This is lecture 13 in the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and it deals with the imputation of Adam’s sin to his human family. Let us pray. O God, our God, we know that this is a fallen human race. We also know that Thou didst not make it this way, but that in its progenitor, Adam, sought out its own devices and brought Thy wrath upon us. How that came about through Adam we know from Thy Word. Why it was done that way and so on, Thou hast left Thy theologians to speculate. We thank Thee for Edwards and his various services as an expositor and interpreter of the Word of God, and as we follow him here in a very unique understanding of this very vital subject, help us to weight objectively what he has to say in the light of what Thou hast revealed in Thy Word, so that we may understand better why we are as we are in this fallen world. For Christ’s sake we ask it. Amen.

Edwards was conscious of differing, but not differing essentially from the Reformed tradition with respect to the entrance of sin into the world. He simply went deeper into the matter, as we’ve seen, and he got into deeper difficulty thereby, as we’ve also seen. His problems were not different from others, but they tended to let sleeping dogs lie. The fact is indisputable and many have realized it’s rather inexplicable at the same time, and they’ve simply told us that as a matter of fact the good man Adam did a very evil thing. And Edwards, like some of the other great theologians, got into deep trouble by trying to explain how that could happen, but thank God, whether his explanation was sound or not, his adherence to the indisputable fact was without question.

When it comes to the doctrine of how we, the descendants of the first man, are responsible for that sin of the first man, Edwards is clearly departing and consciously departing from the Reformed tradition fundamentally. He seems fully aware of what he is doing, and every student of Edwards is aware also that this is a very significant departure from the usual solution to this problem. The problem is not that the Reformed tradition tended to be silent
about the subject but that the solution it offered did not satisfy Jonathan Edwards.

The generally accepted tradition was that the first man, Adam, represented all his descendants in the probation and trial and because he sinned representing them by covenant or federally, they suffered the same consequences which he did, for they were thus involved through representation in the same sin with him. Because of this close, federal, covenantal representation, their guilt was immediate, and the imputation or reckoning of that guilt was immediate. Calvin shared that federal view, but he didn’t see the immediacy of the consequences, and so at the point of imputation, Calvin himself was not quite a Calvinist. I remember once in seminary days listening to a man who probably is the finest Calvinistic theologian the second half of the twentieth century has seen; namely, the late John Murray. In a course on Calvin, he explained in meticulous detail that John Calvin had departed from the view of immediate imputation or reckoning of Adam’s sin to the minority opinion in Reformed theology of intermediate imputation.

Let me explain the concepts here. Immediate imputation means that because we all were represented by Adam and are therefore responsible for Adam’s sin, that becomes our guilt immediately and results in our being born in sin with polluted natures. The other view, which is called the mediate view of imputation is this, that since Adam sinned and became polluted, all who proceed from his loins inherit the same polluted nature, and therefore because we the children of our first father possess at birth a polluted nature, we are reckoned sinners. You see the difference between the immediate reckoning of Adam’s sin and the mediate reckoning. In the majority viewpoint, we were federally represented by Adam in such a way that when he sinned, we sinned; when he became guilty, we became guilty because what he did was immediately reckoned or imputed to us and the result was that we became polluted persons. In the other view, because we come from Adam by ordinary procreation, we inherit his polluted nature and through that we become guilty of his sin. It’s therefore called mediate imputation.

The classic Reformed view, the overwhelming majority position here is the immediate position, and it’s a rather surprising thing that the greatest theologian in the Calvinistic tradition, John Calvin, didn’t hold it. As I say, when Professor Murray was lecturing on this subject precisely because Calvin had departed
from Calvinism, if we might put it that way at this particular point, he made it very plainly and scholastically evident and indisputable that he had to admit that John Calvin had taken the other position which John Murray himself thought was an error. When the final exam came, he, Professor Murray, asked the question about John Calvin’s view of imputation. One of the members of the class, a good friend of mine, couldn’t remember what had been said about Calvin’s view of imputation, so he used his head, and he said, “Calvin was a Calvinist, and Calvinism teaches the immediate view of imputation,” so he concluded that John Calvin must have held immediate imputation which was precisely and absolutely and completely incorrect, and he got an absolute and unmitigated zero for that particular answer.

When it comes to Jonathan Edwards on the question on mediate and immediate imputation, you can’t peg him in either hole. He doesn’t really hold to either of those views. The great Charles Hodge felt that Edwards taught mediate imputation and the even greater B. B. Warfield thought he held immediate imputation. Warfield was closer to the truth, I believe, but as we’ll see as we expound his view, it was neither mediate nor immediate imputation of Adam’s guilt which Edwards felt was the way by which the world became responsible for his evil deed and was born in ruin and hell bound.

Edward’s viewpoint is drastically different from Calvin and the general Calvinistic tradition. His representation was far more intimate and the imputational consequences far more immediate, as we shall see. Now let me give you a fairly lengthy quotation to get this whole matter before you in one glance, as it were, though we’ll try to explain in careful detail this rather unique view of Edwards. He writes, “The depraved disposition of Adam’s heart is to be considered two ways. One, as the first rising of an evil inclination in his heart exerted in his first act of sin and the ground of the complete transgression. Two, an evil disposition of heart continuing afterwards as a confirmed principle that came by God’s forsaking him.” See, now Edwards is going back to the way in which he explained the origin of the very first sin, you understand. And he concludes this little statement by saying “that God’s forsaking him was a punishment of his first transgression.” You see, remember what Edwards was saying there, that Adam had sufficient grace, but he didn’t call on efficient grace and thus he violated in this one sin of his the covenant of works and God punished him immediately by withdrawing His Holy Spirit from him and that established Adam in the habit of sinning
because the Holy Spirit was now withdrawn because of the first sin he committed which was not. You'll remember Edwards tried to say “a result of a habit or an inclination.” You’ll remember I went through a very heavy criticism of Edwards at this point. I don’t agree with him, but it’s not important what I think, but it is important for you to understand what Edwards thinks and here he’s recapitulating that point.

“Now this confirmed corruption,” he continues, “by its remaining and continued operation brought additional guilt on his soul. And in like manner, depravity of heart is to be considered two ways in Adam’s posterity.” Here’s where we come in in the matter as Jonathan Edwards sees it. “The first existing of a corrupt disposition in their [our] hearts is not to be looked upon as sin belonging to them distinct from their participation of Adam’s first sin. It is, as it were, the extended pollution of that sin through the whole tree by virtue of the constituted union of the branches with the root.”

I’ll read this statement again and call your attention incidentally to the fact that it’s this kind of statement in Edwards that led Charles Hodge to think he was teaching mediate imputation. Let me read it again. “It is, as it were, the extended pollution of that sin [of Adam] through the whole tree by virtue of the constituted union of the branches with the root.” We’re the branches which grow from this polluted root is what Edwards is saying here, and it’s no wonder that Charles Hodge was saying that’s the imagery, that’s the way mediate imputationists always speak.

I call your attention to the fact that Edwards uses the word expression “constituted union.” The significance of that we’ll see later, and I think with the failure quite to see the significance of that that misled Charles Hodge at this point, but to continue now with the Edwardsian statement. “Or the inherence of the sin of that head of the species in the members in the consent and concurrence of the hearts of the members with the head in that first act.” We, the members, we, the branches, Edwards is saying, are concurring or going along with, doing as it were, the same sin as the root, as the head, and so on. Now continuing Edwards, “The depravity of nature remaining an established principle in the heart of a child of Adam and as exhibited in after operations is a consequence and punishment of the first apostasy, thus participated and brings new guilt; that is our guilt. The first being of an evil disposition in the heart of a child of Adam whereby he is disposed to approve of the sin of his first father as fully as he himself approved of it when he committed it.” You see, we the children approve of it as much as our father approved of it. “Or so
far as to imply a full and perfect consent of the heart to it; that is we have a full and perfect consent of our heart to the very iniquity that our father committed. I think,” continues Edwards, “is not to be looked upon as a consequence of the imputation of that first sin any more than the full consent of Adam’s own heart in the act of sinning.” That may not be clear yet, but one thing is clear to the hearer, I’m sure, and that is Edwards is here departing from the tradition of either mediate or immediate imputation, but let’s follow on to the end of the statement. “Which was not consequent on the imputation of his sin to himself, but rather prior to it in the order of nature. Indeed, the derivation of the evil disposition to the hearts of Adam’s posterity or rather the existence of the evil disposition implied in Adam’s first rebellion in the root and branches is a consequence of the union that the wise author of the world has established between Adam and his posterity, but not properly a consequence of the imputation of the sin.” See it’s the way the union was constituted between Adam and us and not properly a reckoning or imputing of Adam’s sin to us. You can see vaguely or dimly that’s what Edwards seems to be saying here. Rather it’s antecedent to the imputation, you see, as it was in Adam himself. “The first depravity of heart and the imputation of that sin,” here comes the crucial sentence, “are both” (that’s Adam’s sin and our sin) “the imputation of that sin are both the consequences of that established union, but yet in such an order, that the evil disposition is first and the charge of guilt consequent as it was in the case of Adam himself.” That later statement is what made Warfield think that this was a classic statement of immediate imputation, but hang in there if it’s not too clear to you as yet. I think it will be before we have finished an exploration of Edwards’s concept of personal identity.

The portions of the above quotations from the *Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* show the point of departure of Edwards from the general Reformed tradition. The guilt of Adam’s posterity or Adam’s initial transgression is not because it was imputed to them by virtue of their being representative in Adam but by virtue of their constituted identity with Adam. By virtue, he says, “of the constituted union of the branches with the root.” Again, the guilt is “a consequence of the union that the wise author of the world has established between Adam and his posterity.” Adam’s sin was not imputed to them. It was theirs is what Jonathan Edwards is saying. They sinned as truly and as actually as Adam sinned. If that is so, what is more proper than that they should be held responsible? No longer for Adam’s sin, about which there might be some question, but for their own sin. They are not held
responsible for something done by another but for something
done by themselves. They are blameworthy in exactly the same
way that Adam himself was blameworthy. What could be more
just? Any objection that was ever raised on the ground that one
person could not properly be held accountable for something
he never did himself is completely removed. Incidentally this
is the reason Edwards developed this view, as an answer to that
particular objection, and I think you’ll see immediately that if it’s
a sound position, it is an absolute reply to that objection, Why
should I be responsible for Adam? I never knew the guy. Well, the
person who is no longer blamed for something another person
he didn’t even know did, but for something he himself did. He’s
blamed solely for something which he himself committed. It’s
obvious that Edwards’s answer to this perpetual criticism is utterly
devastating, but it rests entirely on the validity of his doctrine of
personal identity. In this case, our identity with Adam, and to this
we now turn.

The initial form of the doctrine of personal identity in the mind,
which Edwards wrote as a young man, was that of John Locke’s.
I quote, “Well might Mr. Locke say that identity of personality
consisted in identity of consciousness or he might have said that
identity of personality too consisted in the same consciousness,
for a mind or person is nothing else,” says Edwards, “but
consciousness and what is included in it. The same consciousness
is to all intents and purposes individually the very same spirit
substance as much as the same particle of matter can be the same
with itself at different times.” That was number 11 in the mind,
but in Edwards’s final number 72, he changes his position because
of an objection to which he can find no answer. Again I’ll quote in
full because this doctrine of Edwards into imputation is distinctly
a unique matter and consequently understanding how he came
to it and how he justifies it is very important, even though this is
very heavy material for you to listen to if you’re driving along the
highway. I may say it’s deadly to any of you who have the habit
of listening to these tapes here. I warn you especially as we come
into the doctrine of sin that somebody was listening to a tape
of mine on sin [and] got so angry he drove into a ditch. If you’re
listening to Gerstner [and] drive into a ditch, you’ll drive over a
bridge if you listen to Jonathan Edwards, and I warn you, but right
now you aren’t going to get angry so much as you’re going to be
very perplexed. You’re going to have to listen very carefully, so
keep your eye on the road at the same time.
Now this is what he said in his final position, departing from John Locke on this matter of identity. He departs from Locke, and he moves toward this classic view of his on the imputation of Adam’s guilt because of the identity of Adam’s progeny with Adam himself. Here’s Edwards: “Identity of person is what seems never yet to have been explained. It is a mistake that it consists in sameness or identity of consciousness.” That’s what he thought it was before, but now he thinks it’s a mistake to think so. “If by sameness of consciousness be meant having the same ideas hereafter that I have now with a notion or apprehension that I had had them before, just in the same manner as I now have the same ideas that I had in time past by memory. It is possible,” he says, “without doubt in the nature of things for God to annihilate me and after my annihilation to create another being that shall have the same ideas in his mind that I have and with the like apprehension that he had had them before. In like manner, as a person has by memory, and yet I be in no way concerned in it, having no reason to fear that what that being shall suffer or hope for or what he shall enjoy. Can anyone deny that it is possible after my annihilation,” this is all hypothetical, you understand, that Edwards is saying, but he’s asking, “can anyone deny that it is possible after my [hypothetical] annihilation for God as it were to create two beings in the universe, both of them having my ideas communicated to them with such a notion of their having had them before after the memory and yet be ignorant one of another? And in such a case will anyone say that both these are one and the same person as they must be if they are both the same with me? It is possible there may be two such beings, each having all the ideas that now are in my mind in the same manner that I should have by memory if my being were continued, and yet these two beings not only be ignorant one of another, but also be in a very different state, one in a state of enjoyment and pleasure and the other in a state of great suffering and torment. Yet there seems to be nothing of impossibility in the nature of things but that the Most High could if He saw fit cause there to be another being who should begin to exist in some distant part of the universe with the same ideas I now have after the a manner of memory, and should henceforth so exist with me. We both retaining a consciousness of what was before the moment of his first existence in like manner, but henceforth should have a different train of ideas. Will anyone say that he in such a case is the same person with me when I know nothing of his suffering and am never the better for his joys?”
This is Edwards’s rationale for rejecting the idea of identity based on the consciousness through memory of identity with a being in the past. It would seem that Edwards came to rest with respect to personal identity with the above doctrine that is divinely constituted. It is closely related to the doctrine of continuous creation. Just as the only real difference between creation and providence is that creation is referred to the first time that God created, while providence is the term for all subsequent times, so the only difference between Adam’s sin and his posterity is that Adam’s is simply the first. His posterity sin is the same as his because their personal identity is constituted the same, but it’s the second, third, fourth, etc. A difference not in the thing itself but in the number of the thing. Each member of the posterity repeats the very same sin as Adam. It’s not truly, therefore, imputed or reckoned to them but repeated by them. It is true, continuous repetition. A continuous creation insofar as a creature is capable of such a thing.

In an early sermon, Edwards dealt with a standard objection against being judged for another man’s sin. His answer even then was that if we have a hand in another’s sin, we are responsible for it. If men have a hand in another’s hatred, they are guilty of it. So the question of whether we had a hand in Adam’s sin, Edwards goes on to prove that we not only had a hand in Adam’s sin but that it was our sin. Our hand, as it were. We committed it. He insists that there is no “deviation here.” Again I quote: “Adam’s posterity came by the corruption of nature, by God’s withholding His Spirit, and image from them judicially for their breach of the first covenant. It is not derived down naturally, but God withholds His Spirit from them in judgment for their first sin; that is, for their eating the forbidden fruit.” He continues saying that “Adam’s posterity came by corruption the same way that Adam did. They are looked upon as having eaten the forbidden fruit as well as Adam. They transgressed in Adam and there are or are subject to the same judgment.”

I have to warn you certainly the language there sounds like typical immediate imputation thinking. Undoubtedly as I say, Warfield had that in mind when he saw Edwards as a classic exponent of the classic position, but when Edwards says “they are looked upon as having eaten the forbidden fruit as well as Adam,” they are looked upon. Warfield could say that. I could say that. Any immediate imputationist could say that. We’re looked upon as doing it in the sense that we were represented by Adam. We didn’t do it, but it was the equivalent of our doing it because
our representative lacked [inaudible] in it. But that’s not what Edwards means by it. He means something far, far more intimate than that. It’s not an intimate union by representation. It’s an intimate union by identification. Now he uses the same language that fools even Warfield. It’s not the same thought. And he makes it very plain throughout and the only reason I think Warfield missed the point is he must not have read enough of Edwards on that subject to see that that rather traditional language was used in a very untraditional meaning.

The corruption is also transmitted, not only the guilt, but the corruption is also transmitted no differently. “The guilt of the breech of the covenant of works is imputed to them [us] and so they [we] suffer the consequences and ill fruits of it with loss of spiritual and holy principles and the consequent reigning of corruption in us.” But one can see that this is no transmission of the guilt to them, but the imputing of their own guilt. Edwards does not hesitate to say that “Adam’s posterity were as much concerned in the covenant of works as he himself.” Even that’s an understatement. The posterity is more concerned. They act identically as much as if they were there. In fact, they were. They ate the fruit themselves, which according to this view of identity they did.

What about the man Christ Jesus? Edwards says that He escaped defilement because He was not reckoned in the covenant that God made with Adam. He was not identified by divine constitution with Adam or He would have sinned in Adam and He would have fallen in Adam and He would have been born dead in trespasses, which was, of course, not the case. But apart from that fact, Edwards says, “there is as much natural cause why the human nature of Christ should be infected is why the human nature of any man.” If Christ by virtue of being a human being were actually identified with Adam, there would have been no way by which He would have been anything other than a sinner polluted with human guilt, but He was not identified. He was the one exception to the rule of human nature. In other words, God did not constitute this identity between Adam and Christ in sin as He did between Adam and all other posterity.

As I mentioned, Charles Hodge sees only immediate view of imputation here. Foster, . . . , Boardman also see mediate imputationism in Edwards and his successors following him in this deviation from the usual Reformed view. Hodge apparently doesn’t recognize the really novel element of personal identity
The Theology of Jonathan Edwards

10 of 12

Lesson 13 of 24

and for that reason fails to notice that this is no doctrine of mediate imputation. Edwards says in this important unpublished sermon on Genesis 3:11 that there is no need for a transmission of sin. The withdrawal of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to the evil of mankind. They were born without the Holy Spirit’s reigning in our heart and that’s all that’s necessary to explain sin. We’ll say a good deal more about that in our next lecture because there in a consistent way he explains the way in which we actually do sin.

I have a number of notes here that I won’t take time for to show that there’s been a profound misunderstanding of Edwards, but I’m glad to say that Clyde Holbrook in the Yale University Press edition of Edwards’s Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin does indeed catch the point and stresses it very clearly and it fascinates many modern scholars as it does Holbrook in this particular point.

The history of this doctrine is important enough and I’ve got to say something about it, though I can’t go into the kind of detail it deserves. Shelton Smith, a Duke professor, has said that the theory of personal identity fell flat so far as Edwards’s theological successors were concerned. It is an interesting thing that that doctrine of personal identity has had next to no history. It almost was stillborn. It’s one of Edwards’s most unique doctrines, but it . . . whether heretical or sound, it didn’t have much of a history. His theological successors were not much concerned with it. Nathanael Emmons, one of those early successors of Edwards who carried Edwards to something of an extreme, would nevertheless seem to confirm Shelton Smith’s remark at this particular point. I quote him, he says, “We could no more eat of that forbidden fruit before we were born than Adam could eat of it before he was created.”

Hopkins is another person, a great admirer of Edwards, and very much inclined to follow him in even his unique handling, but not on this point. Hopkins said essentially the same as Emmons, but Emmons went a step beyond that insisting that knowledge of the law was necessary and that this fact would exclude infants who, therefore, could not be identified with it. His opinion was that God works in them to will and to do of His good pleasure or produce those moral exercises in their hearts in which moral depravity properly and essentially exists. This strong assertion of voluntarism continued through Edwards’s [thought] and the last of the New England School.
Let’s sort of back off here a moment and take a look at the personal identity view ourselves. You remember in the last lecture as we backed off and looked at the way Edwards explained the origin of the first sin, we were thoroughly and deeply critical—as critical as I am of anything that Jonathan Edwards has ever thought or written. Here again, we’re in a unique area. It’s undoubtedly Edwardsian and not Calvinistic. This is not anticipated really. There’s a little suggestion of it by one theologian, but there’s no real anticipation of this and there’s hardly any sequel to it, but it’s worthy of our consideration, whether we consider only to dismiss it out of hand as a unique thought of a philosophical genius of Calvinistic persuasion who never got off the ground with this idea. But let me remind you before we say anything further that, as I said earlier, if this is sound, nobody again is ever going to object, as people perennially do object to the idea that sin could come into the world because of something somebody else did. Here we did it ourselves and our objections would choke in our throat if that were the case.

I don’t have time to give you all the arguments Edwards has for this concept of personal identity, but you can be sure when Edwards champions a view, he does so with powerful reasoning. It’s a powerful reasoning that doesn’t touch most people because they don’t work in that particular area, but let’s not forget this one thing. You would never again have to explain to a person who is outraged by the idea that all the sin and suffering and damnation that comes into this lost world of ours was because of something somebody else did. Now you feel and I feel we have very satisfactory answers to that question and criticism in terms of representation. If God appointed someone to act for us, that has to be right. And we could explain, as many Calvinists have explained, including Jonathan Edwards on some occasions, that God had to proceed in this manner. He dealt with individual angels because individuals don’t procreate. They don’t live in families. They are single units. The human race cohabits and lives in families. That’s our very character. We couldn’t possibly try each person individually. One thing, we aren’t all there at the same time. We are inheritors of our parents’ genes, and we are affected profoundly from infancy on by their example. We point out that God by a representative and that representative was a perfect individual, in a perfect situation, with a perfect inducement to persevere in holiness. Frequently when I’m dealing with this objection, I point out that God is more than fair when He tries the human race by one person because that one person was not only as perfect as any other one person would be, but he was made aware of the fact that the welfare of the
whole human race depended upon his perseverance and holiness. The very fact that my children will be affected by my behavior has a powerful impact. Imagine what an impact it would have if I thought that my act would actually determine the destiny of the whole human race. I mean, that gives Adam a kind of incentive that no individual could possibly have, but as I say, even though the classic representation federal view is a thoroughly defensible position, I think you can all see that if Edwards’s position were defensible, there couldn’t be any objection at all. If he can soundly argue that by divine constitution we are actually one with Adam and Adam’s sin was our sin and his pollution was our pollution, that would be the end of all argument, but I think we have to admit that history has indicated that that view, whether it’s sound or not, is not registering. That’s all there is to it.

I personally think there’s a great deal to it. I certainly think that Edwards is immune to any basic criticism about it, but as far as its impact is concerned, I think we have to say as we close this lecture that though Edwards gives us a very interesting idea, very cogently defended, which if successful would be absolutely devastating to all criticism of the imputation of Adam’s guilt and pollution at the same time, it whether rightly or wronging has not registered in the Christian tradition.