

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE VIEWS OF
JONATHAN EDWARDS AND JOHN WESLEY
REGARDING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

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PREFACE

In some ways writing this thesis was a disillusioning experience for me. I had tended to hold up Edwards and Wesley as heroes of the faith, shining examples for my future ministry. I now realize acutely that they too were subject to human frailty and weakness. Their polemical activity, in particular, serves as an example of what not to do, rather than vice versa.

Yet in disillusionment I came to two new insights. First, that the doctrine of sovereignty transcends utterly our small human understanding. As Psalm 139 puts it:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for us;
it is high, we cannot attain it.

Second, I realized that finally the Lord Jesus Christ is the only hero of the faith. He is the only reliable, consistent and totally trustworthy example.

I would like to thank Professor C.W. Cook, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity and Professor of Ecclesiastical History, for his valuable guidance, suggestions and comment.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God present a puzzle. On the face of things, both were successful evangelists while both held contrary doctrines of sovereignty. Does this mean that the doctrine of sovereignty is irrelevant? This thesis argues that the doctrine of sovereignty is crucial in evangelism and revival, and that the views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God were in fact very similar. A useful framework for showing this is the Five Points of Calvinism, as well as the doctrines of justification by faith and the omnipotence of God.

CHAPTER I: PREDESTINATION

The polemical writings are different, although one should note that Arminianism in North America was different from Arminianism in England. Their personal writings, correspondence and sermons, however, reveal a similar doctrine of sovereignty.

CHAPTER II: FREE WILL

Again, the difference between Edwards and Wesley on this aspect turns out to be much narrower than generally supposed. Differences are apparent in their polemical writings, but are not as clear-cut as first impressions lead one to believe. In their other writings there is no dichotomy.

CHAPTER III: THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

A small number of polemical passages present opposing ideas to a degree. In the vast majority of their work, Edwards and Wesley strongly affirm both God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

CHAPTER IV: IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Edwards and Wesley both teach irresistible grace. They also both allow, in places, the possibility of resistance. This suggests a similar doctrine of sovereignty.

CHAPTER V: LIMITED ATONEMENT

At first sight, Edwards seems to teach limited atonement, while Wesley embraces the universalist position. On closer examination it becomes apparent that each tried to offer a different theological explanation for an empirical mystery.

CHAPTER VI: THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN

A study of all their writings shows that both Edwards and Wesley held to this doctrine. This indicates a corresponding similarity in their doctrines of sovereignty.

CHAPTER VII: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Both Edwards and Wesley came to explain their experience of sovereign grace by means of the doctrine of justification by faith. In their proclamation of this doctrine, both stressed the sovereignty of God as well as human responsibility.

CHAPTER VIII: THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

The similarity of this doctrine in their writings provides further evidence that their doctrines of sovereignty were not antithetical.

CONCLUSION

The views of Edwards and Wesley regarding sovereignty were similar. There were few alternatives for either. In their experience and proclamation they emphasize both the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. This kind of view of the sovereignty of God is therefore crucial in evangelism and revival. One must be careful, when engaging in controversy over a doctrine of this nature, to conduct the argument in a humble, Christ-like spirit.

INTRODUCTION

The views of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God present a fascinating puzzle. Both were successful evangelists and the ministry of each was associated with revival. In the case of Edwards, revival broke out in New England in 1735 and 1740, forming what has come to be called the First and Second Great Awakenings in North America. Edwards' preaching was used by God to awaken many and to draw them to Christ. As for Wesley, he was a key figure in the eighteenth century Evangelical Awakening in Britain. His preaching also evoked widespread response and his many converts laid the foundation for the eventual formation of Methodist Churches.

The puzzle is this: while both were undoubtedly great evangelists and instrumental in revival, their views regarding the sovereignty of God were seemingly very different. Edwards was supposedly a dyed-in-the-wool Calvinist, over-emphasizing the sovereignty of God and denying free will, while Wesley was a typical Arminian, the defender of the total freedom of the human will in religious decisions.

Edwards, for example, is described in The Encyclopaedia of Christianity¹ as 'first and foremost a Calvinist ... the champion of Reformed theology'. Edward M. Griffin in a recent pamphlet on Edwards² likewise claims that Edwards' idea of faith coincided with the 'Calvinist-Puritan view'.³ In describing Edwards' main ideas, he states:

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1. William Young, 'Jonathan Edwards' in The Encyclopaedia of Christianity (ed. Philip E. Hughes), National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972.
 2. Edward M. Griffin, Jonathan Edwards, University of Minnesota Press, 1964.
 3. Ibid., p.20.

Saving faith, in the Calvinist-Puritan view, is not open to all. In his wisdom, God 'elected' certain of his creatures to salvation. Those not among the chosen 'saints' receive their just damnation; but the elect are not favored because of any merits on their part. Man can do nothing to 'earn' his salvation through his good works; God freely and graciously gives it through Word and Spirit. For his regeneration man must depend entirely upon the will of the sovereign God.⁴

Iain Murray, writing for the Banner of Truth magazine, displays the same heavy emphasis on the Calvinistic tenets held by Edwards:

Moreover, he saw, as Owen before him, that Christianity itself could not long be upheld if concessions were made to accommodate objections to Calvinism.⁵

Perry Miller⁶ perceives the genius of Edwards in the way he applied the new philosophies of Newton and Locke to older problems of religion; but Miller too admits that in the final analysis Edwards' framework was the Calvinist stereotype:

If I read him correctly ... he repays study because, while he speaks from a primitive religious conception (i.e. Calvinism)⁷ which often seems hopelessly out of touch with even his own day ... he speaks from an insight into science and psychology so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him.⁸

For Miller it is only the insight into science and psychology that is important: Edwards' theology is the primitive naïvete of extreme Calvinism.

V.L. Parrington's portrait of Edwards in Main Currents in American Thought⁹ presents the same view:

... drawn away from the stimulating field of philosophy into the arid realm of theology, it was his fate to devote his noble gifts to the thankless task of re-imprisoning the mind of New England within a system from which his nature and his powers summoned him to unshackle it. He

4. Ibid., p.20.

5. Iain Murray, 'Jonathan Edwards' in The Banner of Truth Magazine May 1976, p.35.

6. Perry Miller, Jonathan Edwards, Greenwood Press, 1949.

7. Brackets mine.

8. Miller, op. cit., p.xiii.

9. Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1927, pp. 148-163.

was called to be a transcendental emancipator, but he remained a Calvinist.¹⁰

Parrington's quintessentially liberal exposition, written in the 1920's, is in part responsible for the modern stereotype.

If Edwards is a dyed-in-the-wool Calvinist, Wesley is depicted by many writers as a thorough-going Arminian, whose chief emphasis was the freedom of the will.¹¹

J.P. Gledstone, for example, writes of Wesley as though he was the complete antitype of Calvinism, with a perspective on the sovereignty of God totally different from that of Edwards. Commenting on Wesley's sermon, Free Grace, he says:

... its thrilling denunciations of Calvinistic doctrines almost produce the persuasion that they are as horrible and blasphemous as Wesley believed them to be. The headlong zeal of the preacher allows no time, permits no disposition, to reason. You must go with him; you must check your questions, and listen to him. At the end it seems as if the hated doctrines were for ever consumed in a flame of argument and indignation.¹²

A more modern biographer, V.H.H. Green, writing in 1964, sees the same clearcut antipathy between Wesley and Calvinism:

... the theological position which Wesley adopted and sustained saved Methodism from the sinister dogmatism of the Calvinist theologians ... John Wesley's sage and temperate Arminianism, if not wholly victorious, had at least prevented his religious societies from falling victim to the neo-Calvinist faction.¹³

If these estimates of the views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God are true, the implications for evangelism and revival are startling.

10. Ibid., p.163.

11. With the exception of A. Skevington Wood, who perceives the strong Puritan influence on Wesley, and the way he stressed both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. See A. Skevington Wood, The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist, The Paternoster Press, 1967.

12. Cited by Arnold Dallimore, in George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival, volume 1, Banner of Truth Trust, 1970, p.579.

13. V.H.H. Green, John Wesley, Nelson, 1964, pp.108, 122.

Both were successful evangelists, but the one upheld the sovereignty of God, the other did not. Is an evangelist's conception of God, therefore, simply of no consequence? Is the question of the sovereignty of God in the final analysis irrelevant to revival?

This thesis contends that the matter of the sovereignty of God is crucial in evangelism and revival. Successful evangelism affirms the total sovereignty of God on the one hand, and full human responsibility on the other. An over-emphasis on one aspect of the paradox at the expense of the other will have a crippling effect on revival.

In the second place, this thesis argues that the views of both Edwards and Wesley on this crucial doctrine of sovereignty are much closer than is generally imagined. A careful and honest analysis of all their writings, and not just the polemical works, shows that their views regarding the sovereignty of God were remarkably similar, with each emphasizing both sovereignty and responsibility.

In the light of this, the argument that the evangelists' conception of God is of no consequence, and that the question of the sovereignty of God is irrelevant to revival, is shown to be completely untenable. The sovereignty of God was strongly emphasized by Edwards, but it was also a prominent idea in Wesley. The freedom of the will was defended by Wesley, but human responsibility and agency was stressed just as strongly by Edwards. It was from this twofold emphasis that the evangelistic vision of both men sprang, and it is precisely in this view of sovereignty that the secret of revival lies.

A useful framework for proving the two points of the thesis is an examination of the 'Five Points of Calvinism' (issued by the Council of Dort in 1618) in the writings of both men. These are: predestination and free will (issues raised by the point called 'unconditional regeneration'), the perseverance of the saints,

irresistible grace, limited atonement and total depravity. In addition, attention is given to two vitally related doctrines: justification by faith and the omnipotence of God. These related doctrines ram home the point beyond any doubt whatsoever. The views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God were not antithetical, which suggests in turn that their conception of sovereignty was (and still is) crucial to evangelism and revival.

CHAPTER I

PREDESTINATION

In a consideration of this doctrine, the polemical writings are of crucial importance. It is these that have given rise to the opinion that Edwards is the arch-Calvinist and Wesley the arch-Arminian. In actual fact, a consideration of their other writings shows that in these each affirmed both predestination and free will.

Edwards opted strongly for predestination in his controversy with Arminianism in New England. Of vital significance to a true understanding of Edwards and Wesley is the fact that Arminianism in New England was a completely different kettle of fish from what it was in England. There seems to have been a kind of time-lag, and the 'Arminianism' in New England of Foxcroft, Cooper and Chauncy was more like Deism in England in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. In England, Arminians (such as Wesley and Joseph Fletcher) and Calvinists (such as George Whitefield and Augustus Montagu Toplady) were all products of the same Evangelical Revival, disagreeing tragically only on the issue of Predestination.

Once one has grasped this it is easier to understand Edwards' detailed and powerful defence of predestination against New England Arminianism contained in his work, Concerning the Divine Decrees, and Election in Particular.¹

In the work Edwards draws a distinction between God's secret and His revealed will. It was God's secret will, for example, that Abraham should not sacrifice his son, Isaac, yet His revealed will commanded Abraham to do the deed. Evil

1. The Works, vol. 2, pp.525-543.

is permitted by God:

God decrees from all eternity, to permit all the evil that ever he does permit.²

By conceding God's foreknowledge, Arminians implicitly accept the divine decrees:

The foreknowledge of God will necessarily infer a decree: for God could not foreknow that things would be unless he had decreed they should be.³

Edwards does not state reprobation as categorically as election, but it is implicit in the essay. In criticizing Arminians who accept election but not reprobation he states that God exhorts all men to seek salvation, even though He has predetermined that the reprobate will not be saved:

... for God to warn men to beware of damnation, though he has absolutely determined that they shall not be damned, is exactly parallel with his exhorting men to seek salvation, though he has actually determined that they shall not be saved.⁴

Although Edwards' emphasis on predestination is a very strong one, he does not hold to a supra-lapsarian position. He concedes that God's design to communicate and glorify his goodness and love eternally to a certain number is to be considered as prior to their being and fall.⁵ Nevertheless,

both the decree of election and ... reprobation ... must be considered as consequent to the decrees concerning the creation and fall.⁶

His final position can best be summed up in his own words:

It may be argued from the infinite power and wisdom of God, that nothing can come to pass, but that it must be agreeable to the will and pleasure of God that it should come to pass.⁷

2. Ibid., p.529.

3. Ibid., p.532.

4. Ibid., p.534.

5. Ibid., p.541.

6. Ibid., p.541.

7. Ibid., p.541.

On the other hand, Wesley refutes the doctrine of predestination very forcibly in his theological debates. This polemical purpose sometimes, although not often, creeps into his sermons. The most well-known sermon of this kind is the one entitled Free Grace,⁸ which Wesley had printed and distributed in 1740-1. The sermon was in response to Howell Harris (who was pressing Wesley to openly accept predestination) and George Whitefield (who was supporting the doctrine in his correspondence with Wesley). The vehemence of the sermon sprang from Wesley's fear that an ultra-Calvinistic rigidity might inhibit the progress of the revival.⁹

Free Grace ended up as little more than a disguised polemic. Wesley's reaction to the danger of hyper-Calvinism is so violent that he lapses sometimes into hyper-Arminianism that is not characteristic of the rest of his work. He defines the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination in this way:

... by virtue of an eternal, unchangeable decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned; it being impossible that any of the former should be damned, or that any of the latter should be saved.¹⁰

He draws some telling conclusions from this. The doctrine makes preaching unnecessary. It makes holiness something irrelevant. Its clear-cut, dogmatic and arbitrary nature can fill Christians with pride and destroy their 'meekness and love'.¹¹ It destroys the 'comfort of religion, the happiness of Christianity', and also our zeal for good works; the doctrine also undermines and contradicts God's revelation in Scripture.

Predestination also makes Jesus Christ a 'hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity'. This, for Wesley, is the final straw:

8. Wesley, Works, vol. 7, pp.375-386.

9. Cf. Skevington Wood, op. cit., p.226.

10. Works, vol. 7, pp.375-6.

11. Ibid., pp.376-7.

This is the blasphemy clearly contained in the horrible decree of predestination! And here I fix my foot. On this I join issue with every assertor of it ... I abhor the doctrine of predestination, a doctrine, upon the supposition of which, if one could possibly suppose it for a moment, one might say to our adversary, the devil, 'Thou fool, why dost thou roar about any longer? Thy lying in wait for souls is as needless and useless as our preaching. Hearest thou not ... that God doeth it much more effectually?'¹²

Sentiments similar to these are expounded systematically in only one other sermon, On Predestination. The points made in these sermons are elaborated in greater detail in two polemical essays: Predestination Calmly Considered and A Dialogue Between a Predestinarian and his Friend.¹³ These two essays were written in the 1770's to reply to the militant hyper-Calvinism of the Anglican priest and hymn-writer, Augustus Montagu Toplady.

Edwards deals systematically with predestination only in the essay already referred to, Concerning the Divine Decrees, and also in a sermon called God's Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men.¹⁴

This is a very small portion of the writings of both Wesley and Edwards. Of very great importance, and overwhelming evidence for the basic thrust of this thesis, is that both affirm predestination and free will in the rest of their writings. Space does not permit more than a couple of examples.

The tendency is apparent in their personal writings. In Wesley's Journals, for example, when reflecting upon the debate with Whitefield, he writes:

With regard to ... Unconditional Election, I believe, that God, before the foundation of the world, did unconditionally elect certain persons to do certain works, as Paul to preach the Gospel ... (24th August 1743)

The idea of election to 'certain works' is very similar to Edwards' notion of

12. Ibid., p.383.

13. Wesley, Works, vol. 10, pp.204-266.

14. Edwards, Works, vol. 2, pp.849-855.

predestination. The same stress by Wesley on the sovereignty of God in salvation is evident in the entry for the 13th July 1756:

... God draws many ... to hear his word, and comforts them in hearing ... drawings of God's Spirit touch more hearts ... He now offers grace to all that hear.

The emphasis is on the action of God in initiating the work of salvation. Yet human response is vital as well:

the drawings of God are not followed; and thereby the Spirit of God is grieved: ... Men, once curious to hear, will now draw back ... all who do not savingly believe, have quenched the Spirit of God, ...
(13th July, 1756)

This stress on the sovereignty of God and human responsibility is present also in Edwards' personal writings. There is a tremendous emphasis on the exertion of the will in the many resolutions that abound in his Diary:

Resolved, That I will do whatsoever I think to be most to the glory of God ... Resolved, to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good of mankind in general.¹⁵

At the same time, the total sovereignty of God in salvation and sanctification is also present:

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I humbly entreat him, by his grace, to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake.¹⁶

The account of his conversion shows the same tendency:

... my mind was greatly engaged to spend time reading and meditating on Christ ...¹⁷

This emphasizes the human response; later sovereignty in salvation is stressed:

As I was walking ... there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God as I know not how to express.¹⁸

15. 'Memoirs,' in Works, vol. 1, p.xx.

16. Ibid., p.xx.

17. Ibid., p.xiii.

18. Ibid., p.xiii.

This twofold emphasis is also evident in the correspondence of Edwards and Wesley. The sovereignty of God in salvation, sanctification and in all life pervades Wesley's letters:

God sent her to you in an acceptable time. She came with a good message, and blessed is he that believeth; for there shall be a performance of those things which were spoken unto her. He will water you every moment, and on this depends the continuance of the great salvation.¹⁹

There follows human responsibility:

It will surely continue if you watch and pray.²⁰

Edwards likewise emphasizes both sides of the paradox in a beautiful letter to his son. First, total sovereignty:

Till you have savingly believed in Christ, all your desires and pains and prayers lay God under no obligation; and if they were ten thousand times as great as they are, you must still know, that you would be in the hands of a sovereign God, who hath mercy on whom he will have mercy.²¹

Then responsibility:

God makes it your duty to pray to him for mercy ...²²

The innumerable examples of this tendency in the sermons proves the point conclusively. Consider this statement in Wesley's sermon on justification by faith, strongly implying predestination:

It does not become poor, guilty, sinful worms, who receive whatsoever blessings they enjoy ... of grace, of mere favour, and not of debt, to ask of God the reason for his conduct ... This is the very point on which Paul so strongly insists in the ninth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, viz., That the terms of pardon and acceptance must depend, not on us, but on him that calleth us; that there is no unrighteousness with God, in fixing his own terms, not according to ours, but his own good pleasure; who may justly say,

19. Wesley to Miss D. Perronet, March 30, 1771 (See Works, vol. 14, p.205)

20. Ibid.

21. Edwards to his son Timothy, April 1753, in Works, vol. 1, p.clvii.

22. Ibid.

'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy'; namely on him who believeth in Jesus.²³

The strong stress on the total sovereignty of God in salvation in this passage is obvious. Human responsibility is also evident in the final phrase explaining the need for belief in Jesus as the human response to God's grace.

Edwards, in a sermon entitled Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God propounds the idea of election:

God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land ... the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded.²⁴

In the very next paragraph, he implies that his hearers are capable of choice:

Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come ... Let every one fly out of Sodom: 'Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed'.²⁵

It is clear that in their personal writings, their correspondence and their sermons, Edwards and Wesley both accepted predestination and the necessity for choice. It is probable that the heat of debate led each to neglect, in his polemical writing, that part of the paradox which seemed less palatable. Edwards, in the rough, unrefined environment of New England, with its strong Calvinist tradition, opted for predestination. Wesley, a refined scholar and the product, in part, of a deistic, formalistic Anglican Church, aligned himself with the doctrine of free will. Paradoxically Edwards was preaching to a gathered congregation in Northampton while Wesley had taken to the fields. Yet in essence there was little difference between the average churchgoer in New England and the crowds that thronged to hear Wesley, among whom were many respectable, but 'untheological' lay men and women. The case was very different

23. Wesley, Works, vol. 5, p.63.

24. Edwards, Works, vol. 2, p.11.

25. Ibid., p.12.

when it came to writing for publication; in this regard both were obviously very conscious of the clerical and theological nature of their readership. This factor probably explains the striking difference between their systematic theology and kerygmatic theology.

CHAPTER II

FREE WILL

Despite the fact that he is usually associated with an overemphasis on predestination, Edwards accepted human responsibility and agency, stressing that a person must choose to follow Christ or not. His thought is crucial in that, prior to his appearance on the stage, the discussion about predestination and free will had reached an impasse. Lutheranism and Calvinism had hardened into a scholastic rigidity. The response to this in Europe was an outbreak of pietism. In North America the reaction came more in the form of an enlightened rationalism, reminiscent of deism. V.L. Parrington expresses this clash between the hyper-Calvinists and Arminians in New England in the early eighteenth century very well:

... rationalism was in the air, and although it might be excluded from the minister's study, it spread its subtle infection through the mass of the people. The backwash of English deism reached the shores of New England, and by the decade of the forties a movement of liberalism seems to have got under way. The word Arminian sprinkles more freely the pages of controversial literature, indicating the nature of the attack being directed against Calvinism. Dogma was face to face with rationalism.¹

The North American Calvinists claimed that man was not a free agent at all. Opposed to this viewpoint were the Arminians, who claimed that God must allow the essential prerequisites or moral choice. Edwards proposed to redefine the problem in terms consistent with both moral choice and the sovereignty of God in salvation (predestination).

Edwards succeeded in this attempt in his masterly treatise, A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will, Which is

1. V.L. Parrington, op. cit., pp.148-9.

supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame. The treatise was concluded in July 1757, and was aimed at Arminians in general, and 'Dr Whitby', 'Mr Chubb' and 'Dr Watts' in particular.²

In Part One Edwards defines and explains his terms. The will, he claims, is 'that by which the mind chooses anything'.³ The will is determined when, as a result of certain actions and influences, a decision is made. The will is always determined by the greatest apparent good.

Edwards goes on to define the term Necessity, claiming that to say something is necessary means that it is, or will be, 'notwithstanding all opposition'. Philosophical Necessity is 'the full and fixed connexion between the things signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition, which affirms something to be true'. Impossibility is the opposite of necessity; it 'is the same as negative Necessity, or a Necessity that a thing should not be'. The words unable and inability also relate to negative necessity. Contingent indicates 'something which has absolutely no previous ground or reason, with which its existence has any fixed and certain connexion'.

The next phrases that Edwards deals with in his Lockean definition of terms are: 'moral Necessity' and 'natural Necessity'. In his discourse, Edwards uses 'moral Necessity' to mean:

that necessity of connexion and consequence, which arises from such moral causes, as the strength of inclination, or motives, and the connexion which there is in many cases between these and such certain volitions and actions.⁴

In other words, 'moral Necessity' refers to the moral causation behind men's

2. Preface in Works, vol. 1, pp.3-4.

3. Works, vol. 1, p.4.

4. Ibid., p.10.

decisions and actions. By 'natural Necessity' Edwards means 'such Necessity as men are under through natural causes': that is, the role of natural causes in bringing about decisions and actions.

Liberty is defined as 'the power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has, to do as he pleases'. The opposite of liberty occurs when we are hindered from doing 'what we will'. Crucial to his denial of free will is his assertion that it is not proper to talk of the will as being 'free' or not:

And therefore to talk of Liberty, or the contrary, as belonging to the very Will itself, is not to speak good sense; ... the Will itself is not an Agent that has a will: the power of choosing, itself, has not a power of choosing. That which has the power of volition is the man, or the soul, and not the power of volition itself. And he that has the Liberty of doing according to his will, is the Agent who is possessed of the Will; and not the Will which he is possessed of.

The final concept in Edwards' list of definitions is the idea of moral agency:

A moral agent is a being that is capable of those actions that have a moral quality, and which can be properly denominated good or evil in a moral sense, virtuous or vicious, commendable or faulty. To moral agency belongs a moral faculty, or sense of moral good and evil ... a capacity which an agent has of being influenced in his actions by moral inducements or motives, exhibited to the view of understanding and reason, to engage to a conduct agreeable to the moral faculty.⁵

Edwards in this passage is simply acknowledging man's capacity for performing good actions or evil actions. Once this is conceded, the natural and crucial question that arises is how the good action or evil action comes about. How can man become good? This was the heart of the Pelagian controversy fourteen centuries earlier, and had raised its head once again.

Having laid the groundwork for the answer to this question by his list of careful definitions, Edwards begins to attack the Arminians in Part Two of his treatise. The whole concept of free will, he claims, does not make sense. A person's exercise of his will is always determined by something outside of that exercise of will. Each decision by the will is determined by the previous decision

5. Ibid., p.12.

and so on, ad infinitum. This proves that the will is in no sense self-determining. Indeed, nothing ever comes into being without a cause.

Edwards proceeds to answer possible objections to this proposition. Does volition then arise without a cause, through the activity of the nature of the soul? No, says Edwards:

God has given power to the soul, sometimes at least, to excite Volitions at its pleasure, according as it chooses. And this certainly supposes, in all such cases, a choice preceding all Volitions which are thus caused, even the first of them.⁶

The essence of this passage is that the choice of 'the soul' is a cause of volition.

In the second place, volition does not come to pass contingently, for everything has some preceding cause:

... it is clearly manifest, that every effect has a necessary connexion with its cause, or with that which is the true ground and reason of its existence. And therefore, if there be no event without a cause, ... then no event whatsoever is contingent.⁷

Moreover, many Arminians concede that the will is determined by the 'understanding'.

How, then, can the will be free? Every act of the will is excited by some motive:

there can be no act of the will, or preference of the mind, without some Motive or inducement, some thing in the mind's view which it aims at, and goes after; so, it is most manifest, that there is no such Liberty in the universe as Arminians insist on.⁸

Edwards agrees that God has foreknowledge of the choices men will make. This is evident, firstly, from God's prediction of events. It is also evident from the fact that if God does not foreknow the 'volitions of moral agents', He could

6. Ibid., p.12.

7. Ibid., p.24.

8. Ibid., p.30.

not have foreknown the Fall, or the wonderful events which were to follow. This makes nonsense of such texts as Ephesians 1:4, 2 Timothy 1:9, Ephesians 3:22, Titus 1:8, Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2, even in the sense of 'mere foresight of their virtuous works'.

On the same point, Edwards states that if God does not know what men are going to choose, He must surely repent in a literal sense for what He has done, and be full of disappointment and frustration. This does not accord with the Biblical picture of 'God over all, blessed for evermore'.⁹

If God does not foreknow, it means also that God is constantly changing His mind and that His purposes for creating the world might be frustrated. On the contrary:

It is represented often in Scripture, that God, who made the world for himself, and created it for his pleasure, would infallibly obtain his end in the creation, and in all his works.¹⁰

Edwards goes on to draw a crucial conclusion from the premise of God's foreknowledge. In the case of things which are past, their past existence is necessary; since foreknowledge is a thing with past existence, its existence is also necessary, and the events of foreknowledge must inevitably unfold in history.

In other words, when Arminians accept foreknowledge, they unknowingly also accept predestination:

From what has been observed it is evident, that the absolute decrees of God are no more inconsistent with human liberty, on account of any Necessity of the event, which follows from such decrees, than the absolute Foreknowledge of God.¹¹

9. Ibid., p.35.

10. Ibid., p.35.

11. Ibid., pp.36-37.

Edwards concludes Part Two by emphasizing again that if every act of the will has a cause, then the will can not be free. If every act of the will comes to pass without a cause, then the will 'is necessarily subjected to what accident brings to pass from time to time'. This is inconsistent with the Arminian notion of the freedom of the will, which states 'that the Will's power of determining itself is in its own acts, and being wholly active in it, without passiveness'.¹²

In Part Three Edwards turns his attention to whether the Arminian doctrine of 'freedom of the will' is necessary to 'moral agency, virtue and vice, praise and dispraise'. He begins by proving the fact that God's moral excellency is necessary, yet it is also virtuous and praiseworthy; it was likewise necessary that the acts of the human soul of Jesus Christ were holy; yet these, while necessary, were truly virtuous, praiseworthy and rewardable.

In answer to Dr Whitby's assertion that culpability depends on a man's power to perform or not to perform a particular deed ('no man is blameworthy for not doing what he could not do') Edwards claims that, if this is true, then Judas was blameless after Christ had 'given him over, and declared his certain damnation'.

He also answers the Arminian objection that it is absurd that God should give commands, when men are unable to obey. Edwards claims that the will itself, and not only the actions stemming from the will, is the object of God's commands. Obedience is the submitting of the will to the will of another. If the soul determines all its acts of will, it is not subject to any command or moral government. His argument is that of Luther's in the Bondage of the Will: good actions are the fruits of a good will, yielded to God. If the 'first and determining act of the will' is contrary to the will of God, the following

12. Ibid., p.40.

acts will also be contrary to His will.

Edwards goes further: if man was morally able, that is, able to obey every command of God, the commands would not be necessary at all:

For if that volition only may be commanded to be, which already is, there could be no use of precept: Commands in all cases would be perfectly vain and impertinent.¹³

Another Arminian argument is that 'some men, though they are not able to perform spiritual duties ... yet may sincerely desire and endeavour after these things; and therefore must be excused'. This is absurd; how can a man sincerely desire to do something, and yet not do it? The will does that which it sincerely desires:

If the soul properly and sincerely falls in with a certain proposed act of Will or choice, the soul therein makes that choice its own. Even as when a moving body falls in with a proposed direction¹⁴ of its motion, that is the same thing as to move in that direction.

Arminians claim also that a virtuous action should be performed in a state of indifference. This is nonsense, says Edwards; if the heart is indifferent, how can it incline itself to perform a virtuous act? Virtuous hearts perform praiseworthy deeds. The influence of motive and inducement also contradicts Arminian notions of the freedom of the will. Therefore, a free will is not necessary for moral agency, virtue and vice, praise and dispraise.

In Part Four Edwards answers further objections to his denial of the freedom of the will. Arminians contend that an evil act lies not in the nature of the act, but in its cause. This is not so, for every cause has another cause behind it, ad infinitum. An act is evil because of its nature, not because of its cause.

13. Ibid., p.50.

14. Ibid., p.51.

Arminians contend, secondly, that man is an agent, and capable of action. Because of this, he cannot be acted upon; he is a free agent. This implies that action has no cause and has no effect, which is 'utterly unintelligible and inconsistent'.¹⁵

Edwards goes on to prove, by repeating what he has already said about the will always having a cause, and the fallacy of the notion of indifference, that moral necessity actually makes more sense than the theory of the freedom of the will.

Another common Arminian question is this: if all things are predestined, why should we use means for obtaining holiness? Edwards' reply is the traditional Calvinist one that God has ordained the means as well.

On the very difficult problem of God and sin, Edwards suggests that the solution is to understand God as permitting, though not authorizing, sin:

if, by the Author of Sin, is meant the permitter, or not a hinderer of sin; and, at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that Sin, if it be permitted or not hindered, will most certainly and infallibly follow: I say, if this be all that is meant, by being the Author of Sin, I do not deny that God is the Author of Sin (though I dislike and reject the phrase).¹⁶

After his systematic and brilliant treatment of almost every possible facet of the problem, Edwards concludes:

The truth of the case is, that if the Scripture plainly taught the opposite doctrines to those that are so much stumbled at, viz. the Arminian doctrine of free Will, and others depending thereon, it would be the greatest of all difficulties that attend the Scriptures.¹⁷

This passage reveals the polemical purpose of the work. The whole treatise

15. Ibid., p.61.

16. Ibid., p.76

17. Ibid., p.89

is coloured by the desire to refute Arminianism, and it is from this source that the defects of the work arise. There is not enough attention given to the mystery of predestination and free will. Sometimes material is included simply to bolster the argument. A good example of this is the way Edwards claims that God's moral excellence is 'necessary' and all must agree that His excellence is good and praiseworthy. Therefore, if moral actions are 'necessary', why need they not also be good and praiseworthy? This syllogistic way of arguing smacks of sophistry. There is an element of truth in his point, but the puzzle and inscrutability of predestination and moral culpability is not given fair treatment. The whole treatise is too logical, too clinical, too much like a collection of neat philosophical parcels. Predestination makes sense of a good deal of religious experience, but when it is abstracted into theological and philosophical propositions the essence of the experience tends to evaporate. Edwards does not abstract his experience all the way; he accepts human agency and moral choice, as well as predestination. In granting the validity of these elements, he is true to experience, ultimately at the expense of hyper-Calvinist logic. And surely hyper-Calvinism is untenable because it does not really take everything into account that needs to be taken into account.

In an estimate of Edwards' doctrine of sovereignty, it would be dishonest to confine oneself to his polemical works. He did not overemphasize predestination. Indeed, the theme of human responsibility is one of the most dominant themes in his non-polemical writing. This is particularly clear in his shorter Discourses, and the majority of his sermons¹⁸ where, incidentally, he and Wesley are most similar. Consider, for example, this earnest and urgent passage:

We are directed to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near (Isaiah 55:6). If you that are hitherto Christless, be not strangely besotted and infatuated, you will by all

18. The very form of preaching implies a response, whatever the response may be or the forms it may take.

means improve such an opportunity as this to get to heaven ... Now is the time to obtain a supply of the necessities of your poor perishing souls! This is the day for sinners that have a mind to be converted before they die ... Now do not stay behind, but press in among the rest!¹⁹

This passage is written as though salvation depended entirely on human effort. Note the numerous persuasive phrases and the strong emphasis on the necessity for choice: 'We are directed to seek', 'Now is the time', 'This is the day', 'Now do not stay behind'.

There are many passages in Wesley which are so similar to this that it is almost impossible to credit that so often their views on sovereignty are considered as poles apart. Take the following exhortation:

Will you be happy here and hereafter; in the world that now is, and in that which is to come? Or will you be miserable here and hereafter, in time and in eternity? What is your choice? Let there be no delay: Now take one or the other! O choose life! ... By the grace of God, now choose that better part which shall never be taken from you ... Go in the name of the Lord, whom ye have chosen, and in the power of his might! In spite of all opposition, from nature, from the world, from all the powers of darkness, still fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life!²⁰

One finds in the above passage the same intense assault on the will as in the passage by Edwards. 'Will you be happy ... or will you be miserable', 'Let there be no delay: Now take one or the other!' 'O choose life ... Now choose that better part', 'Lay hold on eternal life'. In the face of the need of their hearers, Edwards and Wesley forget speculative and philosophical niceties, and maintain a healthy tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

The similarity of these rhetorical passages raises another issue: the logic of persuasion. Rhetoric implies a view of man and the type of persuasion used depends ultimately on our view of the nature of man. Liberal and

19. Edwards, 'Pressing into the Kingdom of God', in Works, vol. 1, p.659.

20. Wesley, 'The Important Question', in Works, vol. 6, p.505.

rational philosophers, for example, imagine that 'reason' is the most effective means of persuasion. Dictators, on the other hand, decide that man is basically an animal and opt for torture. The similarity of the rhetoric of Edwards and Wesley implies that they shared essentially the same view of the nature of man. What this view was will be dealt with in a later chapter.

Wesley does not give nearly so much attention to the concept of free will as does Edwards. It was predestination that he reacted violently against, and which he attacks in his polemical works.

In Thoughts Upon God's Sovereignty, written in the 1740's during the controversy with Whitefield, he touches upon the concept of free will:

... we must absolutely maintain, that God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. But he cannot reward the sun for shining, because the sun is not a free agent. Neither could he reward us, for letting our light shine before men, if we acted as necessarily as the sun. All reward, as well as punishment, pre-supposes free-agency.²¹

This is rather a superficial²² treatment of the subject in comparison with Edwards' exhaustive analysis. Wesley does not really answer Edwards' point about a totally free-agency being impossible. Nor does he come to grips with the question of how sin has affected the will. Like Edwards, he completely ignores one strand of the paradox - a strand which he emphasizes very often elsewhere in his work, that God is, after all, 'over all, blessed for ever'.

In another work, Some Remarks on Mr Hill's Review of all the Doctrines Taught by Mr John Wesley, Wesley comes much closer to Edwards' concept of free will. Mr Hill has accused Wesley's collection of books, The Christian Library, of being full of contradictions. One writer, 'Mr F.', held to free will; Wesley, in the same collection of books, claims Hill 'denied it'. In answer

21. Works, vol. 10, p.362.

22. Although Wesley, as many English intellectuals of the eighteenth century, held 'free will' to be a matter of common sense. But the eighteenth century had its difficulties in deciding what was sense, and how common it really was!

Wesley says:

This may prove that Mr W. contradicts Mr F., but it can never prove that he contradicts himself. But, indeed, both Mr F. and Mr W. absolutely deny natural free-will. We both steadily assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil. Yet we believe that every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.²³

This, especially the phrase that 'the will of man is by nature free only to evil' is precisely what Edwards argues for in his Dissertation.²⁴ Wesley's final sentence in the above paragraph is a bit vague. Is he saying that a person has a 'measure of free will' only after conversion, or that every person, although his will is enslaved, nevertheless has a modicum of free will? If the former, he is not at odds with Edwards at all. If the latter, he is decidedly woolly and unconvincing. The phrase must be taken as a last-ditch attempt to extricate himself, having placed himself squarely in the Calvinist camp.

In an essay, Thoughts Upon Necessity, published in 1774, Wesley gives a more systematic outline of his thoughts on free will. The purpose of the essay is specifically polemic, in reply to the Westminster Assembly, Stoics, and 'modern Calvinists', among whom Wesley includes 'Mr Edwards of New-England'. Wesley rejects the doctrine, firstly, because, if necessity is accepted, 'there can be no moral good or evil; there can be neither virtue or vice, neither good nor bad actions, neither good nor bad passions or tempers'.²⁵

A second reason for Wesley's rejection is that necessity eliminates reward, punishment; praise and blame. Further, there 'can be no judgment to come, and no future rewards and punishments'.²⁶ This in turn undercuts the inspiration of the Bible, which promises future judgment.

23. Wesley, Works, vol. 10, p.392 (emphasis mine).

24. Except that to say the will is 'free' is in fact nonsense, since sin always enslaves.

25. Works, vol. 10, p.463.

26. Ibid., p.464.

Wesley also gives some attention to Edwards' argument that the actions of men are voluntary, but not stemming from a free will. If the will is 'irresistibly impelled ... they are no more blamable for the actions which follow it'.

Wesley here puts his finger on the difficulty of Edwards' position, although it does seem strange coming from him in the light of his earlier acceptance of the bondage of the will in his reply to Mr Hill. There is a paradox involved in the doctrine of sovereignty, which Edwards neglects in his systematic theology. It is so easy to lose sight of subtle and mysterious paradox in the heat of theological debate.

In any case, in Thoughts Upon Necessity, Wesley rejects predestination and advocates a doctrine of free will. He is clearly reacting to the growth of Calvinistic Methodism in Wales and the fierce onslaughts of Toplady against the Arminianism of Wesley's movement.

Wesley's thought on the nature of the will is not complete without a consideration of his other writings as well. The bondage of the will, and the sovereignty of God in salvation, is implied very strongly in much of his other writing. A good example occurs in a sermon entitled, A Caution Against Bigotry, preached before 1747 (see Preface to volume 5 of Works). Wesley is explaining the way the Devil works upon earth:

The prince of darkness rules over his willing subjects. The conqueror holds his captives so much the safer, because they imagine themselves at liberty ... He blinds the eyes of their understanding, so that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ cannot shine upon them. He chains their souls down to earth and hell, with the chains of their own vile affections.²⁷

This is a very strong statement indeed of the bondage of the will and the sovereignty of God in salvation from the supposed champion of its freedom.

27. Works, vol. 5, p.481.

It is simply that in this sermon Wesley is emphasizing the other strand of a paradox, which he was inclined on other occasions to omit in the interests of polemical logic.

Thus the differences between Edwards and Wesley on this issue turn out to be much narrower than generally supposed. The differences appear at first sight clear in the polemical writings, though on examination are much less clear-cut. Edwards accepts the reality of moral choice and human agency; Wesley grows vague about the extent of the freedom of the will. The two in this crucial area are not far apart. In their other writings there is no dichotomy at all.

CHAPTER III

THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

On the question of the perseverance of the saints, the same pattern can be observed as was seen in the discussion of predestination and free will. There are a small number of passages, usually polemical, which do present opposing ideas, to a degree. In the remainder of the writings there is equal stress laid upon calm confidence in God for ultimate salvation and human effort and co-operation in 'persevering to the end'.

Edwards and Wesley each wrote one short treatise on the subject of perseverance, so a comparison of their views on this aspect of God's sovereignty is fairly simple.

Edwards argues that true saints can never fall away:

As persons are commanded and counselled to repent and be converted, though it is already determined whether they shall be converted or no; after the same manner, and with the same propriety, persons are commanded and counselled to persevere, although by their being already converted it is certain they shall persevere.¹

Edwards presents this view in a short tract written in the late 1740's, aimed at combatting the same kind of rationalistic Arminianism which was outlined in Chapter I.

Wesley on the other hand, categorically states that saints can never fall away:

By the saints, I understand, those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience; ... Can any of these so fall from God as to perish everlastingly? ... to the law and the testimony. Let the living oracles decide: On this authority, I believe a saint may fall away; that one who is holy or righteous

1. 'Concerning the Perseverance of the Saints' in Works, vol. 2, p.596.

in the judgment of God himself may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.²

This extract is taken from Wesley's polemical work, Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints, written also in the late 1740's with the Calvinistic Methodists in mind.

Both Edwards and Wesley, in the above quotations, emphasize the opposite strand of a paradox. It is only natural that in defending one point of view, the texts and arguments in favour of the other side are neglected.

Their differing approaches to the question in these two works are characteristic. Edwards defends his position in thirty-one observations, a scholastic mixture of philosophical propositions, explanations and frequent references to Scriptural texts. Wesley launches immediately into a consideration of Scriptural texts.

Thus in discussing the key text Ezekiel 18:24 ('But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity ... shall he live? ... for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die'), Edwards treats perseverance as the fruit of the right kind of righteousness. He contends that there are two kinds of righteousness, the one lasting, the other not:

The one is of a lasting sort, the other not; and so, falling away or holding out, are in those places respected as natural fruits or discoveries of the nature of the righteous or of the wicked.³

Wesley is no less sure that the text proves his position:

That this (text) is to be understood of eternal death appears from the twenty-sixth verse: 'When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them'; (here is temporal death;) 'for his iniquity that he hath done he shall die' (here is death eternal). It appears farther from the whole scope of the chapter, which is to prove, 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die'.⁴

2. Works, vol. 10, p.284.

3. Edwards, op. cit., p.596.

4. Wesley, op. cit., p.284.

Edwards overemphasizes his strand of the paradox quite clearly as he goes on to argue that those who say 'persevering to the end' is a condition for eternity are, in fact, saying that 'Christ has no church in this world'.

Wesley, meanwhile, goes on to overemphasize the other side of the paradox in a consideration of Psalm 89:30-35:

May not every man see, that the covenant here spoken of relates wholly to David and his seed or children ... the covenant mentioned in these words is ... not absolute, but conditional.⁵

Unfortunately, in polemic, it is difficult to accept paradox. Opposing texts have to be squeezed into the mould of the preconceived theory. Wesley and Edwards both do this. Wesley, for example, in the above quotation argues that God's promises of lovingkindness and faithfulness to David apply only to him and his posterity, and not to all Christians. This is a short-sighted interpretation of the text and is explicable only in the light of Wesley's polemical purpose.

In the treatises under discussion both Edwards and Wesley are guilty of special pleading. There is an element of truth in what each says, but an unwillingness to see that the other position can be deduced equally as clearly.

The tendency can be seen again and again. Edwards quotes Romans 5 as support for his position:

'Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom also we have access into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God'. So, remission of sins and inheritance among them that are sanctified, are mentioned together, as what are jointly obtained by faith in Christ.⁶

While emphasizing the latter half of the passage, he ignores the justification by faith element at the beginning, which is the hinge on which the rest of the

5. Ibid., p.286.

6. Edwards, op. cit., p.598.

passage depends.

Wesley shows the same kind of blindness in his interpretation of John 3:36:

But does not Christ say elsewhere, 'He that believeth hath everlasting life'? And, 'He that believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life'?

I answer, (1) The love of God is everlasting life. It is, in substance, the life of heaven. Now, every one that believes, loves God, and therefore 'hath everlasting life'. (2) Every one that believes 'is' therefore 'passed from death', spiritual death, 'unto life'; and (3) 'Shall not come into condemnation', if he endureth in the faith unto the end; according to our Lord's own words, 'He that endureth to the end shall be saved'; and, 'Verily I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death'.⁷

Wesley's first point is devious arguing which he contradicts in many of his sermons on the magnificence and wonder of God planting the new, heavenly life of Christ in a spiritually dead human being. 'Everlasting life' is far more than simply 'love of God'.

As for the second point in the above quotation, Wesley, a Greek scholar, must have realized that the Greek word for eternal life, *αἰώνος*, has the connotation of indestructibility.

The third point is true, but is the other side of the coin to the doctrine of final perseverance. The two go together.

The danger of polemics and theological wrangling is very vividly illustrated in the two essays under consideration. The essays go on in the same vein, Edwards marshalling texts such as 1 Peter 1:5, Hebrews 10:38, 39, John 14:13, 21 to support his argument. Wesley uses Romans 11, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 2 Thessalonians 3: 2,3 and 1 Corinthians 1: 8,9 to support his opposing contention. Each refuses to consider the possibility of there being some

7. Wesley, op. cit., p.288.

truth in the other argument.

Reading their other writings is like a breath of fresh air after the constricted and prejudiced atmosphere of these theological treatises. In the other writings, both emphasize the faithfulness and reliability of God to keep Christians to the end, as well as the necessity for Christians to continue to trust in God, to strive after holiness and to 'watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation'.

Consider this example from Edwards' superb Treatise on Religious Affections (1747). The total control and sovereignty of God over the life of the Christian is delicately balanced with the responsibility and duty of the Christian to strive to be conformed to the image of Christ:

All who are truly religious are not of this world, they are strangers here, and belong to heaven; they are born from above, heaven is their native country ... they receive an anointing from above; that principle of true religion which is in them, is a communication of the religion of heaven; their grace is the dawn of glory, and God fits them for that world by conforming them to it.⁸

This passage teaches the principle that Christians cannot fall away. Since 'they belong to heaven' they will certainly one day be there. Moreover, God will lead them unerringly in the path of sanctification which leads there; 'He fits them for that world by conforming them to it.'

In the next paragraph Edwards stresses the need for human co-operation and the exertion of the human will:

This appears from the nature and design of the ordinances and duties, which God hath appointed, as means and expressions of true religion. To instance in the duty of prayer ... And the duty of singing praises to God ... The same thing appears in the nature and design of the sacraments which God hath appointed ... we should be told of the great things of the gospel and the redemption of Christ ... they should be, as it were, exhibited to our view in sensible representations ... And ... God has ordained that his word delivered in the Holy Scriptures

8. Works, vol. 1, p.242.

should be opened, applied, and set home upon men, in preaching.⁹

Edwards does not say that it is possible for a Christian to fall away, but he does say that these human acts are essential to Christian growth. The implication is that if these actions do not take place, the Christians (or supposed 'Christians', as Edwards would argue, but the distinction is an irrelevant one) would fall away. The point is that when not attacking another viewpoint, he was prepared to let the theological niceties of the question alone, and to sound surprisingly like an 'Arminian'.

The same twofold emphasis is evident in Wesley's non-polemical works. Wesley's sermon on the text, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure', is a near perfect juxtaposition of eternal security on the one hand and Christian co-operation on the other.

Wesley gives first priority to the total sovereignty of God in salvation:

First. We are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance: 'It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do his good pleasure'. The meaning of these words may be made more plain by a small transposition of them: 'It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do'. This position of the words, connecting the phrase, of his good pleasure, with the word worketh, removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his work. Otherwise, we might have had some room for boasting, as if it were our own desert, some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us, which first moved God to work. But this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself, in his own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy.¹⁰

I have given the quote in some length because the paragraph shows how Wesley goes out of his way to stress very forcibly the total and absolute sovereignty of God in sanctification. As he proceeds, he rams home the point even more:

9. Ibid., p.242

10. Works, vol. 6, p.508.

'It is God who worketh both inward and outward holiness ... God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect ... το ἔνεργειν, which we render to do, manifestly implies all that power from on high, all that energy which works in us every right disposition, and then furnishes us for every good work.'

Immediately afterwards Wesley emphasizes the other facet of the paradox:

if God worketh in you, then work out your own salvation. The original word, rendered work out, implies the doing a thing thoroughly. Your own; for you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone for ever.¹¹

Wesley elaborates the point; we are to work out our own salvation 'with fear and trembling', in the same way as Christian servants serve their masters that are upon earth. We are to perform those duties outlined in Scripture:

... fly from all sin as from the face of a serpent; carefully avoid every evil word and work; yea, abstain from all appearance of evil. Be zealous of good works, of works of piety, as well as works of mercy; family prayer, and crying to God in secret. Fast in secret ... Search the Scriptures: Hear them in public, read them in private, and meditate therein. At every opportunity be a partaker of the Lord's Supper ...¹²

In part three of the sermon, Wesley expresses the paradox clearly and lucidly, showing just how well he generally held a tension between sovereignty and responsibility:

Meantime let us remember that God has joined these together in the experience of every believer; and therefore we must take care, not to imagine they are ever to be put asunder.¹³

Unfortunately Wesley himself, in his polemical writing, tried to 'put asunder' the two complementary doctrines. This demonstrates forcefully the grave danger in polemic and doctrinal disputation among Christians. In 'contending

11. Ibid., p.509.

12. Ibid., p.511.

13. Ibid., p.512.

for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints' it is dangerously easy in the intensity of debate to take a doctrine further than Scripture itself does. It is also very easy in a polemical situation to be blind to another Biblical doctrine which is contrary to the one we hold. This is why happened in the case of Edwards and Wesley, and this is why many accept the contention that their views regarding the sovereignty of God were contradictory.

CHAPTER IV

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Champions of irresistible grace so easily exalt the sovereignty of God over human responsibility, while opponents of the doctrine often come close to denying God's total and utter control of His creatures. It is therefore a vital subject to consider in a comparison of the views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God.

Edwards' main ideas on the subject are set out in another of his polemical essays, Concerning Efficacious Grace, probably written in the 1750's.¹ The essay is obviously aimed at a number of Arminian writers, among them Dr John Taylor (1694-1761), an English nonconformist minister, whose works were popular among the New England Arminians.

In this essay Edwards comes down heavily in favour of irresistible grace. He states that the basic points in the debate are these:

1. Whether the grace of God, in giving us saving virtue, be determining and decisive.
2. Whether saving virtue be decisively given by a supernatural and sovereign operation of the Spirit of God.²

Both points receive the traditional Calvinist reply from Edwards:

The Calvinists suppose otherwise: they suppose that divine influence and operation, by which saving virtue is obtained, is entirely from, and above, common assistance, or that which is given in a course of ordinary providence, according to universally established laws of nature.³

This passage shows what is at the heart of the Calvinist position: the sense of

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1. The exact date is impossible to determine, as the essay forms part of a book, Miscellaneous Observations on Important Theological Subjects; the book was published long after Edwards' death in 1793.
 2. Works, vol. 2, p.544.
 3. Ibid., p.544.

a 'special' benefit or mercy that cannot be accounted for in any other way than 'grace' (which, humanly speaking, is to admit its unaccountability). Unfortunately when this subjectivity is translated into objective theological terms as Edwards is attempting to do in this essay, trouble begins. 'Reason' is always on the side of the 'universals'.

Edwards goes on to consider in a long series of 95 paragraphs, some of the arguments advanced by the Arminians about the two basic points at issue. He advances most of the arguments which we have already considered in the chapter on the Freedom of the Will.

It is very instructive to realize that the two points which Edwards affirms over against the Arminians' denial of them (that is, the decisive and determining nature of saving grace, and the supernatural and sovereign work of the Spirit in salvation) are affirmed just as strongly by Wesley.

Wesley was convinced that saving grace was decisive and determinative. He saw it as operating in a twofold way:

By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.⁴

Wesley stresses this point even more emphatically in his sermon on Salvation By Faith preached before 1747:

Of yourselves cometh neither your faith nor your salvation: 'It is the gift of God'; the free, undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation, which he, of his own good pleasure, his mere favour, annexes thereto. That ye believe, is one instance of his grace; that, believing, ye are saved, another.⁵

One could hardly find a more un-Arminian statement on the question of whether grace can be resisted or not. The New England Arminians would have thought,

4. Works, vol. 6, p.509.

5. Works, vol. 5, p.13.

if they had read it, that they had another Edwards on their hands!

This stalwart defence of grace on Wesley's part raises the real issue: how real was the religious experience of the North American Arminians? One suspects that their religious experience was rational and theoretical; certainly Foxcroft, Cooper and Chauncy opposed the revival in New England. Edwards and Wesley on the other hand had been brought into the closest personal contact with the sovereignty of God and had experienced it as gracious.

Wesley also argues for Edwards' second basic point: that 'saving virtue ... is given by a supernatural and sovereign operation of the Spirit of God'. This is clear from his frequent emphasis on salvation by faith and not of works, and also his theme of the new birth, which is among the most prominent ideas in all his writings. Salvation by faith and the new birth come about, claims Wesley, only from the power and working of the Spirit:

it (being born again) implies not barely the being baptised, or any outward change whatever; but a vast inward change, a change wrought in the soul, by the operation of the Holy Ghost.⁶

So far we have seen that Edwards and Wesley both taught irresistible grace. The picture would be incomplete if other passages in which both imply that resistance is possible were not examined.

There is a crucial passage in Wesley's Journals which deals with this subject:

I believe ... that the grace which brings faith, and thereby salvation, into the soul, is irresistible at that moment. That most believers may remember some time when God did irresistibly convince them of sin. That most believers do, at some or other times, find God irresistibly acting upon their souls.
Yet I believe, that the grace of God, both before and after those moments may be, and hath been, resisted; and That, in general, it does not act irresistibly, but we may comply therewith, or may not.

6. 'Privilege of Those that are Born of God' in Works, vol. 5, p.224.

And I do not deny,
 That in those eminently styled 'the elect' (if such there be) the
 grace of God is so far irresistible, that they cannot but believe,
 and be finally saved.
 But I cannot believe,
 That all those must be damned, in whom it does not thus
 irresistibly work: Or
 That there is one soul on earth who has not, and never had, any
 other grace, than such as does, in fact, increase his damnation
 and was designed of God to do so. (August 24th, 1743)

In the above passage Wesley is grappling with the two sides of the paradox in the tradition of the schools. He tries to ward off possible deductions others may draw from his statements. In the end he does not quite resolve the paradox, but irresistible grace and the possibility of resisting are both conceded as part of religious experience.

Edwards likewise does not neglect the question of resistance. Resistance is clearly implied in his frequent use of the terrors of Hell, and the wrath of God upon unrepentant hearts.⁷ In the following extract from a sermon on Ephesians 3: 10, for example, the possibility of resistance is strongly stated:

Salvation is ready brought to your door; and the Saviour stands, knocks and calls that you would open to him, that he might bring it in to you. There remains nothing but your consent. All the difficulty now remaining is with your heart. If you perish now, it must be wholly at your door. It must be because you would not come to Christ that you might have life; and because you virtually choose death rather than life ...⁸

In the case of rhetorical appeals, such as this one, the ontological purport can only be determined after the result becomes apparent. If the hearer accepts, he will probably agree that grace is irresistible. If he rejects, does this prove that the hearer resisted or that he was unable to accept because not elected? This underlines the fact that the question of sovereignty ultimately transcends human reason. What is beyond dispute is that Edwards, like Wesley, allowed the possibility of resistance in practice, even if in theory he upheld the irresistibility of grace.

7. See, for example, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God', 'God's Awful Judgment', 'The Future Punishment of the Wicked' and 'Wrath Upon the Wicked to the Uttermost' (all in Works, vol. 2).

8. Works, vol. 2, p.186.

CHAPTER VLIMITED ATONEMENT

Calvinists (and indeed all the main-line theologians of the sixteenth century) looked at the empirical situation facing them, in which there were elect and reprobate. Limited atonement followed as a practical consequence. Since God obviously could have saved all men (and the atonement of Christ was potentially universal) the issue must lie in God's will. God was thought of as not bound to have mercy on all, indeed, not bound to have mercy on any, and in fact did not.

The humanists felt that this was unjust: if God had mercy on any he was bound to have mercy on all. This merely postponed the problem. Why was the universal mercy of God ineffective for some? It outraged the Calvinist sense of the divine sovereignty that man could successfully resist the grace of God. To allow man to be arbiter of his damnation was to allow him also to be an arbiter of his salvation, and if arbiter than also de facto sovereign.

At first sight Edwards and Wesley seem to mirror this Calvinist-humanist polarization in their views regarding the atonement. Edwards, for example, in one of the corollaries he draws from his essay on the Freedom of the Will (1754) argues for a limited atonement:

As appears by what has been now shown, God has the actual salvation or redemption of a certain number in his proper absolute design, and of a certain number only;¹

Wesley, on the other hand, in an attack against predestination (written in

1. Works, vol. 1, p.88.

response to Toplady's tract of 1770 which argued in favour of absolute predestination)² rejects a limited atonement out of hand. Note the emphasis on 'all' in the following passage from the work:

How will you reconcile reprobation with the following scripture, which declare that Christ came to save all men; that he died for all; that he atoned for all, even for those that finally perish?³

Before one concludes from these passages that the two were diametrically opposed in their views on the atonement, certain related themes in their writings need to be taken into account. It then becomes clear that both were saying the same thing, but in different words. Both had to grapple with two inescapable facts: Christ died for all, but not all men appear to accept this. On close analysis the explanations of each express in essence the same underlying truth.

Edwards, for example, believed that the death of Christ was sufficient for all men. He concedes this in the same essay in which he argues for limited atonement:

From these things it will inevitably follow, that however ... Christ in some sense may be said to die for all, and to redeem all visible Christians, yea, the whole world by his death.⁴

Wesley, on the other hand, while claiming that Christ died for all, allows that the atonement is, in a sense, limited, because only those who exercise faith will be saved.

In the first place, Wesley clearly accepted the existence of Hell, and that the majority of his generation were heading towards it:

2. Toplady's tract can be found in Wesley's Works, vol. 14, pp.190-198. Wesley's reply, due to a printing error, is in vol. 10, pp.204-259.

3. Works, vol. 10, p.215.

4. Edwards, op. cit., p.88 (emphasis mine).

... it cannot be denied (though neither can we acknowledge it but with shame and sorrow of heart), that even in this, which is called a Christian country, the generality of every age and sex, of every profession and employment, of every rank and degree, high and low, rich and poor, are walking in the way of destruction ... Add to these, those who have a name indeed that they live, but were never yet alive to God; those that outwardly appear fair to men, but are inwardly full of all uncleanness ... how greatly will these saints of the world swell the children of hell!⁵

The way to avoid Hell and the Devil is to believe in Jesus, and to have faith in His life, death and resurrection:

Go as altogether ungodly, guilty, lost, destroyed, deserving and dropping into hell; and thou shalt then find favour in his sight, and know that he justifieth the ungodly ... I challenge thee for a child of God by faith!⁶

This faith itself though is totally a gift from God:

It is certain that no human spirit, while he is in the body, can persuade another to repent; can work in him an entire change, both of heart and life; ... No angel, much less any human spirit, whether in the body or out of the body, can bring one soul 'from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God' ... God alone can raise those that are 'dead in trespasses and sins'.⁷

Pushed to its logical conclusion, this implies a very limited atonement.

Normally, Wesley did not push it to its logical conclusion. He taught that Christ died for all, provided they believe, and was content to leave it there. He failed to realize that those who held to limited atonement were simply expressing the sovereignty of God in giving faith in a different way. For what puzzled Edwards and drove him to a position of limited atonement was the question: if Christ died for all, then surely it is the design of God to bring about saving faith in all. He does not; therefore His design must

5. From 'Sermon on the Mount: Discourse XI' in Works, vol. 5, p.407.

6. From 'Justification by Faith' in Works, vol. 5, p.64.

7. From 'Dives and Lazarus' in Works, vol. 7, p.253.

be limited:

For it is as impossible, in strictness of speech, that God should prosecute a design, or aim at a thing, which he at the same time most perfectly knows will not be accomplished.⁸

It can be seen from these considerations that Edwards and Wesley were not really diametrically opposed. Each simply tried to explain the mystery of reprobation in a different way, Edwards by falling back upon the theory of limited atonement, Wesley by stressing that Christ died for all, but only those who believed participated in this salvation. Both stressed the sovereignty of God in the giving of faith. Their views in this respect were clearly much more similar than is at first apparent.

8. Edwards, op. cit., p.88.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN

Both Edwards and Wesley adopt the dominant Western theological tradition (which had been strongly reaffirmed by Calvin) of the total depravity of man. By this they mean that every faculty of man has been affected by the fall; there is nothing which can be trusted by itself to bring man to salvation.

This view emerges, for example, from a study of Edwards' diary:

O how weak, how infirm, how unable to do anything of myself!
What a poor, inconsistent being! What a miserable wretch,
without the assistance of the Spirit of God! ... I am but a
poor infant, upheld by Jesus Christ; who holds me up, and gives
me liberty to smile, to see my enemies flee when he drives them
before me ... The heart of man is deceitful above all things,
and desperately wicked! (January 15th, 1723)

The key sentences are: 'unable to do anything of myself', 'a miserable wretch without the assistance of the Spirit of God' and 'The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked'. Edwards does not spell it out, but total depravity is clearly implied. In another passage in his diary he states the doctrine more explicitly:

I regarded the doctrines of election, free grace, our inability to do anything without the grace of God, and that holiness is entirely, throughout, the work of the Spirit of God. (March 6th, 1723)

Wesley's Journals reveal a similar awareness of the depravity of his own nature. In some personal reflections on the text, 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new', he states the doctrine of the depravity of man and then applies it specifically to himself:

(A new creature) judges himself to be altogether fallen short of the glorious image of God. To have no good thing abiding in him; but all that is corrupt and abominable: In a word, to be wholly earthly, sensual and devilish; - a motley mixture of beast and devil.

Thus, by the grace of God in Christ, I judge of myself.

(6th October, 1738)

There is no mistaking the import of such powerful phrases as 'to have no good thing abiding in him; but all that is corrupt and abominable', 'to be wholly earthly, sensual and devilish', 'a motley mixture of beast and devil'.

Wesley's extreme statement here of the depravity of man came from the trials of many wearying years of self-effort before his conversion. Its vehemence underlines vividly the perception of the saint of the gravity of his position; to see it thus is one of the evidences of the Spirit at work within us. The natural man is happy, indeed anxious to excuse that about which the Spirit convicts. Hence the Spirit is indispensable to real conviction as well as regeneration.

Edwards does not deal with the doctrine of depravity as such in any of his extant sermons, but there are glimpses and hints of the doctrine in almost every sermon. The sermon on Acts 16: 29, 30 treats the doctrine most comprehensively. In this sermon Edwards states that 'those who are in a natural condition are in a dreadful condition'. He goes on to demonstrate this by an examination of the 'state and condition of unregenerate persons' in this world and in the world to come.

As for this world, his central assertion is that the condition of the unregenerate is 'dreadful' because of their depravity:

As men come into the world, their natures are dreadfully depraved. Man in his primitive state was a noble piece of divine workmanship, but by the fall it is dreadfully defaced.¹

The depravity of man shows itself in his blindness and ignorance:

1. Works, vol. 2, p.817.

His understanding is full of darkness; his mind is blind, is altogether blind to spiritual things. Men are ignorant of God, and ignorant of Christ, ignorant of the way of salvation, ignorant of their own happiness, blind in the midst of the brightest and clearest light, ignorant under all manner of instructions.²

The fact that there is no goodness in man is also a proof of his depravity. His whole existence is motivated by self-love. He 'never had the least degree of love' to God or Christ. When outwardly he seems to have done something pleasing to God, it is done without a 'spirit of subjection to God, or any disposition to obey him'.

Besides having no goodness, the unregenerate, says Edwards, have 'dreadful wickedness' within them:

The hearts of natural men are exceedingly full of sin. If they had but one sin in their hearts, it would be sufficient to render their condition very dreadful. But they have not only one sin, but all manner of sin. There is every kind of lust. The heart is a mere sink of sin, a fountain of corruption, whence issue all manner of filthy streams.³

Moreover, the unregenerate have no power whatsoever to save themselves from sin:

the hearts of natural men are dreadfully hard and incorrigible. There is nothing but the mighty power of God will move them.⁴

The state of the unconverted is also dreadful for a number of other reasons: they are without God in the world, the wrath of God abides on them and they are the children of the devil.

As for the state of the unregenerate in the future world, they have 'no title to any inheritance in another world' and they will be exposed to 'dreadful misery' in the future world. In explaining this point of his sermon

2. Ibid., p.817

3. Ibid., p.818

4. Ibid., p.819

Edwards paints a graphic and terrifying picture:

If a few drops of wrath do sometimes so distress the minds of men in this world, so as to be more dreadful than fire, or any bodily torment, how dreadful will be a deluge of wrath; how dreadful will it be, when all God's mighty waves and billows pass over them! Every faculty of the soul shall be filled with wrath, and every part of the body shall be filled with fire.⁵

From these illustrations four basic themes emerge: there is no goodness in man; man is totally wicked; man is unable to save himself; and man, without God, has no hope in the future life.

Each of these has parallels in the sermons of Wesley. These parallels are crucial: they hardly suggest that Wesley contradicts Edwards' view of God's sovereignty in any essential point.

Thus in Wesley's sermon on original sin, he shows that the picture of fallen man in Genesis has not changed. He explains that, after the flood, only Noah and perhaps part of Noah's household was 'an exception from the universal wickedness' prevailing. God saw that 'all the imaginations of the thoughts of man's heart (i.e., every inclination, affection, passion, appetite, every temper, design, thought) was evil'. Moreover, the inner nature of man is totally evil:

But was there not good mingled with evil? Was there not light intermixed with darkness? No; none at all ... 'in his flesh dwelt no good thing'; all his nature was purely evil: it was wholly consistent with itself, and unmixed with any thing of an opposite nature.⁶

There is no question here of a mixture of good and evil, nor any room for the suggestion that Wesley saw the matter in less uncompromising terms than Edwards.

5. Ibid., p.821

6. Works, vol. 6, p.57

Nor has the passage of time improved man's nature. All the rest of Scripture and most recent daily experience confirm the same melancholy truths:

we may learn one grand fundamental difference between Christianity and heathenism. Many of the ancient Heathens have ... described the vices of particular man ... but none of them knew his total corruption. They knew not that all men were empty of all good, and filled with all manner of evil.⁷

In the same sermon Wesley states that only God can free us from sin and give us knowledge of Himself:

By none of these (our natural faculties) could we attain the knowledge of God. We could no more perceive him by our natural understanding, than we could see him with our eyes. For 'no one knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal him. And no one knoweth the Son but the Father, and he to whom the Father revealeth him'.⁸

This stress on the inability of man to save himself parallels Edwards' third point above exactly.

Wesley agrees also with Edwards' fourth point. In his sermon on the new birth he states that the unregenerate have no hope in the afterlife:

... without holiness no man shall see the Lord, shall see the face of God in glory. Of consequence, the new birth is absolutely necessary in order to eternal salvation.⁹

It is clear that the sermons of Edwards and Wesley present an identical doctrine of depravity. The same is true of the theological treatises. Edwards spells out the doctrine most clearly in his treatise entitled, The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended. This was written in 1757, and was in reply to John Taylor's The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin (1740). In this work Taylor claimed that the orthodox Reformed view of the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity lacked Biblical support, and that

7. Ibid., p.63

8. Ibid., p.58

9. Ibid., p.72

Adam's sin had only natural, not moral, consequences.¹⁰

At the beginning of his reply Edwards, as always, defines his terminology:

By original sin, as the phrase has most commonly been used by the divines, is meant the innate, sinful depravity of the heart.¹¹

He sees the core of this doctrine as consisting in the corruption of human nature. Human nature compels mankind 'to run themselves into that which is, in effect, their own utter eternal perdition'. The inherent tendency to sin in human nature is 'very evil, depraved and pernicious'. This incurs the wrath of God:

A propensity to that sin which brings God's eternal wrath and curse (which has been proved to belong to the nature of man) is evil, not only as it is calamitous and sorrowful, ending in great natural evil; but as it is odious and detestable; for by the supposition, it tends to that moral evil, by which the subject becomes odious in the sight of God, and liable as such to be condemned, and utterly rejected, and cursed by him.¹²

The soul of man is, by nature, in a corrupt, fallen and ruined state. Proof of this is the fact that men sin immediately, as soon as they are capable of it; this tendency continues, and increases:

That strong propensity of nature, by which men are so prone to immediate sinning at first, has no tendency in itself to a diminution; but rather to an increase; as the continued exercise of an evil disposition in repeated actual sins, tends to strengthen it more and more.¹³

Another proof of the depravity of man is the fact that even the greatest saints complain of a 'remaining depravity of heart'. Other proofs are: stupidity in matters of religion; the fact that most of mankind, down through the ages, have been 'wicked men'; the rejection of preachers and prophets, and even Christ himself; and, finally, the fact of universal mortality.

10. See Paul Helm, 'Jonathan Edwards,' in The International Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J.D. Douglas.

11. Works, vol. 1, p.146.

12. Ibid., p.152

13. Ibid., p.154

This section is followed by a detailed analysis of Biblical passages relevant to the topic. This in turn is followed by a detailed and thorough refutation of possible objections.

It is fascinating that Wesley also produced a treatise in defence of original sin (1757) and that his treatise was in reaction to precisely the same work which had prompted Edwards' defence: Taylor's The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin. On this question they are certainly friends, with a common enemy. The fact that Taylor's works were championed by the North American Arminians is further proof that Wesley's Arminianism was a far cry from the Arminianism which Edwards attacked.

Wesley's basic assumption is the same as that of Edwards, although his approach is different. In some ways Wesley's statement of the doctrine is more powerful. He shows the depravity of man in the past, proving by detailed citation of historical examples that

Not barely the works of their hands, or the words of their tongue, but 'every imagination of the thoughts of their hearts was evil'. The contagion had spread itself through the inner man, had tainted the seat of their principles, and the source of their actions. But was there not some mixture of good? No; they were only evil.¹⁴

The treatise moves on to the present. Wesley refers to 'Heathens, Rome, deism, war, even among Christians ... the natives of Ireland and the peasantry of England ... soldiers, sailors, tradesmen ... Lawyers, Gentry ... Nobility', mercilessly exposing the moral poverty of his age. Then, with the experience born of many years of preaching, he proposes to apply the general principles specifically to the personal lives of his readers:

I shall desire every one who is willing to know mankind, to begin his enquiry at home.¹⁵

14. 'The Doctrine of Original Sin' in Works, vol. 9, pp.196-7.

15. Ibid., p.231

Having proved the existence of depravity in history, the present, and in the personal lives of his readers, Wesley goes on to explain how depravity came about. He then goes into the Biblical account, expounding with great clarity and force the record of the Fall:

By punishment I mean suffering consequent upon sin, or pain inflicted because of sin preceding. Now, it is plain, all mankind suffer death; and that this suffering is consequent upon Adam's sin ...¹⁶

He concludes the work by a treatment of some of the other relevant texts, such as Genesis 9: 25-27, 1 Corinthians 15: 21, 22, Romans 5: 12-19.

Wesley's statement of depravity in this treatise is just as extreme as Edwards', and has ultimately a more searching and powerful impact on the reader. Wesley's use of the realities of human experience, past and present, coupled with his clear and vivid account of Biblical teaching, captures the imagination and attention more readily than Edwards' undoubtedly profound, but complex and speculative, treatise.

Clearly then Edwards and Wesley both believed, preached and taught a similar doctrine regarding the depravity of man. In other words, both held that man was entirely unable to save himself. In the light of this, is it really feasible to argue that Edwards upheld the total sovereignty of God in salvation, while Wesley did not?

16. Ibid., p.243

CHAPTER VII

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Since both Edwards and Wesley agreed on the disease, both agreed on the sovereign remedy. Freedom from depravity for them lay solely in the experience of justification by faith.

This doctrine had been the core of the evangelical gospel of the sixteenth century, and its renovation in the eighteenth century was at the heart of revivalist experience. In essence the basic elements in the doctrine preached by Edwards and Wesley were the same as in the sixteenth century counterpart, although the language of communication had changed. The generally short, ^hpit_y and clear sermons of Edwards and Wesley seem more akin to twentieth century sermons than the long, verbose and complex sermons of the sixteenth century (used for example by the early Puritans).

The key point of justification by faith is that it explains to men and women how they can come to God, and on what grounds God accepts them. This both Edwards and Wesley were able to do very cogently, with a conviction reinforced by experience. One could quote innumerable passages in support of this statement. Two for each man should provide sufficient evidence: one to show how the doctrine was born in experience, and one to show that the doctrine was part of their proclamation.

Edwards, in his Memoirs (collected by Sereno E. Dwight) states, when relating his conversion:

From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty . . . But I remember the time very well when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as

to this sovereignty of God, ... I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet ...

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 those words, 1 Tim. 1: 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; ...

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. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him.¹

In this supremely important passage Edwards' experience of justification by faith is closely linked with his realization of the sovereignty of God.

Indeed, his perception of the exalted and sovereign nature of God precedes his realization that access to this sovereign God is possibly only by trusting in the gracious work of Christ.

Wesley's account of his experience of justification emphasizes the role that a sense of deep personal sin had played in drawing him to Christ:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: And an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. (Journal, 19th May, 1738)

The doctrine is not spelt out in any detail but it is clearly implied in phrases such as 'the change ... through faith in Christ', 'I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation' (reminiscent of Paul's teaching about justification by faith alone) and 'he had taken away my sins ... and saved me from the law of sin and death' (again the phraseology has a Pauline ring

1. In Works, vol. 1, p.xiii.

about it).

These two excerpts confirm a point already noted: the vital importance of experience in a consideration of the views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God. The above accounts throw more light on this matter: they show that experience has a crucial bearing on doctrine. No-one has stated this with greater clarity than Cardinal Newman in his Apologia:

There is one other principle which I gained from Dr Hawkins, more directly bearing upon Catholicism, than any that I have mentioned; and that is the doctrine of Tradition. When I was an undergraduate, I heard him preach in the University Pulpit his celebrated sermon on the subject, and recollect how long it appeared to me, though he was at that time a very striking preacher; but, when I read it and studied it as his gift, it made a most serious impression on me. He does not go one step, I think, beyond the high Anglican doctrine, nay he does not reach it; but he does his work thoroughly and his view was in him original, and his subject was a novel one at that time. He lays down a proposition, selfevident as soon as stated, to those who have at all examined the structure of Scripture, viz., that the sacred text was never intended to teach doctrine, but only to prove it, and that, if we would learn doctrine, we must have recourse to the formularies of the Church; for instance to the Catechism, and to the Creeds. He considers, that, after learning from them the doctrines of Christianity, the inquirer must verify them by Scripture. This view, most true in its outline, most fruitful in its consequences, opened upon me a large field of thought. Dr Whately held it too. One of its effects was to strike at the root of the principle on which the Bible Society was set up. I belonged to its Oxford Association; it became a matter of time when I should withdraw my name from its subscription-list, though I did not do so at once ...²

Newman is saying that the experience of the Church as expressed in its Creeds and doctrines must be 'proved' by Scripture. It is no use going to Scripture to construct a doctrine: rather doctrine (approved interpretation of experience) has to be tested by Scripture. Justification by faith was in the Scriptures, waiting for someone like Luther to discover its meaning in his own experience and to champion his own experience against the erroneous doctrines that had been allowed to creep into popular practice through unexamined experience. It is fatal to try to 'construct' doctrines in the abstract.

2. Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, pp.9-10.

In Newman's case, this realization was part of the process by which he was 'emancipated' from early eighteenth century evangelicalism. Incidentally one could argue that his own doctrine of development might be said to have justified erroneous doctrine by having given up the independent critical stance of Scripture.

In the case of Edwards and Wesley, their similar evangelical experiences led them to find the model (and hence authentication) for what had happened to them in the doctrine of justification by faith. And, since both were scholars, both were aware of the role which the passages setting out this doctrine had played in the earlier evangelical revival of the sixteenth century (as well as in the experience of someone like Augustine).

The earlier quotations from the personal writings of Edwards and Wesley show the kind of experience that each had and which each interpreted by means of the doctrine of justification. Wesley's conversion experience at Aldersgate, characterized by a note of mild surprise (he had taken away my sins, even mine) is paralleled by Edwards' acceptance of the incredible (the doctrine of the sovereignty of God). Each experience is also accompanied by a similar sort of inner harmony and assurance, though Edwards characteristically uses 'sweet' rather than 'warm'!

The doctrine of justification by faith was central to Edwards' proclamation of the Gospel. Indeed, the doctrine appears in one form or another, in virtually every sermon. It is hinted at, for example, in this extract from the sermon on Christ's Agony:

Here is great ground of assurance that Christ stands ready to accept of sinners, and to bestow salvation upon them ... the strongest ground of assurance that God stands ready to accept of all those that come to him for mercy through Christ.³

3. Works, vol. 2, p.877

More explicitly:

... faith is the qualification in any person that renders it meet in the sight of God that he should be looked upon as having Christ's satisfaction and righteousness belonging to him, viz., because it is that in him which, on his part, makes up this union between him and Christ.⁴

The doctrine was also a very prominent theme in Wesley's preaching. In a sermon entitled Justification by Faith he says:

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father, whereby, for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he 'showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of sins that are past' ... Faith ... is the necessary condition of justification; yea, and the only necessary condition thereof.⁵

One can draw out certain features from these extracts from the preaching of Edwards and Wesley in order to show how similar their notions of justification were.

In the first place, for both faith is possible only because of the death of Christ, which acts as an atonement for sin. This is clear from Wesley's words: 'justification is ... that act of God the Father, whereby, for the sake of propitiation made by the blood of the Son, he "showeth forth his righteousness ... by the remission of sins that are past"'. Edwards refers to the atonement in similar vein: 'God stands ready to accept all those that come to him for mercy through Christ ... faith is the qualification in any person that renders it meet in the sight of God that he should be looked upon as having Christ's satisfaction and righteousness belonging to him.'⁶

Secondly, both men strongly affirm God's action and human response in the process of justification. God's sovereignty is implied by Wesley in the above quotation

4. 'Justification by Faith Alone' in Works, vol. 1, p.625.

5. 'Justification by Faith' in Works, vol. 5, p.62

6. Emphasis mine.

when he says, 'justification is that act of God the Father'. But the person involved in justification has a part to play as well. 'Faith is the necessary condition of justification; yea and the only necessary condition thereof'. Edwards also stresses the divine initiative. 'Christ ... stands ready to accept sinners and to bestow salvation upon them ... God stands ready to accept.' The emphasis here is completely on the role of Christ and God. Yet the individual's response is also implied: 'faith is the qualification in any person that renders it meet in the sight of God that he should be looked upon as having Christ's satisfaction', and 'faith ... is that in him, which, on his part, makes up the union between him and Christ'.⁷

Edwards and Wesley certainly held very similar doctrines of justification by faith, emphasizing divine sovereignty and human response in the experience. This makes the thesis that they held opposing doctrines even less tenable. It also supports the contention that it was precisely because their evangelism was inspired by a conception of the total sovereignty of God as well as a realization of the need for human response that it formed the spearhead for revival.

7. Emphasis mine.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, whatever their views on predestination, free will, the perseverance of the saints, irresistible grace and limited atonement, both believed in the omnipotence of God, His ultimate control over their lives, and over the whole world.

The sermons of both, for example, hammer home this doctrine. Ultimately God is in control. We can trust in His power. The entire theme of Edwards' sermon, God Glorified in Man's Dependence, is the power and control of God over the life of the believer:

We are dependent on God's power through every step of our redemption. We are dependent on the power of God to convert us, to give faith in Jesus Christ, and the new nature ... It is by God's power also that we are preserved in a state of grace ... As grace is at first from God, so it is continually from him, and is maintained by him, as much as light in the atmosphere is all day long from the sun, as well as at first dawning, or sun-rising.¹

In Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Edwards asserts the power of God over the unregenerate as well:

There is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. Men's hands cannot be strong when God rises up: the strongest have no power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his hands.²

Wesley does not pursue the doctrine of the omnipotence of God so remorselessly to its conclusion as Edwards does (saying, in the above quotes, that the Lord has total power over salvation and damnation) but the general theme of the omnipotence

1. Works, vol. 2, p.4

2. Works, vol. 2., pp.7-8

of God is very prominent throughout his sermons. The best example occurs in the sermon On Divine Providence:

The eternal, almighty, all-wise, all-gracious God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He called out of nothing, by his all-powerful word, the whole universe, all that is ... And as this all-wise, all-gracious Being created all things, so he sustains all things. He is the Preserver as well as the Creator of everything that exists. 'He upholdeth all things by the word of his power'.³

While in this particular sermon Wesley goes on to emphasize human liberty, he does not do so in a way that contradicts Edwards, with his constant emphasis on human responsibility.

Another good example in the case of Wesley occurs in the sermon entitled The Discoveries of Faith:

... above all these is the Lord Jehovah; He that is, that was, and that is to come; that is God from everlasting, and world without end; He that filleth heaven and earth; He that is infinite in power, in wisdom, in justice, in mercy, and holiness; He that created all things, visible and invisible, by the breath of his mouth, and still upholds them all, preserves them in being, 'by the word of his power'; and that governs all things that are in heaven above, in earth beneath, and under the earth.⁴

Wesley is stating here the total control of God over His earth. Ultimately God, and not man, has total power in all things. It is obvious what crucial implications this has in a study of Wesley's doctrine of sovereignty.

It is clear that the doctrine of the omnipotence of God was a vital element in the sermons of Edwards and Wesley. Indeed it was indispensable to the Gospel they proclaimed. What good news was there in the proclamation of good intentions which God (like ourselves) was powerless to implement?

The omnipotence of God is also a recurrent theme in the theological treatises of

3. Works, vol. 6., p.315

4. Works, vol. 7, p.233

both Edwards and Wesley. It is one of the problems that Edwards grapples with in the conclusion of his essay on the freedom of the will (See Chapter I), showing that 'God's moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents, making them the objects of his commands, counsels, calls, warnings, exhortations, promises, threatenings, rewards and punishments' does not contradict that 'determining disposal of all events, of every kind, throughout the universe, in his providence'.⁵

The theme of providence is beautifully developed at the end of Edwards' History of Redemption. In His total omnipotence, His total control of the world, says Edwards, God has but one end in view - the furthering of the progress of Redemption until the ultimate triumph of the Gospel in the whole world:

... if we consider the events of providence in the light in which they have been set before us, and in which the Scriptures set them before us, they appear an orderly series of events, all wisely directed in excellent harmony and consistence, tending all to one end ... God's providence may not unfitly be compared to a large and long river, having innumerable branches, beginning in different regions, and at a great distance one from another, and all conspiring to one common issue. After their very diverse and apparent contrary courses, they all collect together, the nearer they come to their common end, and at length discharge themselves at one mouth into the same ocean.⁶

In a short essay on the Medium of Moral Government, Edwards draws a distinction between God's 'moral government' and his 'general government of providential disposal'. The former requires a revelation of the methods and rules necessary for proper moral government, and the enforcement of the rules of the society 'by threatening just punishments, and promising the most suitable and wise rewards'. The latter is a mystery: 'the methods, rules, particular views, designs and ends of it ... are secret things that belong to God; in which men's understandings and wills are no way concerned'.⁷

5. Works, vol. 1, p.87

6. Works, vol. 1, p.617

7. Works, vol. 2, p.485

Wesley's treatment of the omnipotence of God in his theological treatises is very similar to that of Edwards. Consider for example this passage in Wesley's anti-Calvinist treatise, Predestination Calmly Considered:

Many of those who enjoy the 'faith which worketh by love', may remember some time when the power of the Highest wrought upon them in an eminent manner; when the voice of the Lord laid the mountains low, brake all the rocks in pieces, and mightily shed abroad his love in their hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto them. And at that time it is certain they had no power to resist the grace of God.⁸

This is a strange assertion indeed from an arch-Arminian! Wesley implies strongly the sovereign grace of God, breaking into the life of a person, His total power over the lives of men. He continues in this vein:

... the children of God may continually observe how his love leads them from faith to faith; with what tenderness He watches over their souls; with what care He brings them back if they go astray, and then upholds their going in his path, that their footsteps may not slide.⁹

It would be difficult to discover a stronger statement of the total omnipotence of God, and this in a treatise which is supposed to be against Calvinism. True, Wesley does go on to show how faith is always the condition of salvation and the upholding of the Christian in the path of sanctification thereafter. Edwards would not have disagreed with him, nor, I think, would Calvin. But what the quoted passages do prove, without any qualification, is that Wesley, even in the treatises, upholds the general omnipotence of God in the same manner as Edwards.

The evidence is clear: on the question of the omnipotence of God, His ultimate control over all things, the views of Edwards and Wesley are so similar as to be almost identical. If, in the final analysis, both accepted the total power of God, and the fact that He would ultimately bring His purposes inexorably to pass, it is impossible to accept that there is any significant difference in their doctrines of sovereignty. The similarity of their ideas about the omnipotence

8. Works, vol. 10, p.204

9. Ibid., p.204

of God is yet more evidence supporting the thesis that their views regarding the sovereignty of God were virtually the same, and that this is one of the keys to a true understanding of why they were successful evangelists, and why their ministries were associated with revival.

CONCLUSION

The inescapable conclusion of an analysis of the writings of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God is this: their views regarding sovereignty were very similar indeed. While in their polemical writings there seems to be some divergence on the Five Points of Calvinism, their personal writings and their practical proclamation shows that in fact there was little disagreement between them on these points.

Moreover, certain other relevant doctrines, such as justification by faith and the ultimate sovereignty of God (omnipotence) are almost exactly similar. It is therefore quite impossible to see Edwards as someone who neglected human response, or Wesley as someone who denied the power of God and the helplessness of man.

In fact there was little alternative to Calvinism for either. The original Calvinist-Arminian struggle was fratricidal, though the Arminian position quickly absorbed the underlying Erasmian position and there quickly grew up a corresponding group of extreme Calvinists. For the English-speaking world the alternatives were either Romanism (which the political situation in eighteenth century England put out of the question) or Anglicanism which was developing the position that Newman later judged untenable (the so-called via media). Maximin Piette¹ has shown, for example, that Wesley's theology has Anglican roots. Moreover, although Wesley's controversies with Whitefield and Toplady show that there were times in the English-speaking world when Arminian disagreed with Calvinist, there were also times when Arminian and

1. Piette, John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism; see Part 4, pp.411-481. Piette's thesis is that Wesley rejected ultimately both Calvinism (as a system) and Lutheranism, adhering instead to the Thirty-nine Articles, minus their predestinarian elements.

Calvinist agreed against Rome, as the anti-papist stance of Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards proves.

Another key factor was the way in which the seventeenth century attempts of Presbyterianism and Episcopacy to seize control of the whole church establishment exacerbated and stressed the differences at the expense of their largely common doctrine.

But perhaps the most important change of all was the switch from a religion of rationality to one of experience. Wesley absorbed the lessons of Locke which Edwards taught himself and applied.

Both Edwards and Wesley therefore were Reformed theologians, with Wesley the more moderate of the two. One of the reasons for the misinterpretation of their two theologies lies in the polemical writing. What has been missed here is the difference between English and North American Arminianism. Edwards, facing a group of rationalistic, anti-revivalistic Arminians, championed the sovereignty of God which his religious experience had burnt into his being. In his fierce defence of sovereignty, he does neglect the other side of what is ultimately an inscrutable paradox. Wesley, on the other hand, sensing dangers for evangelism in the Calvinism of Whitefield and later of Toplady, reacted by championing the other side of the paradox.

In experience and in their proclamation of the Gospel each affirmed both sides of the paradox. It is in this that the secret of their powerful and effective evangelism and the secret of their role in revival lies. True, there were other elements in their evangelical kerygma, especially, as we have seen, the doctrine of the depravity of man and the doctrine of justification by faith. Other matters, such as the atonement, the resurrection, hell and judgment, were

also emphasized. This was coupled with a burning evangelistic world-vision in the case of both.² Yet these doctrines became effective only because, as was shown in the case of depravity and justification, equal stress was laid upon the sovereignty of God and the dire need for human response.

Moreover this sense of both the sovereignty of God and the need for human response had a tremendous influence in the shaping and moulding of the two men themselves. Only those who are filled, on the one hand, with a sense of the total sovereignty of God, and therefore their total dependence upon Him, and imbued, on the other hand, with a desire to see all men respond to the Gospel, will be effective evangelists and used by God in revival. This was the key to their impact upon history, and it is the key to revival and renewal in the Church today.

On the negative side, this study of the views of Edwards and Wesley regarding the sovereignty of God highlights the peril of polemical writing. Granted that the 'faith once and for all delivered to the saints' must be preserved and defended; yet extreme care and discernment must be exercised in its preservation and defence. Fierce dispute about mysterious and paradoxical subjects such as predestination and free will can so easily become the unnecessary cause of polarization, and ultimately harm the work of God. Edwards' vicious attacks on the North American Arminians have caused so many people, including Wesley,³ to lump him with the hyper-Calvinists. Wesley's harsh and often uncharitable tirades against Whitefield and the doctrine of predestination have given even moderate Calvinists a lasting suspicion of him. They had also a sad repercussion in the calumnious attacks of the Calvinist underground (including

2. See, for example, Edwards' 'History of Redemption' in Works, vol. 1, especially pages 604-611; and Wesley's sixth Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount' in Works, vol. 5, pp.335-6. These passages show that Edwards and Wesley share a postmillennial view of the Second Coming, which expects (by the power of the Gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) a Christianized world before the Second Coming.

3. See 'Thoughts Upon Necessity' in Works, vol. 10, p.463.

Toplady) in the 1770's, which was long after Edwards' death.

Before engaging in polemic, one must be absolutely convinced that the opposing argument cuts at the root of the all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning death, as in the case of Paul and the Judaizers (cf. Philippians 3 : 2). One must also be sure that the opposing argument does not contain an element of Scriptural truth, while neglecting other equally Scriptural truths. If this is the case, the reply must emphasize both truths, instead of allowing two seemingly opposed Biblical themes to cause division.

In the light of this, a third element must be added to the need in the Church today for a stress on total sovereignty as well as human responsibility. The supreme test of our doctrine of sovereignty is the spirit in which we proclaim it. We shall be held responsible for that. How terrifying the word of the Lord will be if, when we claim his patronage of us (or ours of Him) He says: 'Depart from me you workers of iniquity; I never knew you.'

We must not conduct controversy, or contend for the faith, and at the same time fit the category of a 'worker of iniquity'. There is a burning necessity to conduct all theological argument and discussion in a humble and Christ-like spirit. In this way, perhaps, the Church's evangelism will be powerful and effective; revival will come; and, most important, the Church at last will find and retain the unity it has never really enjoyed since Pentecost.

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