's imputation of the sin to them.

On the federal view, however, there was no initial phase in the sinfulness of humanity that would correspond with the first rising of an evil inclination in Adam's heart.³⁴ This is because, on the federal view, there was no *organic* union between Adam and humanity such that his sinful inclination would naturally and immediately flow through to them. There was only a *legal* union between Adam and his descendants, one in which God had bound himself to punish them for his sin. Hence no sinful inclination entered the hearts of humanity until God executed the terms of that legal covenant.

³⁴ This at least is the case according to common renderings of the federal view of immediate imputation. Murray, however, articulates the view such as to bring Edwards' view within it. John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1959), 60.

Consequently, on the federal view, humanity is corrupt because it was first counted guilty of Adam's sin.³⁵ For Edwards however, humanity is guilty because, in an initial stage of corruption, it endorsed and thus participated in Adam's first sin.

Evaluation

Edwards' doctrine of original sin is remarkable for its comprehensiveness. He attempts to answer all possible objections, resorting to some innovative theories in order to explain certain elements of the doctrine.

As noted above, Edwards in this regard could perhaps be criticized for overly seeking to cater for the desire of his age to understand every matter in its entirety. Considered overall, however, Edwards' doctrine is commendable for the way in which it seeks to uphold the various biblical tensions in the doctrine. In particular, Edwards seems content to accept that the imputation of Adam's sin is just and reasonable simply on the basis of humanity's willing approval of Adam's action. As noted above, this is despite the fact that, at least on Edwards view, humanity's willing approval was itself caused by Adam's original inclination.

³⁵ Crisp, *Theological Pedigree of Jonathan Edwards*, 315.

On this point a great many Christians and non-Christians would object that a person cannot be held responsible for an inclination which did not arise by their own choice. Such an objection seems to underlie for example (at least in part), the realist view of imputation discussed above.³⁶ Edwards however, for all his metaphysical ingenuity and desire for deeper understanding, seems steady in his resolve to let the biblical tension on the matter rest where it lies. In that regard, he offers valuable assistance for those wishing to conform their own understanding of original sin to that of the Bible.

³⁶ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 209

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