

John H. Gerstner, PhD, DD

Experience: Distinguished Professor Emeritus,
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary



A word about the terminology of Edwards which is rather troublesome here, the terminology in this area of regeneration and sanctification is rather troublesome with many theologians. Terms are used in different ways and in different systems somewhat differently. But the teaching is clear enough, but we do have to wade through a little technicality here. Effectual calling, conversion, repentance, and regeneration were approximately synonymous terms for Edwards. An important statement in his *Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* shows the identity of the last three terms. He says,

I put repentance and conversion together because the Scripture puts them together Acts 3:19 and because they plainly signify much the same thing. The word *metanoia* (repentance) signifies a change of the mind as the word *conversion* means a change or turning from sin to God and that this is the same change with that which is called regeneration except that this latter term especially signifies the change as the mind is fastened in it. The following things do show.

And he goes on to that train of thought. It's a rather unfortunate and unscientific way of proceeding. While it is true that Scripture tends to use these different terms synonymously, there are significant differences. Edwards himself notes that the mind active in repentance is passive in regeneration. He often notes that conversion too has reference to the passivity of the mind as well as its reflex activity. He especially observes that repentance is a change of the mind which we shall soon see he constantly attributes exclusively to God, the mind of man being passive if not hostile at the time of the change. Man's active turning away from sin and turning toward God is again a reflex of God's activity in changing.

So in Edwards, regeneration, repentance, conversion, and effectual calling possess this feature of passivity, though they are all followed by a human activity or response. The sinner is certainly in Edwardsian theology passive in regeneration. Regeneration or efficacious grace itself is characteristically immediate and solely supernatural without the human antecedents of faith and repentance. This is a crucial difference between Calvinists, who affirm it, and Arminians, who deny it. I think you're aware of the fact that the same time that Jonathan Edwards was living and preaching, so was John Wesley in England and George Whitefield. As a matter of fact, the three great pietists of the eighteenth century were [Friedrich] Spener in German Lutheranism, John Wesley in Anglicanism, and Jonathan Edwards in Congregationalism. But Wesley, unlike Spener and Edwards, moved away from the Reformed context in his thinking and thus brought on this famous free grace debate and strain with the good mutual friends George Whitefield and John Wesley.

It may puzzle you who study this episode to understand why George Whitefield would accuse his very intimate and dear friend who had had such a powerful influence on him and led him into his own great evangelistic career, you might be puzzled why George Whitefield would charge John Wesley with substituting free will, as he put it, for free grace. This is what Whitefield meant by that. Whitefield believed that the Bible taught that men were dead in trespasses and sins. One of his most powerful sermons describes the sinner in terms of Lazarus in the tomb. And in his own dramatic, eloquent, rhetorical fashion, Whitefield would invite his thousands and thousands of hearers to come closer to that tomb. Look into where dead Lazarus is. Behold, he stinks. He's foul. He'd go for minutes into a description of how hideous and detestable the rotting corpse of Lazarus was when he would say to his audience that Lazarus doesn't smell half as bad in the nostrils of God as you in your stinking sin.

Whitefield was a Calvinist all right. He preached it very emphatically, very influentially; and he preached the very thing that we've been noticing in Edwards's doctrine of seeking and the idea of regeneration as being totally from above, purely an act of free grace. When he charged his good friend John Wesley with substituting free will for that free grace, what he meant was, John, you have made fallen man over into a person who instead of stinking in corruption and sin and total depravity, though affected by sin, is nevertheless able of his own vaunted free will to reach out and bring salvation to himself through Jesus Christ.

You see, George Whitefield was preaching the same doctrine of regeneration that Jonathan Edwards was preaching. Regeneration is not only related to an accepting of the free gracious offer of Jesus Christ crucified, but also regeneration is free grace in the sense that it comes down from above absolutely freely to people who can't even reach up to receive it but have to be brought alive, regenerated, in order even to have faith. Whereas John Wesley was saying it all depended on this sinner who of his imaginary (in Whitefield's opinion) free will was able to reach out and accept that, that, for George Whitefield and though Jonathan Edwards was never engaged in direct controversy with John Wesley, was nothing less than a substitute of free will for free grace. It was a defection from the doctrine of regeneration which, as I say, has no human antecedents.

Here again I remind you, twenty years of seeking salvation is not an antecedent to regeneration. Some sought and never found. Some found without ever seeking. It was not customary. It was not usual. But one thing was always certain. When this gift was given, it was a gift, a gift so absolute that even the ability to accept it was a part of it. And any supposition that the acceptance of the gift would bring the regeneration, as Wesley was supposing and most modern evangelists are assuming, is a perversion of the gospel, in the opinion of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.

A favorite term in eighteenth-century theology was "physical regeneration," meaning that the influence of the Holy Spirit in regeneration consists in infusing a new nature (*fusus*). *Fusus* is the word for nature, and it means a physical regeneration is not the product of education or re-education but the infusion of a new *fusus* or nature and not merely moral influence. Daniel Whitby, the Arminian of Edwards's time, also speaks of the Spirit's work as physical. But it is clear that he construes physical regeneration as merely a natural effect so that even in those days they had semantic problems. There's no theological problem here to understanding. There's all the difference in the world between believing that regeneration precedes faith or believing that faith precedes regeneration. It's really a shame that other language is thrown in there that is confusing, but surely normally those who were of the Edwards persuasion were the ones who weren't comfortable with the idea of physical or nature regeneration. The others had a different pattern of thought, though unfortunately Daniel Whitby used the same language as the Reformed people.

“If ever men are turned, God must turn them,” insisted Edwards. “God in His Word is especially insistent on this. I know of no one thing in Scripture wherein such significant strong expressions are used in so great variety or one has so often as the testament [he means bestowment] of this benefit of true goodness and piety of heart. If God be not the proper bestower, author, and efficacious cause of virtue, then the greatest benefits flow not from Him are not owing to Him nor have we Him to thank for them,” insisted Edwards as he pressed Arminianism to the ground of a meritorious system of thought.

In fact there is more of God in it than in almost any other work. If God is stronger than the world, as Scripture says, how else could He be so? Ephesians 2:5–10 spells out the divine character of grace. We are saved by grace. Grace is God’s gift. We are, therefore, His workmanship. And we were foreordained to it. I know not what the apostle could have said more. Metaphorically this truth is stated in Romans 7:14. There is no lawful principle in us before we are married to Christ any more than a remarried woman whose husband still lived. Seeming virtues and good works before are not so.

These seemingly good works of the unregenerate that I call bad good works, splendid vices as words of Augustine, civic righteousness, Luther would often call them; but [of] these bad good works, these seeming good works of bad people and so on Edwards says, “They are a spurious brood being bastards and not children.” Again he says, “In saving conversion, they that are blind and in darkness have their eyes opened and are turned from darkness, (Stygian total darkness) to light. This grace is impossible with men, but it’s possible with God.” It is possible with men, according to John Wesley. They could not, according to George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. The Bible says God alone is able to overcome all resistance.

We are reminded at that point of a statement of Perry Miller; I can’t remember where I read it now. Perhaps I ought not to quote it. But it’s a kind of expression you never forget. But Perry Miller, who’s a man I mentioned before, the Harvard secularist who generated so much interest in Edwardsian theology among the academic liberals and so on, Perry Miller in one of his many writings commenting on John Calvin’s doctrine at this point of regeneration referred to it as a doctrine of a holy rape of the soul. “Rape,” you see, in the sense that the man isn’t choosing

it. It's something that happens to him. Miller tried to redeem the expression by making it a holy rape though it's very hard to think in terms of a holy rape. It has a certain value in it in suggesting it, but it's probably better not used. But at least it shows how a secular person being impressed by the thoroughgoing doctrine of John Calvin which has its, as Miller was noting there, repercussions in Jonathan Edwards in terms of the holy rape of the soul.

The saint is active afterwards in consequence of regeneration. Edwards is equally insistent that the saints reflect activity resulting from regeneration is a very real thing. He's utterly passive when regenerated and thoroughly active once he's born again. He calls on the converted to live the converted life. Probably Edwards's most definitive statement on this theme are these oft-quoted words.

In efficacious grace [this comes from his famous treatise on grace] we are not merely passive nor yet does God do some and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what He produces our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain. We only are the proper actors. We are in different respects wholly passive and wholly active.

What he means by that in the reception of the gift we are wholly passive. Once the gift is bestowed, we are wholly active just as God is wholly active. He does all, and we do all. That would probably, if I had one sentence to describe his doctrine of regeneration and sanctification, that would be it. God does all, and we do all.

Efficacious grace as the gift of God is quite consistent with vigorous human activity. Titus, he points out, was forward in his concern for the saints because God put it in his heart. The human soul voluntarily determines to do good, but this is what the influence of God's Spirit determines. One of Edwards's most comprehensive and clear descriptions of efficacious grace occurs in that sermon on Romans 2:10. I may say several things about the duo of sermons on Roman 2:8 and 9 and Romans 2:10. For one thing, as I mentioned before, it's so difficult to know how many sermons Edwards preached. You see, one of these sermons is twenty-five thousand words. I counted them once and so on. It was obviously a series of sermons. I suspect that the duo describing the wrath and judgment of God and the grace and salvation of God in a kind of parallel fashion would make a little book. And yet they're published as two separate sermons. And I may say to

those of you who are purchasing the two Hickman volumes that they are printed there among the sixty-five sermons of Jonathan Edwards. But then here's what he has to say on this subject in the sermon on Romans 2:10.

Indeed the saints in themselves have no excellence as they are in and of themselves. In them, that is in their flesh [now here again Edwards is using "flesh" just the way the apostle Paul does, not just for the physical body here but the fleshly mind controlled and serving creaturely desires] . . . in them [that is, in the saints] that is in their flesh dwells no good thing. They are in themselves [mind you, this is regenerated saints he's talking about now] filthy, vile creatures. And they see themselves to be so, but they have an excellence and a glory in them because they have Christ dwelling in them. 'Tis something of God this holy, heavenly spark is put into the soul in conversion; and God maintains it there. All the power of hell cannot put it out. Though it be small, 'tis a powerful thing. It has influence on the heart to govern that and brings forth holy fruits in the life and won't cease to prevail till it has consumed all the corruption that is left in the heart until it has turned the whole soul as it were into a pure, holy, and heavenly flame till the soul of us becomes like the angels a flame of fire and shines as the brightness of the firmament.

This principle once born grows. In conversion this spiritual principle begins again to be restored. Though it be but in an imperfect degree, it gets more and more powerful; the house of David waxes stronger and stronger and the house of Saul weaker and weaker. Again, like infants in the womb, all parts of the person are present from the beginning. Conversion is a universal change as this principle affects all of life including the body. Conversion is sometimes seen as an act, sometimes as a process; but it is apparent that Edwards is not lapsing into Arminianism but is thinking of each new act of sanctification as a veritable new moral creation, almost a continuous creation of the saint, you'll see.

Probably the reason Edwards will not let go of the active character of this principle is that he dreads anyone thinking of it in an antinomian easy-believism fashion. Here again antinomianism, I would say, is the worst plague rampant in modern evangelicalism in this last quarter of the twentieth century. It is horrible in itself and incredible in its extension. But if any of you think it was invented in the twentieth century, all you have to know is

that Robert Sandeman preceded Jonathan Edwards. And he says things that would make Bob [Thieme] look like a legalist. In this sermon on Deuteronomy 5:27, Edwards says that there is “nothing in heaven or on earth of a more active nature than the converted man’s good works. Godliness in the heart has a relation to practice as much as a fount has a relation to streams. Grace is infused. It is this infused principle which makes actions right and not actions that make the principle right as the Arminians erringly suppose.” You see, Edwards is having to struggle with the Arminians to the right and the antinomians to the left, or maybe you want to say the antinomians to the right and the Arminians to the left, however your vision dictates, but problems on both sides. We must walk the path of pure faith, but that path does not allow an indifference to works, as the [antinomians] say, nor does it allow any notion of anything virtuous whatsoever or morally able in the works, as the Arminians say. Truth is a razor’s edge, and you have to have the calloused feet of a Jonathan Edwards to walk on it all the time without relieving yourself by stepping to the soft ground to the right or the soft ground to the left. Likewise, regeneration is the result of predestination. “Conversion,” he writes, or “efficacious calling in this the decree begins to bring forth with regard to the elect.” Edwards is a predestinarian evangelist. He never forgets it even though he doesn’t always mention.

But when he is talking about vital Christian experience, he wants his people to know that vital, contemporary, immediately experienced grace in their soul is a result of nothing other than the eternal decree of a sovereignly gracious God. Consequently there is a great difference, he says, between converted and unconverted men. First there is a vast difference in understanding. The unconverted hear about holiness but see no excellency in it, as the converted do. Here again I repeat myself deliberately, because I want certain of these constantly recurring patterns of Edwardsian thought to be in your mind as a part of the Edwardsian heritage. What you do with them is your business, but it’s my business here at least as a lecturer on the theology of Edwards to get them over to you. I’ve said to you repeatedly and I’ll say probably again before this twenty-fourth tape is finished and so on, that Edwards believed that fallen men, though they in things of religion were as blind as a bat, nevertheless could have very acute understanding. And they could understand the nature of regeneration, the priority of regeneration, and all those matters. You remember in his sermon on James he points out that the devils aren’t heretics. They’re not Pelagians. They’re not deists. They know better than that. They know the truth. They hate it. They distort it. They twist it. They

fight it, but they're not ignorant of it.

What's the difference in the understanding of a saint and the understanding of an acute, unconverted sinner? The unconverted hear about holiness. They know about holiness. They could write a book on holiness, but they "see no excellency in it as the converted do." The reason a mind like Russell or Einstein and so on could know a great deal about the Bible, and Russell at least as I've said to you, could write a book on *Why I'm Not a Christian*, and give you some reasons for not believing in the ontological argument, they were blind as bats as far as the beauty, the divine light, and the power. And people who were very, very, very inferior to them intellectually could grasp it and glory in it and rejoice in it and live in it. The unconverted hear about holiness, but they see no excellency in it, as the converted do.

Second, the unconverted lack conviction of the reality of spiritual things. They know what they are. They even know the argument, but they've got a vested interest in hoping and thinking they're not true. So they lack conviction about them. They are unpersuaded, aware only of problems, but unwilling and unable to grasp the solution. You get that point? They can see it. They can even see the cogency of it. As I say, they could write the book on it. I know people who understand Christianity better than some very godly people with whom I'm acquainted. But it's not real to them. And it's not real not because they can't see it or the cogency of the arguments, but because they don't see the beauty of it and they do see the threat of it. And they're unwilling, therefore, to use their superior intellects not to find the truth but to avoid the truth, not to come to God but to justify moving away from God.

Third, unlike the converted, they have no love for God or any desire for any of His qualities. These are real differences, because only through spiritual knowledge (not just knowledge) is one assimilated to God. I remind you once again there must be knowledge. Edwards insists there is no spiritual knowledge without natural knowledge in the first place. God doesn't come to the heart except through the head. But unless He goes beyond and unless the head goes beyond itself to the heart, there is no assimilation to God.

Fourth, relational differences between converted and unconverted are also indicated: union with Christ, freedom from guilt, removal from divine wrath. Fifth, these vast differences which obtain between converted and unconverted argue the necessity also of

their ultimate separation. Later on we'll discuss his doctrine of the church in terms of membership and such things as that. But it's grounded on the fact that there's a fundamental difference between people, some who have spiritual light, the Holy Spirit dwelling in their hearts, and some who do not. And those who have are to be gathered together in what is called the Christian church. The others must not be permitted in that fellowship except to listen to the message but not to break bread together or to shake hands as Christians together or to consider themselves as in the same fellowship.

Now a word about irresistible grace. We noted Edwards's preference for the term "efficacious grace." But how did he feel about that expression "irresistible grace"? I know all the seminarians and probably many of you lay people who may listen to this tape know TULIP (T for total depravity, U for unconditional election, L for limited atonement, I for irresistible grace, P for the perseverance of the saints). So we're asking now how Edwards feels about the irresistible grace since he obviously has a predilection for the term "efficacious grace." This is what he has to say about that. And once again you'll notice that whenever Edwards comments on a subject, you can't assume that he's going to say simply what's expected. You can almost assume that he's going to say something new and fresh even when he agrees not to mention when he disagrees.

This is what he says here on this subject. "The dispute about grace as being resistible or irresistible is perfect nonsense. The reason is that this grace produces new life and will. Therefore, asking whether it's resistible or irresistible is tantamount to asking whether the will opposes the will." In the new birth you're given a new heart. You're given a new will. The idea of that being resistible when you're talking about that which does the resisting is, for Edwards, perfect nonsense and the explanation of why he prefers the term "efficacious grace." I do too. I think every Calvinist does. It just doesn't fit with the acrostic TULIP. Just about every one of those letters, TULIP, if understood correctly, is a fine quintessential summary of the Reformed faith especially as developed at the famous Synod of Dort in the Netherlands, 1618 and 1619. But if not understood, every solitary article there can be a misrepresentation and a distortion of what it believes and irresistible grace, for the very reason Edwards is here giving. "If this grace is thought of as enlightening the understanding, then it could be resistible. That would mean that the mind sees so well that it could will or could nil if it's objected that the person can

still will what he pleases.” This is saying that he can will what he wills, which Edwards finds rather obvious. But the objection continues. “Could he not have willed otherwise? Yes,” comes Edwards’s answer, “if he had willed otherwise.”

The whole dispute is nonsense because it only says that the man can do or choose what he can and does actually choose. He’s not opposing the doctrine, please understand. He is demurring on the expression. As I say, you could demur with total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement especially, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints as well. But there’s a proper way of understanding them, and the proper way of understanding irresistible grace is that it’s efficacious grace. It’s a grace which changes the person so that he wills otherwise. Augustine here again is very much like Edwards.

One time I wrote a paper on Edwards as a [favor] for a good friend of mine. I worked especially with the doctrine of irresistible grace and Augustine, because the Roman church, especially the Thomists and somewhat the Dominicans in the Roman church, liked to feel that they are true to Augustine. The Jesuits, of course, it’s a downright caricature. But the Dominicans and Thomists are deeply admiring of Augustine. They almost have a right to call him one of their fathers. So I won’t for a moment give them Thomas Aquinas, not to mention Aurelius Augustinus. But I was reading one writer in the preparation of this paper, an especially good one, a French writer, on the Augustine theology. And he went along with Augustine so solidly. I was wondering how he could avoid giving him to us Calvinists as a Protestant saint rather than trying feloniously to claim him for the Roman church. And this is where the difference came in. They tried to suggest, this author and other authors too, that Augustine did demur at the final line of irresistible grace. Regeneration even has to precede faith. They admitted that but that even though regeneration took place, they were trying to suggest that Augustine felt that even there that grace could be resisted. That’s nonsense as far as John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards say; once you’re born again you naturally believe there’s no such thing as receive a meaningless sort of a proposition, and so it was with Augustine.

Since the burden of Edwards’s preaching ministry had to be [that] the antinomian problem was far more severe, but it was far less extensive in its advocacy too; whereas Arminianism was coming on the size of a man’s fist at that time. It’s now become an absolute thunderstorm all over evangelicalism. But in those

days it was the danger threatening the reform which for Edwards was the biblical faith. And nowhere more crucially than at this matter of regeneration. So let us see what he has to say vis-à-vis the Arminians. “The Arminians found effectual calling to be indecisive, gradual, and natural.” If that’s true, that is damning, of course. If John Wesley ever thought that to be true, he would recognize that he [had] to give up that kind of theology. The only way Arminians could go on in business as professing Christians would be to think that that is false. But this is Edwards’s opinion, and we’ll follow why he claims as he does. You can be perfectly sure Edwards never hurls epithets without documenting the reason for them and the necessity for hurling them. I repeat. The Arminians found effectual calling to be indecisive, gradual, and natural. “This is the assistance of the Holy Spirit,” says Edwards, “which produces a certain meekness or teachability that is not conversion but may lead to conversion. This is the drawing of the Father as the Arminians interpret that passage of Jesus. Thus a good and honest heart is the fruit of the Spirit’s assistance,” not regeneration, but assistance before actual obedience following regeneration.

I may say again, Jim Packer has a fine little essay entitled “Arminianisms” to point out that they have degrees, just as the Calvinists. He could write an essay on Calvinisms. There are little sort of school differences in these different patterns of thought. And certainly the Arminianism of John Wesley in England was a much more evangelical phenomenon than Episcopius and Limborch and people like that in the Netherlands, so both of them had the basic pattern of thought. But here Edwards is talking about the evangelical Arminianism. His remark is that “Arminianism comes to the ground” as a result of that type of thinking. This cryptic comment seems to mean either that the Arminian is here capitulating by seeing preventing grace, prevenient grace as actual grace. It’s the grace that goes before regeneration as really grace and not merely that which goes before grace as actual grace. So the Arminians are making prevenient or preventing grace as actual grace. Or they conceive of virtue existing before virtue exists, thus contradicting the system.

In the same vein, Arminianism construes “becoming as little children as prior to efficacious graciousness.” The new birth is entrance into the kingdom of God, but it comes about by nurture and culture. What it all comes down to, as the Arminian Daniel Whitby, who was much more radical for example than John Wesley, puts it—this is John Gerstner saying that, not Jonathan Edwards.

But Daniel Whitby is the one Edwards is citing at this point. What it all comes down to, as the Arminian Daniel Whitby puts it, is this. “That efficacious grace amounts to God’s merely giving motives to obedience and virtue to which unregenerate man responds,” because the Arminians believe that his total depravity is not such that he is unable to respond.

Edwards’s critique of the Arminian view of conversion is many-splendored. I can only give this hastily in the last couple minutes of this tape. First, basic observation is virtually in the words of Scripture that the nature cannot change nature. Only super nature can. Flesh is flesh. Spirit is spirit, says Edwards, contradicting Arminianism, which conceives of the flesh doing something which is spiritual in the very terms of John 3. Second, in the Arminian view, God can do no more than the devil, angels, the Pharisees, and obviously men themselves, and only the meaner parts of the process are allotted to God, who can only sow while the Arminians give the increase. God who, according to Scripture, is absolute sole and sovereign in this work is really left out of it. Third, the Arminians have yet to show how righteousness can come to the souls of men without a truly physical (remember that word?) work of the Holy Spirit. If this work depends on the sinner, then as Stebbing, one of the Arminians of the day (very acute but very Arminian) admits, the work may fail to occur. Fifth, if it were imagined thus to occur, it would mean that man who came into grace on his own could fall out of it the same way. But sixth, repentance is specifically called a sovereign gift of God. Edwards is citing text for all of this, you see. I don’t have time to mention those, but I remind you once again Edwards never advances a doctrine unless he feels he has very adequate biblical support. Seventh, Paul, the classic case of conversion, was surely not gradually changed. Eighth, apostates who went out from us on those principles were still, in the Arminian principle, in the converted state. Ninth, Edwards deals with the favorite illustration of the Arminians, the beggar accepting alms, by noting that the position to receive the preferred gift is the pointed issue. Tenth, if being born again means being admitted to the kingdom, then John 3:5 means that unless a man is admitted to the kingdom, he cannot be admitted to the kingdom on Arminian theory here. I’m sorry I don’t have time to develop it, but I take it I’ve said enough on this subject for you to understand wherein Jonathan Edwards differed from the Arminian theology.