

Jonathan Edwards  
the Calvinist:

# **THE CENTRALITY OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY IN EDWARDS' THEOLOGY**

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Jonathan Edwards is becoming a celebrity. Or, more accurately, Edwards is a dead rock star amongst 20-something evangelicals. The reformed resurgence, led by John Piper and a plethora of other pastors, theologians and leaders, has captured the minds and the hearts of a large number of young believers, promoting Edwards' works from the dust-riddled basements of libraries into the hands of eager young Calvinists. As Collin Hansen wrote in an article<sup>1</sup> for *Christianity Today*, "Not since the decades after his death have evangelicals heaped such attention on Edwards."

The new found attention is centered around Edwards' propagation of the sovereignty of God. And though there remains little debate on Edwards' allegiance to Calvinism, Edwards' theology as presented in his works should clear any confusion. The "T" in "TULIP," representing the foundational doctrine of Calvinism, Total Depravity, is central to Jonathan Edwards' Theology for without it, his understanding of the will, of sin and salvation, would crumble.

Before it can be established that Edwards' Theology is centered around Total Depravity, the definition of the term within Calvinism and Calvinism's historical development must be presented. Calvinism is defined by five points spelling out the acronym TULIP. The first is Total Depravity, which holds that because of the fall the whole of man has been corrupted, "leaving him unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel."<sup>2</sup> The "U" stands for Unconditional Election, which holds that God has sovereignly and unconditionally chosen before the foundations of the world those to be saved by Christ's atonement. The "L" stands for Limited Atonement, that Christ's redeeming work on the cross secured salvation for the elect and the elect alone. The "I" stands for Irresistible Grace, that the Holy Spirit inwardly calls the elect to repentance, a call that cannot be denied. The last point is Perseverance of the Saints, that the

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1 Hansen, Collin, "Young, Restless, Reformed," *Christianity Today*, 1.

2 Steele, David, and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publications, 2004), 5.

elect have been chosen of God and therefore cannot lose their redemption.<sup>3</sup>

Calvinism, though named after the 16th century reformer, originated not with John Calvin but Augustine. "Augustine...maintained that human nature had been so completely corrupted by Adam's fall that no one, in himself has the ability to obey either law or the gospel."<sup>4</sup> Alongside Calvin, the leading reformers of the 16th century, such as Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli, were heavily Calvinistic in their doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Though Calvinism had been around for centuries, the five points were officially brought together and outlined at the Synod of Dort in 1619 in order to denounce the rising doctrine of Arminianism.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-four years later Calvinism would be reaffirmed again as the "learned, godly and judicious Divines"<sup>7</sup> were called by the English Parliament to Westminster Abbey where in 1646 the *Westminster Confession* was produced, a document systematically presenting reformed Calvinistic doctrine. In Articles 6:1-4, the confession presents Total Depravity:

6.1. Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptations of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit their sin, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

6.2. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.

6.3. They being the root of mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by original generation.

6.4. From this original corruption, by which we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, proceeds all actual transgressions.

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3 Ibid., 5-8.

4 Steele, 9

5 Ibid., 10.

6 Ibid., 12-13

7 Williamson, Robert, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, (City: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2008), 84.

The key to Total Depravity is two fold. First, sin extends to the whole of man, and second, it leaves man unable to love God, negating any free will choice of conversion apart from the Spirit's call. This is seen in Articles 9:3-4:

9.3. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

9.4 When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly, or only, will that which is good, but does also will that which is evil.

Edwards' uniqueness as a theologian was his philosophical mind, as John H. Gerstner — who, before his death, was the foremost Christian authority on Edwards — wrote, “Never in history did a finer philosophical mind than that of Jonathan Edwards give its sustained and almost undivided attention to the bible...”<sup>8</sup> The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reads “Jonathan Edwards...is widely acknowledged to be America's most important and original philosophical theologian.”<sup>9</sup> His greatest philosophical work, *Freedom of the Will*, was written in response to the Arminian incursion into Puritan thought. In the book Edwards systematically dismantles the Arminian notion of free will, a doctrine in direct opposition to its Calvinistic counterpart, Total Depravity. “Edwards is at pains to combat the 'prevailing notions,' advanced primarily by Arminians, that the will is “self-determined” in the sense that our choices are not predetermined by any other cause but the exercise of will itself, or are exercised from a state of 'indifference.' For Edwards, this was nonsensical and dangerous, because it denied the

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8 Gerstner, John, and Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: a Mini-Theology*, (City: Soli Deo Gloria Ministries, 1997), 21.

9 "Jonathan Edwards," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/edwards/>, Internet; accessed 10 May 2009.

sovereignty of God as first cause.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the centrality of Total Depravity in Edwards' theology of the will is made obvious at the very reason of its writing.

Edwards divided the work into four parts. The first part deals with terminology and various topics such as the nature and determination of the will and the distinction between natural and moral necessity. The second part deals with the Arminian notion of free will and whether such a free will could ever exist. In the third part Edwards deals with whether Arminian liberty is necessary for moral agency and in the fourth he answers objections from his opponents and discusses the relation of divine volition to the world and to man.<sup>11</sup>

In Part I, Section II of *Freedom of the Will*, titled “Concerning the Determination of the Will,” Edwards writes of volition's cause.

...whatever is perceived or apprehended by an intelligent and voluntary agent, which has the nature and influence of a motive to volition or choice, is considered or viewed as good ... It must be observed in what sense I use the term “good;” namely, as of the same import with “agreeable.” To appear good to the mind, as I use the phrase, is the same as to appear agreeable, or seem pleasing to the mind. ...Thus, when a drunkard has his liquor before him, and he has to choose whether to drink it, or no; the immediate objects, about which his present volition is conversant, and between which his choice now decides, are his own nets, in drinking the liquor, or letting it alone; and this will certainly be done according to what, in the present view of his mind, taken in the whole of it, is most agreeable to him. If he chooses to drink it, and not to let it alone, then this action, as it stands in the view of his mind, with all that belongs to its appearance there, is more agreeable and pleasing than letting it alone.<sup>12</sup>

Here Edwards is setting the stage for his argument. The sinner, who is wholly corrupted, cannot choose God of his own free will because that which is “good” or “agreeable” to him is evil and wretched, not holy and virtuous. The sinner cannot love God for the sinner is inclined to sin,

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10 “Freedom of the Will: Introduction.” The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. Available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/major-works/freedom-of-the-will/>. Internet; accessed 5 April 2009.

11 Smith, John, *Jonathan Edwards* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 58.

12 Edwards, Jonathan, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 Volume Set* (Banner of Truth, 19796), Vol. 1, 6.

making him unable of himself to choose God, who is virtuous and holy. This problem is often described with the term “moral inability.” Edwards uses the term in Part I, Section 4 to further develop the stage for his argument. “A strong habit of virtue and great degree of holiness may cause a moral inability to love wickedness in general, may render a man unable to take complacency in wicked persons or things; or to choose a wicked life, and prefer it to a virtuous life. And on the other hand, a great degree of habitual wickedness may lay a man under an inability to love and choose holiness; and render him utterly unable to love an infinitely holy Being, or to choose and cleave to him as his chief good.”<sup>13</sup>

In the meat of his argument, Edwards returns to his example of moral inability, explaining how one is unable to overcome an inclination and how the will is determined by motive:

This is manifest from what was observed in the first part concerning the nature of moral Inability, as distinguished from natural: where it was observed, that a man may then be said to be morally unable to do a thing, when he is under the influence or prevalence of a contrary inclination, or has a want of inclination, under such circumstances and views. It is also evident, from what has been before proved, that the Will is always, and in every individual act, necessarily determined by the strongest motive; and so is always unable to go against the motive, which, all things considered, has now the greatest strength and advantage to move the Will... The Will in the time of that diverse or opposite leading act or inclination, and when actually under its influence, is not able to exert itself to the contrary, to make an alteration, in order to a compliance. The inclination is unable to change itself; and that for this plain reason, that it is unable to incline to change itself.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of the passage, Edwards is refuting the argument that one who is morally unable cannot be obligated to obey commands, essentially that it is “absurd to suppose God by his command should require that of men which they are unable to do.”<sup>15</sup> While easily demolishing

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13 Edwards, vol. 1, 11.

14 Ibid., 49.

15 Ibid., 48.

the Arminian argument, Edwards clearly shows the relationship between the will and total depravity: that a man's inclination cannot be changed for his will is unable to do that which is contrary to his inclination. Since original sin has corrupted the whole of man, all of humanity is inclined to sin and cannot do that which is contrary to the inclination, choose God.

Edwards does not just explain why total depravity is so in philosophical terms, but directly references the point. In Section II, Edwards writes:

Hence all arguments of Arminians, who own God's omniscience, against the doctrine of the inability of unregenerate men to perform the conditions of salvation, and the commands of God requiring spiritual duties, and against the Calvinistic doctrine of efficacious grace; on this ground, that those doctrines, though they do not suppose men to be under any constraint or coercion, yet suppose them under Necessity, must fall to the ground. And their arguments against the necessity of men's volitions, taken from the reasonableness of God's commands, promises, and threatenings, and the sincerity of his counsels and invitations; and all objections against any doctrines of the Calvinists as being inconsistent with human liberty, because they infer Necessity; I say, all these arguments and objections must be justly esteemed vain and frivolous, as coming from them; being leveled against their own doctrine, as well as against that of the Calvinists.<sup>16</sup>

Later in Section IV, Edwards again asserts victory over Arminian arguments "against the Inability of fallen men to exert faith in Christ, or to perform other spiritual duties, from the sincerity of God's counsels and invitations, must be without force."<sup>17</sup> The final confirmation of the centrality of total depravity in Edwards' theology of the will as seen through the very reason of its writing is in the conclusion as Edwards summarizes his argument. "It is easy to see, how the decision of most of the points in controversy between Calvinists and Arminians, depends on the determination of this grand article concerning the Freedom of the Will requisite to moral agency; and that by clearing and establishing the Calvinistic doctrine in this point, the chief

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

arguments are obviated by which Arminian doctrines in general are supported, and the contrary doctrines demonstratively confirmed.”<sup>18</sup> Edwards clearly states that by establishing the Calvinistic doctrine in the point of “Freedom of the Will requisite to moral agency,” the arguments presented by the Arminians are invalidated and the Calvinistic doctrines confirmed. Edwards again champions the victory of Calvinistic doctrine in the next paragraph, specifically naming total depravity.

The things which have been said, obviate some of the chief objections of Arminians against the Calvinistic doctrine of the total depravity and corruption of man's nature, whereby his heart is wholly under the power of sin, and he is utterly unable, without the interposition of sovereign grace, savingly to love God, believe in Christ, or do anything that is truly good and acceptable in God's sight. For the main objection against this doctrine is, that it is inconsistent with the freedom of man's will, consisting in indifference and self-determining power; because it supposes man to be under a necessity of sinning, and that God requires things of him, in order to his avoiding eternal damnation, which he is unable to do; and that this doctrine is wholly inconsistent with the sincerity of counsels, invitations, etc. Now this doctrine supposes no other necessity of sinning, than a moral necessity; which, as has been shown, don't at all excuse sin; and supposes no other inability to obey any command, or perform any duty, even the most spiritual and exalted, but a moral inability, which, as has been proved, don't excuse persons in the nonperformance of any good thing, or make 'em not to be the proper objects of commands, counsels and invitations. And moreover, it has been shown, that there is not, and never can be, either in existence, or so much as in idea, any such freedom of will, consisting in indifference and self-determination, for the sake of which, the doctrine of original sin is cast out; and that no such freedom is necessary, in order to the nature of sin, and a just desert of punishment.<sup>19</sup>

Edwards specifically states that what has been presented has done away with some of the chief objections to Total Depravity and goes on to explain the doctrine. If the doctrine was not central to his theology, and specifically, in this case, to his theology of the will, he would not make such an assertion. The central purpose of “Freedom of the Will” was to show that the Arminian notion of free will cannot hold up against reason, and thus promoting Total Depravity

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18 *Ibid.*, 87.

19 *Ibid.*, 87.

as a rational concept, as well as a biblical.

Without Edwards' understanding of sin's corruption of the whole man and man's inability therefore, to love God of his own free will, he would have no foundation for his theology of the will. The question becomes, is Edwards' theology of the will dependent upon the doctrine of Total Depravity, or is his acceptance of Total Depravity dependent upon his theology of the will? To agree with the latter is to say that Edwards' theology was not dependent upon the Bible, but his rational thought. Though to agree with the former is to deny Edwards' own insistence of the relation between reason and doctrine. More likely, the two were so intertwined as not to be distinguished, yet there is little doubt that Edwards originated his theology of the will upon the Calvinistic doctrine. For Edwards' theology was built upon the sovereignty of God ever since his meditation upon 1 Timothy 1:17 in 1721 brought him from rejection to a “delightful conviction”: “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; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before.”

Edwards' understanding of the doctrine of sin has already been seen in his theology of the will, but to correctly identify the centrality of Total Depravity in his whole theology, further illumination is essential in order to determine its influence. Referring to Edwards' view of the doctrine of sin, Gerstner writes, “Not only is mankind disobedient universally, but its disobedience is universal. This is, not only is disobedience as extensive as mankind, but it pertains to each individual in the universality of being. The totality of mankind is totally depraved according to Edwards, who, if anything, is more thoroughgoing than John Calvin on this crucial Calvinistic doctrine.”<sup>20</sup> Edwards' doctrine of sin was dependent on and built upon

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20 Gerstner, 44.

Total Depravity, for without it man would not be in a “dreadful condition” as his sermon on Acts 6:29, 30 is titled. “On account of the depraved state of their natures. 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.”<sup>21</sup> Edwards follows with an explanation of how the dreadfulness of the condition appears in three points. First: “The dreadfulness of their depravity appears in that they are so sottishly blind and ignorant...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...”<sup>22</sup> Second: “And as there is no good principle in the hearts of natural men, so there are never any good exercises of heart, never one good thought, or motion of heart in them. Particularly, there is no love to God in them. They never had the least degree of love to the infinitely glorious Being....They never desired to have God and Christ for their portion.”<sup>23</sup> Third: “Sin is a thing of a dreadful nature, and that because it is against an infinitely great and an infinitely holy God...There is nothing that will awe our hearts; and there is nothing that will draw them to obedience: let there be mercies or afflictions, threatenings or gracious calls and invitations, frowning, or patience and long-suffering, or fatherly counsels and exhortations.”<sup>24</sup>

In the same way that *Freedom of the Will* is the primary source for Edwards' theology of the will, *Original Sin* is for Edwards' doctrine of sin. Its full title, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, shows the purpose of its writing. Edwards wrote to defend the Calvinistic view of sin, Total Depravity, primarily in a theological setting, specifically against “Dr. Taylor’s *Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin*”<sup>25</sup> which argued that man is not blamable

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21 Edwards, Vol. 2, 817.

22 Ibid., 818.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 819.

25 Ibid., 145.

because man is hindered not by a moral inability but a natural deficiency.<sup>26</sup> But Edwards was also writing beyond the theological setting to meet the tide of Enlightenment which was spreading an inherently good view of human nature. Edwards countered the attacks upon the Calvinistic doctrine with Scripture, history and reason, proving the natural and inborn depravity of man.<sup>27</sup>

Starting in his preface to *Original Sin*, Edwards is quick to support Total Depravity, establishing it as a doctrine that the whole gospel supposes and the true notion of the gospel is built upon. "I look on the doctrine as of great importance; which every body will doubtless own it is, if it be true. For, if the case be such indeed, that all mankind are by nature in a state of total ruin, both with respect to the moral evil of which they are the subjects, and the afflictive evil to which they are exposed, the one as the consequence and punishment of the other; then, doubtless, the great salvation by christ stands in direct relation to this ruin, as the remedy to the disease; and the whole gospel, or doctrine of salvation, must suppose it; and all real belief, or true notion of that gospel, must be built upon it."<sup>28</sup>

Edwards viewed Total Depravity not just as a significant doctrine, but an essential doctrine for here he has written that our understanding of salvation and belief are dependent upon that doctrine. It would be spurious to suggest otherwise, for why would Edwards devote such length of words in defending a doctrine he did not view as essential? Taylor had undermined the Calvinistic system of redemption of which total depravity is the first act.<sup>29</sup> And Edwards, being the Calvinist defender he was, had to act to protect a doctrine he viewed as

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26 Miller, Perry, and John Wilson, *Jonathan Edwards*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 273.

27 "Introduction," *Original Sin (1758)*, The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, Available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/major-works/original-sin/>, Internet; accessed 25 April 2009.

28 Edwards, Vol. 1, 145.

29 Edwards, Jonathan and Clyde A. Holbrook. *Original Sin (WJE Online Vol. 3)*. The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, Available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXdwaglsby9nZXRvYmplY3QueGw/Yy4yOjI6MjoyLndqZW8=>, Internet; accessed 25 April 2009.

central to redemption. For without sin what does man need salvation from? Edwards understood the perilous road Taylor's theology, partnered with the humanistic views of the Enlightenment, could lead New England down, having already been saturated with Arminian thought.

In defending the Calvinistic doctrine, Edwards establishes the veracity of moral depravity of all humanity. In the first part of his work, Edwards asserts that the depravity of nature is visible in the immediate sin of the individual as soon as they are capable and the continuation and progression of that sin.

The great depravity of man's nature appears, not only in that they universally commit sin, who spend any long time in the world, but in that men are naturally so prone to sin, that none ever fail of immediately transgressing God's law, and so of bringing infinite guilt on themselves, and exposing themselves to eternal perdition, as soon as they are capable of it.

The Scriptures are so very express in it, that all mankind, all flesh, all the world, every man living, are guilty of sin; that it must at least be understood, everyone that is come to be capable of being active, in duty to God, or sin against him, is guilty of sin.

...Again, the reality and greatness of the depravity of man's nature appears in this, that he has a prevailing propensity to be continually sinning against God. What has been observed above, will clearly prove this, That same disposition of nature, which is an effectual propensity to immediate sin, amounts to a propensity to continual sin. For a being prone to continual sinning is nothing but a proneness to immediate sin continued. Such appears to be the tendency of nature to sin, that as soon as ever man is capable, it causes him immediately to sin, without suffering any considerable time to pass without sin.<sup>30</sup>

Edwards did not view sin as a mere hinderance of human nature, but as a cosmic rebellion against an infinitely sovereign and lovely God. Taylor's optimism and confidence in man's ability to fulfill the moral law apart from God's redemptive power was undermined by man's “propensity to immediate sin” and thus his “propensity to continual sin.” Concluding his statements concerning the immediacy and continuation of sin, Edwards strikes at Taylor's

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30 Edwards, Vol. 1, 153.

assertion that man is born free of sin by showing that even the greatest of men are tainted.

According to Dr. Taylor, men come into the world wholly free from sinful propensities. And if so, it appears from what has been already said, there would be nothing to hinder, but that many, without being better than they are by nature, might perfectly avoid the commission of sin. But much more might this be the case with men after they had, by care, diligence and good practice, attained those positive habits of virtue, whereby they are at a much greater distance from sin, than they were naturally: which this writer supposes to be the case with many good men. But since the Scripture teaches us, that the best men in the world do often commit sin, and have remaining pollution of heart, this makes it abundantly evident, that men, when they are no otherwise than they were by nature, without any of those virtuous attainments, have a sinful depravity; yea, must have great corruption of nature.<sup>31</sup>

It was evident to Edwards that scripture and history bare witness to the depravity of man. From scripture it is plainly seen that even the greatest of saints sin and Edwards draws from Hebrews 12:6-8 as evidence, to show that the children of God are not above chastisement. Nor is there a degree of righteousness that can be attained that would lead to a sinless life. Here Edwards uses Ecclesiastes 7:20 and Proverbs 20:9 to show that scripture attests to a remaining pollution of the heart which is evidence of moral depravity.<sup>32</sup>

Edwards had already shown in the conclusion to the previous section that sin cannot be downplayed nor dismissed, leaning on universality of depravity and using reason to show how, within an earthly context, no one would suggest otherwise.

Agreeable to these things, the Scripture represents all mankind, not only as having guilt, but immense guilt, which they can have no merit or worthiness to countervail...

Therefore how absurd must it be for Christians to object, against the depravity of man's nature, a greater number of innocent and kind actions, than of crimes; and to talk of a prevailing innocency, good nature, industry, and cheerfulness of the greater part of mankind? Infinitely more absurd, than it would be to insist, that the domestic of a prince was not a bad servant, because though sometimes he

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

contemned and affronted his master to a great degree, yet he did not spit in his master's face so often as he performed acts of service; or, than it would be to affirm, that his spouse was a good wife to him, because, although she committed adultery, and that with the slaves and scoundrels sometimes, yet she did not do this so often as she did the duties of a wife. These notions would be absurd, because the crimes are too heinous to be atoned for, by many honest actions of the servant or spouse of the prince; there being a vast disproportion between the merit of the one, and the ill-desert of the other: but in no measure so great, nay infinitely less than that between the demerit of our offenses against God and the value of our acts of obedience.<sup>33</sup>

The unmistakable weight of sin, the vileness of the singular act and the ever increasing vileness of the plural, in Edwards' doctrine of sin could not exist apart from the centrality of Total Depravity for only by attributing a universally corrupting nature to sin does the rebellious act become that of an anchor, unable to be pulled from the depths by any human willpower. In Edwards' mind, so great is the anchor that man cannot do a single act of moral good,<sup>34</sup> for lacking all virtue, man is unable to do anything but that which their nature demands.<sup>35</sup>

The doctrine of sin extends beyond the depravity of nature to the imputation of Adam's first sin upon his posterity. Thus it is important to understand Edwards' view of imputation if the centrality of Total Depravity is to be observed. While answering objections in *Original Sin*, Edwards explains his view of imputation:

And in like manner, depravity of heart is to be considered two ways in Adam's posterity. The first existing of a corrupt disposition in their 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; 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... Indeed the derivation of the evil disposition to the hearts of Adam's posterity, or rather the coexistence 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

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33 Ibid., 153.

34 Gerstner, 44.

35 Edwards, Jonathan, *Sermons, Series II, 1729-1731 (WJE Online Vol. 45)*, Ed. Jonathan Edwards Center.

world has established between Adam and his posterity: but not properly a consequence of the imputation of his sin; nay, rather antecedent to it, as it was in Adam himself. The first depravity of heart, and the imputation of that sin, are both the consequences of that established union: but yet in such order, that the evil disposition is first, and the charge of guilt consequent; as it was in the case of Adam himself.<sup>36</sup>

This much misunderstood explanation of imputation by Edwards is unpacked by Oliver Crisp in an article for the *Scottish Journal of Theology*: "...Edwards took the notion of the union of Adam and his posterity from Augustinian realism, and the notion of Adam's place as the first man from federalism, to forge a *via media* between these two traditional views on that matter."<sup>37</sup> Though the historic Calvinistic view of imputation rests in federalism, Edwards saw that federalism alone could not fulfill the inherent physical nature of the imputation of sin expressed in Total Depravity, nor could it account for the individual's guilt.<sup>38</sup> For sin to spread and morally corrupt all of humanity, leaving the individual blind and unable to discern his own depravity apart from the work of God, imputation must have been forensic unity through physical means. Thus Edwards' understanding of the imputation of sin is centered around Total Depravity for it is more thoroughly consistent with the Calvinistic doctrine than that of the historical Calvinistic position.

The doctrine of sin is directly connected to the doctrine of salvation, for salvation is dependent upon the state of man in determining how the salvation takes place. Hence, to understand the centrality of Total Depravity in Edwards' theology, his doctrine of salvation must be examined.

In Calvinism, salvation must occur without any, however small, movement of man's will of his own power. Salvation occurs through the "I" in "TULIP" as the Spirit irresistibly draws

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36 Edwards, Vol. 1, 221.

37 Crisp, Oliver D., "On the theological pedigree of Jonathan Edwards's doctrine of imputation," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 56, 326-327.

38 Crisp, 325.

the morally depraved man to repentance. Regeneration and rebirth must take place before one can choose to love God because one must be discerning of their own depravity and need of salvation in order to decide to turn from sin. If Total Depravity is central to Edwards' doctrine of salvation it will be evident in the workings of salvation in the heart of man. And this it is, as Stephen R. Holmes writes, "...conversion, at least in Edwards' scheme, is probably best understood by examining what it is a turning from before looking at what it is a turning to."<sup>39</sup>

Edwards' understanding of salvation begins with the sovereignty of God and the inability of man to will himself to repentance. Returning to Edwards' sermon on Acts 6:29, 30, he writes, "They have nothing on which to depend for conversion. They have nothing in the world, by which to persuade themselves that they shall ever be converted. Left to themselves, they never will repent and turn to God. If they are ever converted, therefore, it is God who must do it."<sup>40</sup> Returning to the state of man, Edwards is adamant that conversion cannot happen apart from God's sovereign will, authoritatively asserting that a sense of spiritual things cannot be obtained apart from the bestowing of divine and spiritual light. A sinner may know of sin, may have an opinion of the existence of God and of holiness, but a sinner cannot have a sense of such things, to have tasted the majesty and glory of God.<sup>41</sup> Salvation, or more appropriately regeneration, then must occur through the work of God, by the Spirit, alone because of the morally depraved state of man. Edwards explains this sense of spiritual things in his great treatise, *Religious Affections*.

This sense of the spiritual excellency and beauty of divine things, does also tend directly to convince the mind of the truth of the gospel, as there are very many of the most important things declared in the gospel, that are hid from the eyes of natural men... And by this means a man sees his own sinfulness and

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<sup>39</sup> Holmes, Stephen, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2001), 150.

<sup>40</sup> Edwards, Vol. 2, 823.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

loathsomeness; for he has now a sense to discern objects of this nature; and so sees the truth of what the Word of God declares concerning the exceeding sinfulness of mankind, which before he did not see. He now sees the dreadful pollution of his heart, and the desperate depravity of his nature... and this shows him the truth of what the Scripture reveals concerning the corruption of man's nature, his original sin, and the ruinous undone condition man is in, and his need of a Saviour, his need of the mighty power of God to renew his heart and change his nature.

...And the opening to view, with such clearness, such a world of wonderful and glorious truth in the gospel, that before was unknown, being quite above the view of a natural eye, but now appearing so clear and bright, has a powerful and invincible influence on the soul to persuade of the divinity of the gospel.<sup>42</sup>

Edwards attributes salvation to God alone, making the sinner passive in regeneration, for man is unable to generate his own “sense of the spiritual excellency and beauty of divine things,” and is therefore dependent upon the work of the Spirit to illuminate the truth of the gospel of which he then cannot deny. Man is entirely dependent on God in every moment and act in regeneration. “We are dependent on God’s power through every step of our redemption. We are dependent on the power of God to convert us, and give faith in Jesus Christ, and the new nature.”<sup>43</sup> The state of moral ruin of which man is born into is evident in God's work of salvation, for man is dependent upon the power of God to convert, to give the ability to have faith in Christ and to bestow a new nature. To Edwards there is no mutual action in conversion, no mutual action in moving from sin to faith in Christ. It is wholly the work of God. Returning to Edwards' theology of the will, it is wholly the will of God because man cannot move from one disposition to another. “Nature cannot change nature; only super nature can.”<sup>44</sup>

In his sermon on Hosea 5:15, Edwards meticulously works through God's sovereignty in revealing sin to an individual, the first act of regeneration. “This is God’s ordinary way before

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42 Edwards, Vol. 1, 292.

43 Ibid., Vol. 2, 4.

44 Gerstner, 67.

great and signal expressions of his mercy and favour. He very commonly so orders it in his providence, and so influences men by his Spirit, that they are brought to see their miserable condition as they are in themselves, and to despair of help from themselves, or from an arm of flesh, before he appears for them, and also makes them sensible of their sin, and their unworthiness of God's help."<sup>45</sup>

Edwards made the connection between the state of man's nature and salvation in his notes on efficacious grace. "It is manifest that the Scripture supposes, that if ever men are turned from sin, God must undertake it, and he must be the doer of it; that it is his doing that must determine the matter; that all that others can do, will avail nothing, without his agency."<sup>46</sup> This supposes that God must undertake the movement to repentance because of the total depravity of man's nature. This is in direct conflict with the Arminian understanding of man's disposition as Edwards writes: "Arminians argue that God has obliged himself to bestow a holy and saving disposition, on certain conditions, and that what is given in regeneration, is given either for natural men's asking, or for the diligent improvement of common grace; because, otherwise, it would not be our fault that we are without it, nor our virtue that we have it."<sup>47</sup> But, as Edwards writes, this cannot be for Scripture is clear in man's disposition to wickedness and thus God alone holds the authority to bestow salvation. If man was not utterly and wholly depraved in nature, God would not hold such authority for man would be able to move himself to repentance.

Those who are in a state of salvation are to attribute it to sovereign grace alone, and to give all the praise to him, who maketh them to differ from others. They should exalt God the Holy Ghost, who of sovereign grace has called them out of darkness into marvellous light; who has by his own immediate and free operation, led them into an understanding of the evil and danger of sin, and brought them off from their own righteousness, and opened their eyes to discover the glory of God,

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45 Edwards, Vol. 2, 830.

46 Ibid., 543.

47 Ibid., 548.

and the wonderful riches of God in Jesus Christ, and has sanctified them, and made them new creatures.<sup>48</sup>

Though it is evident in the first act of regeneration that Total Depravity is central in Edwards' doctrine of salvation, it is appropriate to contrast Edwards' picture of the redeemed with that of the unregenerate. In a sermon on Matthew 15:26, titled "There is a Great difference between converted and unconverted men," Edwards explains:

A Person that is Converted has an understanding of spiritual things the unconverted has none. [H]e that is Converted has Right Conceptions of spiritual things [he knows God] he has Ideas of them that no natural man has. Thus the Ideas he has are as different from what persons Unconverted have as the Idea that a man that sees has of Colours are different from those that One has that was born blind...The believer he knows G[od] is acquainted with him. He has an Understanding of his Glorious excellency. They know what the scripture means when it speaks of God's holiness, his majesty, his truth & his mercy. They have had a views of these things and of the Glory of them...They have an understanding of the excellency of [Jesus Christ] and they unders[tand] the way of sal[vation] they know the sufficiency, the suitableness, & the Glory of that Contrivance for the saving of Lost souls. They have a spiritual understanding of the Glorious truths of the Word of G[od].<sup>49</sup>

In contrasting the converted and unconverted, Edwards continues in his sermon by describing the unconverted person as knowing nothing of these spiritual things and though they may be able to understand them in a small measure, they have no conception of them. The unconverted person is completely blind, the kingdom of darkness prevails over them and they are unable to see even a pinch of light. Though they may here of how glorious God is and about his infinite holiness, majesty, and mercy, they know nothing of it and Christ has no beauty in their eyes. The contrast Edwards paints is strikingly clear. The state of the unconverted is in harmony with Total Depravity and the state of the converted is further evidence of this harmony, for if there was no clear and striking difference between the two states there Arminian view would suffice in

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48 Ibid., 853.

49 Edwards, Jonathan, "Matt: 15:26," *Sermons, Series II, 1729 (WJE Online Vol. 44)*, Ed. Jonathan Edwards Center.

explaining the change.

The centrality of Total Depravity upholds Edwards' doctrine of salvation in the nature of its first act, the revelation of sin and sense of divine things, and God's lone authorship of regeneration. Though the evidence has thoroughly been presented, it would be foolish to disregard Edwards' remarks on redemption's uselessness apart from a corrupting sin.

It will follow on Dr. T.'s scheme, that Christ's redemption, with regard to a great part of them who are the subjects of it, is not only a redemption from no sin, but from no calamity, and so from no evil of any kind... It will follow, on our author's principles, not only with respect to infants, but even adult persons, that redemption is needless, and Christ is dead in vain. Not only is there no need of Christ's redemption in order to deliverance from any consequences of Adam's sin, but also in order to perfect freedom from personal sin, and all its evil consequences.

To Edwards, if love of virtue can be obtained through natural means beyond the work of Christ upon the cross, man is in no need of a savior and Christ's death was pointless. But Christ's death was far from pointless, providing the atoning work to impute the righteousness of Christ upon the elect. And this provides the means to which the elect are reborn and given the ability to have "truly virtuous mind" that are "under the sovereign dominion of love to God," and "above all things, seeks the glory of God, and makes this his supreme, governing, and ultimate end."<sup>50</sup>

There are two obvious observations in response to the assertion of Total Depravity's centrality. First, that the 'T' in "Tulip" is inherently central to a Calvinist's theology in its position, making all other doctrines dependent upon the first. Second, that it is not Total Depravity that is central to Edwards' theology but the sovereignty of God. In response to the former, it is true that the first doctrine of Calvinistic theology is inherently foundational to a Calvinist's theology, but to assert that it is thus necessarily central is to suggest that it is

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50 Edwards, Vol. 1, 127.

inherently primary in every individual's development of theology. When the five points of Calvinism are truly understood it is conspicuous that one cannot hold one point or a few points without the whole, for the five are intertwined and therefore dependent upon one another as truth. This allows for one to hold an individual point as more important or central in the whole by its scriptural proof or by reason of the mind. In response to the latter, I will concede that Edwards' theology is ultimately dependent on the sovereignty of God, to suggest otherwise would be absurd in the context of his work, but to say it is central is to undermine the supremacy the sovereignty of God holds over theology as a whole. To say that the sovereignty of God is central to Edwards' theology is to say that the foundation of a building is equal to the bricks which form it. One brick may be more central to the shape of the building, but the building would not stand without the foundation. Though I have used the word foundational in referring to the centrality of Total Depravity, here I use it in a far more literal and powerful sense.

That the first point in Calvinism, the "T" in "TULIP," is central to Edwards' theology is evident in its great influence upon his theology of the will and his understanding of the doctrines of sin and salvation. Edwards' theology of the will is dependent on the Calvinistic root of Total Depravity in the very reason of the writing of his great work, *Freedom of the Will*, in combating the Arminian notion of free will, and as an essential influence in Edwards' view of sin's corruption of the whole man, man's inability to love God of his own free will, and the philosophical reasoning that makes it plausible. Edwards' doctrine of sin is dependent on this moral inability in sin's great vileness and effect on humanity, both individually and universally, and in his understanding of imputation which more closely follows Total Depravity than the historical Calvinistic view. Edwards' doctrine of salvation is dependent on the "T" in the nature of its first act, the sense of divine things and immense guilt of sin, to remove the corrupting

darkness of sin, God's lone authorship of regeneration and man's passivity, the clear and striking contrast between the converted and unconverted. Lastly, without moral inability Christ's work on the cross would have been for naught.

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