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SUMMARY

Samuel Johnson's religious views are shaped by his staunchly Anglo-Catholic soteriology which reflects a synthesis of Tridentine, Arminian, and latitudinarian ideas. The guiding principles of Johnson's soteriology are experientialism and moralism: Johnson is less concerned with doctrinal niceties and even theological orthodoxy than with the effects of soteriology on moral deportment. At the heart of Johnson's soteriology is affirmation of conditional salvation and consequent denial of the Protestant notion of justification by faith alone. Following William Law, Johnson is convinced the appropriation of Christ's expiatory merits is contingent on faith, obedience, and repentance. He concedes but is diffident toward the effects of original sin. He denies or sharply questions predestination and prescience. He replicates Tridentine dogma in asserting the necessity of propitiatory acts of repentance, denying the possibility of assurance of salvation, and positing no material distinction between justification and sanctification.

THE SOTERIOLOGY OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

by

PETER ANDREW SANDLIN

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INTRODUCTION¹

The business of life is to work out our salvation; and the days are few, in which provision must be made for eternity.

Samuel Johnson
from Sermon 15

Scholarly attention to Samuel Johnson's religious views has tended to focus on his firm Anglican orthodoxy;² the relation of his beliefs to the innovative but inchoate "liberal" opinions emerging in the eighteenth century;³ his assertedly excessive scruples and their vexing effect;⁴ and his controversial "conversion experience."⁵ At the back of Johnson's generic religious orientation, however, lies his admittedly unsystematic soteriological scheme. It is this soteriological scheme that, to a large degree, provides an explanation of the general shape of Johnson's religious views which, in turn, influences his thinking and actions. If, as Boswell observes, from the time of Johnson's reading William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* during his brief residence at Oxford, "religion was the predominant object of his thoughts,"⁶ one may naturally conclude that for Johnson, to whom consideration of eternal salvation and the eternal state were governing principles of life, the soteriology that informed them was of crucial significance and deserves serious examination. A recognition of Johnson's implicit soteriological scheme furnishes a key to comprehending the intensity of his religious scruples, the nature of his "conversion," and the rationale for his "sturdy prejudice."⁷

¹Footnotes contain abbreviated bibliographical information; full information appears in the bibliography.

²Chapin, "Religious Development" and *Religious Thought*; Griffith, "The Faith of Samuel Johnson"; and Quinlan, *A Layman's Religion*.

³Brown, "Religious Problem"; Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*; and Sachs, "Reason and Unreason."

⁴Byrd, "Spiritual Anxiety"; Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death"; and Humphreys, "Troubled Believer."

⁵Basney, "Johnson and Religious Evidence"; Chapin, "'Wonderful' Experience"; Greene, "'Late Conversion'"; and Quinlan, "Rumor."

⁶Boswell, *Life*, 14.

⁷Hudson, *op. cit.*, 7.

Indisputably the strongest influence on the young Samuel Johnson's religious views was his mother Sarah,⁸ proud daughter of a yeoman and property owner.⁹ Her theological outlook may broadly be classified as Calvinistic, but not in distinction from high-church Anglicanism of the eighteenth century. As Chester Chapin observes,

...if Sarah's "Calvinism" refers merely to the fact that her approach to the Bible was "literal and devout," that she believed in a very real hell and taught this belief to Sam, then she believed and taught only what thousands of orthodox middle-class women believed and taught to their children, then, and for many generations thereafter, whether "Calvinist," "evangelical," or strictly "high church."¹⁰

Aside from the perpetually annoying question of predestination (which the authors of the *Book of Common Prayer* addressed in quite a latitudinarian fashion), Anglican confession, though not always dogma and practice,¹¹ of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was at one with Calvinism.¹² Chapin is merely recognizing by insinuation that virtually all middle-class "lay" Protestant religion operated within the strictures of historic Christian orthodoxy, and even were Sarah's religious views incorrectly described as strictly "Calvinist," the sentiments to which such an appellation point are, for practical purposes, indistinguishable from orthodox Protestantism in almost any form: that is, the theological ideas to which the child Johnson was exposed were not unique:

It is misleading to regard Sarah's unimaginative and literal approach to religion as the product of "evangelical" or Calvinist influence. What we have here is simple Protestant fundamentalism, a fundamentalism shared by the vast majority of the orthodox middle classes, whether Baptist, Presbyterian, or Anglican.¹³

⁸His father Michael had little or no discernable influence on his son's religious views. See Chapin, "Samuel Johnson's Earliest Instruction in Religion," 357-360.

⁹Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 5, 13. Sarah was not reluctant to remind Samuel's father and her husband Michael, a bookseller by trade, of her social superiority.

¹⁰Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 7.

¹¹Hudson, *op. cit.*, ch. 7

¹²Chapin, "Samuel Johnson's Earliest Instruction in Religion," 361.

¹³*ibid.*, *Religious Thought*, 9.

Employment of the epithet "fundamentalism" is unfortunate since it potentially prejudices understanding of the period and subject. Further, it unwarrantably anticipates Protestant American fundamentalism in linking it to the classical orthodoxy of the eighteenth century, despite the sharp distinctions between the two.¹⁴ In any case, the thrust of Chapin's remarks is accurate: the influence of the skepticism of Enlightenment heterodoxy had not yet filtered down to the English middle classes, and Johnson's theological orientation—in creed if not necessarily temperament—was Anglican orthodoxy. This "basic Anglicanism"¹⁵ consists creedally of the expression of Christianity preserved in Anglicanism's Thirty-Nine Articles, "doctrinal formulae accepted by the Anglican community in the attempt to define its dogmatic position midway between Reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism."¹⁶ This "midway position," known theologically as *via media*, is a crucial element of Johnson's soteriology.

Boswell describes how, as a child, Johnson was exposed to his mother's thetic religious instruction:

Her piety was not inferiour to her understanding; and to her must be ascribed those early impressions of religion upon the mind of her son, from which the world afterwards derived so much benefit. He [Johnson] told me, that he remembered distinctly having had the first notice of Heaven, "a place to which good people went," and hell, "a place to which bad people went," communicated to him by her, when a little child in bed with her; and that it might be the better fixed in his memory, she sent him to repeat it to Thomas Jackson, their man-servant; he not being in the way, this was not done, but there was no occasion for any artificial aid in its preservation.¹⁷

He believed his mother erred in placing in his hands the anonymous work *The Whole Duty of Man* without simultaneously "having his attention directed to the arrangement, to the style, and other excellencies of composition; that the mind being thus engaged by an amusing variety of

¹⁴Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility*, 32, 33.

¹⁵Chapin, *op. cit.*, 368.

¹⁶Hardon, *The Spirit and Origins*, 173.

¹⁷Boswell, *Life*, 5.

objects, may not grow weary,"¹⁸ and he claimed to have become inattentive to religion before his tenth birthday because (he told Boswell)

"The church at Lichfield, in which we had a seat, wanted [required] reparation, so I was to go and find a seat in other churches; and having bad eyes, and being awkward about this, I used to go and read in the fields on Sunday. This habit continued till my fourteenth year; and still I find a great reluctance to go to church..."¹⁹

Boswell notes Johnson's concession that as an adolescent he "became a sort of lax *talker* against religion, for I did not much *think* against it."²⁰ During his brief residence at Oxford, however, Johnson abandoned his religious apathy. The motivation of that abandonment—more than its occasion—is of chief significance in a consideration not only of Johnson's general religious views but also of his soteriology.

Boswell quotes Johnson,

"When at Oxford I took up [William] Law's *Serious Call to a Holy Life*, expecting to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry."²¹

Boswell interposes, "From this time forward religion was the predominant object of his thoughts; though, with the just sentiments of a conscientious Christian, he lamented that his practice of its duties fell far short of what it ought to be."²² Even allowing for possible hyperbolic inaccuracy in Boswell's assessment, it is quite indisputable that Law's devotional work—occasionally even its very wording²³—shapes Johnson's religious views.

¹⁸*ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹*ibid.*

²⁰*ibid.*

²¹*ibid.*

²²*ibid.*

²³Quinlan, *Layman's Religion*, 24, 25. See also Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 32, 33.

Though Law's *Serious Call* exerts considerable influence on the whole of Johnson's faith,²⁴ it is the book's influence on Johnson's soteriology that is of interest here. What is immediately evident on examination of *A Serious Call* is its pervasive emphasis on Christian experience and corresponding lack of doctrinal exposition. To be sure, "Law assumed his readers were Christians [and] his efforts [thus] were devoted to awakening them to the profound implications of their faith."²⁵ Notwithstanding, the virtual void of *doctrine*—defined here not as Christian moral instruction but in the theological sense as orthodox belief derived from the Bible and tradition—in Law's work, a void not wholly unique in the Christian tradition, is most striking. Law's attitude toward the Scriptures (and therefore the Faith itself) may be characterized, in the description of Richard Mouw, as "pietism."²⁶ "While the doctrinalist tends to define the human predicament in terms of ignorance," Mouw relates, "the pietist sees human beings as plagued by troubled hearts, doubts and fears. On the pietist view, then, the Bible's primary use is in speaking to these subjective states... ." ²⁷ Though Law's *Serious Call* is not concerned primarily with setting forth a particular attitude toward the Scriptures, it is concerned with outlining the procedures for the fulfillment of individual holiness as the moral obligation of believers, quite divorced from any consideration of a divine objective supply of holiness to humanity on the grounds of Christ's life and death. A covenantal or forensic dimension of devoutness²⁸—say, Christ's righteousness imputed to humans on account of his bearing the penalty for the sin of mankind—is wholly absent from Law.

Recognizing the overwhelmingly positive contribution of devotional literature historically by both Roman Catholics and Protestants,²⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones nonetheless criticizes the form of Roman Catholic-High

²⁴Quinlan, *op. cit.*, chap. 1.

²⁵*ibid.*, 6.

²⁶Mouw, "The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism," 144, 145. I refer here not to the largely Lutheran pietistic movement (see Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies*, ch. 18) but to pietism as a general theological-Biblical orientation.

²⁷Mouw, *op. cit.*, 145.

²⁸Althaus, *Theology*, 224-233; Calvin, *Institutes*, III, ch. xi.

²⁹Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons*, 230.

Church Anglican pietism espoused by Law in that “[i]t regards holiness as a special vocation.”³⁰ It requires withdrawal from the always-tempting world, formally in the case of monastic Romanism, and attitudinally in the case of Anglicanism and other Protestantism and “becomes the exclusive business of [one’s] life.”³¹ It thereby tends to bifurcate the church into the truly spiritual (usually the monastic clergy who enjoy the luxury to fulfill such devotion) and the ordinary believers (the laity who are not ordinarily afforded the resources to fulfil that devotion).

The relevance to Johnson of Lloyd-Jones’s criticism of the pietistic conception of spirituality is that the latter concedes the basic validity of Law’s thesis while correspondingly retaining a this-worldly orientation. As Quinlan observes,

...it seems to have had a dual influence on Johnson. In the first place, *A Serious Call* helped to develop his deep sense of religion. Both the habit of recording his prayers and his practice of self-examination may have resulted directly from his study of this work. A second influence, it would seem, was to increase the severity of his scruples and to contribute to his fear that he might not be saved.³²

This second effect of Law’s work shapes (as this dissertation will argue) Johnson’s entire soteriology inasmuch as, to the mind of Johnson at least, it weds the procurement of eternal salvation to a monastic-ascetic conception of the religious life apart from the context of an understanding of the objective, judicial role of the Father and Christ in effecting that salvation. Chapin correctly perceives that “Law has an ideal—the ideal of Christian perfection—which is extremely rigorous, extremely ascetic, and quite impossible for ordinary human flesh to live up to.”³³ Combining this rigorous “ideal” with a void of judicial soteriology on which the weary soul can repose irresistibly conduces to the sort of “spiritual anxiety”³⁴ Johnson suffers.³⁵

³⁰*ibid.*, 234.

³¹*ibid.*

³²Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 26.

³³Chapin, *op. cit.*, 38.

³⁴Max Byrd, “Spiritual Anxiety,” *passim*.

Maurice Quinlan's discussion of the influence of the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker on Johnson's thought and the accurate description of Hooker's theological and ecclesiological approach as "a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism"³⁶ furnish additional keys to understanding the tension in Johnson's soteriology between the experientialism of Romanism and the judicial soteriology of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The evidence, indeed, seems to support the conclusion that Johnson's overwhelmingly experiential soteriology is—like that of a number of his moralistic Anglican contemporaries³⁷—at significant points more akin to Tridentine dogma than to orthodox Protestantism.

Johnson's soteriology, like his religious views in general, is not, however, easily classified. It has been variously—and contradictorily—described as Augustinian,³⁸ Arminian,³⁹ and Pelagian.⁴⁰ The intent of this dissertation is to explore his religious convictions and arrive at a fuller understanding of his complex soteriology.

³⁵To put it paradoxically, he developed a Calvinistic sense of the load of original sin without any Calvinistic sensation of the omnipotence of God in lifting the load from a person's back," Chadwick, "The Religion of Samuel Johnson," 130. But for a corrective to this observation, see ch. 2 on original sin. In addition, Kass observes, "... [In his sermons] Johnson transforms the motivation for right conduct from the Christian ascetic ideal of self-denial to a motivation based on pragmatic and secular self-interest," Kass, "Consolations," 33. While this observation is partially justified, one cannot exert in the face of Johnson's repeated statements exhorting an altruistic devotion that he was concerned only for "secular self-interest." However, it is possible that the wedding of devotion to pragmatism could itself compound the spiritual anxieties of a man for whom valid religious motivation is a central concern.

³⁶Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 154, 155.

³⁷Hudson, *op. cit.*, 203, 204.

³⁸Griffith, *op. cit.*, 7.

³⁹Chadwick, "Religion of Samuel Johnson," 129.

⁴⁰Hudson, *op. cit.*, 203.

Chapter 1: THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done;
For I have more.*

John Donne
from "A Hymn to God the Father," 1633

In Johnson's writings we do not find a systematic account of his religious or theological views. His soteriological ideas are expressed piecemeal. Johnson seems much more interested in the subjective aspects of salvation—human works, repentance, perseverance, conversion, assurance (due partly, as noted above, to the influence of Law)—than its objective aspects—election, original sin, justification, propitiation, adoption, and so forth. Of the latter he says little. As Nicholas Hudson observes,

Theoretical questions concerning man's inward nature, the role of God and Christ in his regeneration, and the motives to repentance were of importance to Johnson primarily as they either promoted or hindered the individual's feeling of responsibility for his own salvation through a moral life.¹

It would be unwarranted to deduce from this neglect either that Johnson was agnostic about the objective dimensions of soteriology or that he flatly denied their existence. It is more reasonable to assume that Johnson, professed the eighteenth-century orthodox Anglican conception of soteriology and took it for granted, stressing rather the more "this-worldly" practices of repentance and good works, without which salvation is an impossibility.

Johnson's lack of interest in objective soteriology, however, does influence his understanding of soteriology. This lack of affirmation of a

¹Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 203.

fully orthodox and Reformational objective soteriology, in fact, shapes his soteriology and issues in the well known and quite practical consequences normally associated with Johnson's religious scruples and anxieties.²

Stuart Brown writes, "It is not, I think, permissible to impose a formalistic analysis upon a man's religious experience and attitude, particularly if he is not a theologian."³ It is nonetheless valuable to examine Johnson's unsystematically expressed soteriological views to discover their connections. It is profitable, in addition, to compare and contrast them with prominent views within historical orthodoxy.

Johnson utters what is possibly his most succinct statement of his soteriology on April 15, 1778 at Mr. Dilly's in response to a query posed by the "ingenious Quaker lady,"⁴ Mrs. Knowles.

I expressed [recalls Boswell] a horror at the thought of death. MRS. KNOWLES. "Nay, thou should'st not have a horror for what is the gate of life." JOHNSON. (standing upon the hearth rolling about, with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air,) "No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension." MRS. KNOWLES. "The Scriptures tell us, 'The righteous shall have hope in his death.'" JOHNSON. "Yes, madam; that is, he shall not have despair. But, consider, his hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance. But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation."⁵

Johnson expressed similar sentiments earlier. In *Rambler* 110⁶ written Saturday, April 6, 1751, Johnson addresses the issue of repentance. He submits:

²Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death" and Humphreys, "Troubled Believer."

³Brown, "Religious Problem," 17.

⁴Boswell, *Life*, 390.

⁵*ibid.*, 394. See also Pierce, *Religious Life*, 56.

⁶Yale edition, iv, 220-226. My emphasis.

A constant and unflinching obedience is above the reach of terrestrial diligence; and therefore the progress of life could only have been the natural descent of negligent despair from crime to crime, had not the universal persuasion of forgiveness *to be obtained by proper means of reconciliation* recalled those to the paths of virtue whom their passions had solicited aside... .

These "proper means of reconciliation" by which one gains "acceptance with God" include "corporal austerities" and "voluntary afflictions." One who lacks these means is "as [one] suspended over the abyss of eternal perdition." That is, one's eternal state depends on his good works and repentance.

Likewise, on Friday, May 7, 1773, in conversation with Boswell, Goldsmith and others, Johnson remarks, "But charity, for instance, is not definable by limits. It is a duty to give to the poor; but no man can say how much another should give to the poor, *or when a man has given too little to save his soul.*"⁷

In addition, Johnson's sermons clearly communicate this sentiment: "But it may be hoped, that a sufficient remedy against this sin [pride] may be easily found, by reminding those who are infected with it, that the blood of Christ was poured out upon the cross *to make their best endeavors acceptable to God*";⁸ "If we consider this sacrament [communion] as a renewal of the vow of baptism, and the means of reconciling us to God, and *restoring us to a participation of the merits of our Saviour, which we had forfeited by sin*, we shall need no persuasions to a frequent communion";⁹ "The terms, upon which we are to hope for any benefits from the merits of Christ, are faith, repentance, and subsequent obedience";¹⁰ "The whole life of man is a state of probation; he is always in danger [of damnation], and may be always in hope [of heaven]";¹¹ and "Salvation is promised to us Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance.*"¹²

⁷Boswell, *op. cit.*, 222. My emphasis.

⁸Johnson [Sermon 6], *Sermons*, 72. My emphasis.

⁹*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 103. My emphasis.

¹⁰*ibid.*, 104.

¹¹*ibid.* [Sermon 22], 233.

¹²*ibid.* [Sermon 28], 303. Emphasis in original.

In the dialogue with Mrs. Knowles and in the other remarks, crucial elements of Johnson's soteriology appear: (1) Christ mediated for our salvation; (2) the application of that mediation is perpetually conditional; (3) those conditions are obedience and repentance; (4) none can be certain that his obedience and repentance have been sufficient; therefore, (5) none can be certain of his salvation.

The sermons, in fact, teem with these sentiments. A sampling of Johnson's sermonic declarations will demonstrate this assertion.

In Sermon 3 exhorting the listeners to fear God, Johnson states:

It is sufficient to observe, that the religion which makes fear the great principle of action, implicitly condemns all self-confidence, all presumptuous security; and enjoins a constant state of vigilance and caution, a perpetual distrust of our own hearts, a full conviction of our natural weakness, and an earnest solicitude for divine assistance... . Of that religion, which has been taught from God, the basis is humility; a holy fear which attends good men, through the whole course of their lives; and keeps them always attentive to the motives and consequences of every action; if always unsatisfied with their progress in holiness, always wishing to advance, and always afraid of falling away.¹³

Sermon 4 dealing with charity reinforces Johnson's view of conditional salvation:

Whatever superiority may distinguish us, and whatever plenty may surround us, we know, that they can be possessed but a short time, and that the manner in which we employ them must determine our eternal state... .¹⁴

In condemning pride in Sermon 6 Johnson states:

But it may be hoped, that a sufficient remedy against this sin may be easily found, by reminding those who are infected with it, that

¹³*ibid.* [Sermon 3], 30, 31.

¹⁴*ibid.* [Sermon 4], 44.

the blood of Christ was poured out upon the cross to make their best endeavours acceptable to God.¹⁵

It should be noted that Johnson here clearly implies Christ's atonement is designed to supplement men's efforts; there is no hint good works are not necessary to salvation as in the Protestant idea that Christ's merits are credited to the Christian's account.

Johnson is convinced men forfeit their salvation every time they sin; they cannot expect salvation if they have violated their covenantal communion with Christ:

...every sin, and much more any habit or course of sin long continued, is, according to the different degrees of guilt, an apostacy or defection from our Saviour; as it is a breach of those conditions upon which we became his followers; and he that breaks the condition of a covenant, dissolves it on his side. Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer, we lose the benefits of his death; nor can we have any hopes of obtaining them, while we remain in this state of separation from him.¹⁶

In Sermon 10 Johnson asserts that salvation is contingent on conformity to the laws of God.

It is now certain that we are *here*, not in our *total*, nor in our *ultimate existence*, but in a state of exercise and probation, commanded to qualify ourselves, by pure hearts and virtuous actions, for the enjoyment of future felicity in the presence of God; and prohibited to break the laws which his wisdom has given us, under the penal sanction of banishment from *heaven* into *regions of misery*.¹⁷

These sentiments adorn virtually every Sermon of Johnson's. The cluster of convictions they represent are that Christ died to render man's imperfect but sincere works acceptable as payment for salvation, that obedience and repentance are conditions on which salvation is dependent,

¹⁵*ibid.* [Sermon 6], 72.

¹⁶*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 100.

¹⁷*ibid.* [Sermon 10], 109. Emphasis in original.

and that man can never be certain he has attained the conditions necessary to salvation.

Maurice Quinlan is at least partially justified in objecting to Robert Anderson's *Life of Johnson*. Whether Johnson remained aligned with the Calvinistic tenets of Anglicanism he learned from his mother, Quinlan asks, "Which tenets? Certainly there appears to be no evidence that Johnson favored any of the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism, such as predestination, the witness of the Spirit, or salvation by faith alone."¹⁸ It is quite possible, as Quinlan notes, that the "basic reason for this misconception seems to be a notion that any Christian who works out his salvation in fear must be a Calvinist."¹⁹ Indeed, it may be argued that the ascetic life is much more suited to Roman Catholicism than any form of Protestantism.²⁰

The generic form of Anglicanism in which Johnson was reared²¹ is not equivalent to theological, specifically soteriological, Calvinism. The austerity of the practical aspects of eighteenth-century Anglicanism to which Johnson was exposed, when reinforced by the ascetic spiritual ideal of William Law could, in fact, render Anglicanism's *confessionally* derived dictum of justification by faith alone almost meaningless. Observed against the background of the prominent soteriological schools of the day, Johnson's soteriology settles much more easily into Roman Catholicism than creedal Protestantism of any sort.

Philip Griffith insists that "nothing in Johnson's conversation contradicts his Augustinian Christianity."²² Yet the description of Johnson's religion as Augustinian is tenuous and, in the case of his soteriology, distinctly in error. The appellation *Augustinian* with reference to Johnson is misleading, for employment of the term implies soteriology ("...the word *Augustinian* has commonly been reserved to designate Augustine's

¹⁸Quinlan, *Layman's Religion*, 162.

¹⁹*ibid.*, 163.

²⁰Bray, "Asceticism and Monasticism," 48.

²¹Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 8-15.

²²Griffith, "Faith of Samuel Johnson," 7.

system of grace, not his entire teaching"²³); and while Johnson's ecclesiological views may reinforce Augustine's, his soteriology is not Augustinian.

While the specific categories of Johnson's soteriology will be discussed later in depth, it will suffice here to outline Augustine's fundamental soteriological model which varies at critical points from Johnson's. Indeed, the issue is significant, for it is precisely Johnson's variation from Augustinianism that coincides with his almost unqualified experientialism resulting in the perpetual spiritual vexation he suffered. Had Johnson's soteriology been *truly* Augustinian, he would have taken the initial steps to a full Reformed soteriology (grounded in Augustinianism²⁴) which provides quieting spiritual assurance.

Augustine's soteriology was forged most comprehensively in his refutation of the heretical views of Pelagius. Pelagius flatly denied original sin.²⁵ The relation of Adam's sin (and, therefore, its consequences) to his posterity is illustrative, not hereditary: Adam serves as a bad example, but his sin and concomitant guilt are not transmitted to the humanity who follow. Children are born unsoiled by sin and possessing a free will to obey infallibly the commands of God or to perform evil.²⁶ By logical extension

Some of [Pelagius's] followers seem to have held that Adam was created mortal and that his death was not due to his sin, that newborn children need not be baptized, for they have no original sin inherited from Adam which needs to be washed away, and that some men before and after Christ have so used their free will that they have been sinless. God's grace, so at least some Pelagians held, is seen in giving man free will at his creation, in giving man the law as a guide to his choice, and in sending Jesus Christ who by his teaching and good example assists men to do good.²⁷

²³Portalie, *Guide*, 177.

²⁴Schaff, *Creeds*, 1:372.

²⁵Wiggers, "Pelagian View," 153. On this point Johnson agrees with Augustine as against Pelagius. See Boswell, *op. cit.*, 482.

²⁶Latourette, *History*, 1:180.

²⁷*ibid.*, 181.

In stark contrast, Augustine affirms the utter depravity of humanity, "born of a corrupted and condemned stock."²⁸ Their sin is "both original and personal."²⁹ Augustine's support of not only original sin but also immediate imputation of that sin to Adam's posterity is forthright:

The first man brought sin into the world, whereas this One [Christ] took away not only that one sin but also all the others which he found added to it. Hence, the apostle says, "And the gift [of grace]³⁰ is not like the effect of the one that sinned: for the judgment on that one trespass was condemnation; but the gift of grace is for many offenses, and brings justification" [Rom. 5:16]. *Now it is clear that the one sin originally inherited, even if it were the only one involved, makes men liable to condemnation. Yet grace justifies a man for many offenses, both the sin that he originally inherited in common with all the others and also the multitude of sins which he has committed on his own.*³¹

In contradistinction to Pelagius, Augustine contends that sin eliminates man's free will:

...it was in the evil use of his free will that man destroyed himself and his will at the same time... He serves freely who freely does the will of his master. Accordingly he who is slave to sin is free to sin. But thereafter he will not be free to do right unless he is delivered from the bondage of sin and begins to be the servant of righteousness.³²

It is God alone who in his unmerited grace delivers "from the bondage of sin."

A correlate of Augustine's negative estimate of unregenerate (i.e., natural) humanity is his insistence, following St. Paul, that the grace of salvation cannot be merited. His impassioned reasoning is most cogent:

But now, can that part of the human race to whom God hath promised deliverance and a place in his eternal kingdom be restored through the merits of their own works? Of course not!

²⁸Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 27, 355.

²⁹*ibid.*, ch. 29, 356.

³⁰This editorial interpolation appears in the original source; it is not this writer's.

³¹Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 50, 369. My emphasis.

³²*ibid.*, ch. 30, 356, 357.

For what good works could a lost soul do except as he had been rescued from his lostness? Could he do this by the determination of his free will? Of course not! For it was in the evil use of his free will that man destroyed himself and his will at the same time. For as a man who kills himself is still alive when he kills himself, but having killed himself is then no longer alive and cannot resuscitate himself after he has destroyed his own life—so also sin which arises from the action of the free will turns out to be victor over the will and the free will is destroyed.³³

This predicament would be horrid indeed were it not for the justification effected by God on the merits of Christ's death on our behalf. In fact, even the emancipation of the will is not sufficient for salvation, for men are still accountable for the sin committed in their federal representative, Adam.

Since men are in this state of wrath through original sin—a condition made still graver and more pernicious as they compounded more and worse sins with it—a Mediator was required; that is to say, a Reconciler who by suffering a unique sacrifice, of which all the sacrifices of the Law and the Prophets were shadows, should allay that wrath.³⁴

Augustine's conception of how the benefits of this sacrifice are appropriated coincides perfectly with his belief in original sin and the human will bound to sin. Obviously if man is utterly depraved and his will bound, he cannot by his own works appropriate the benefits of Christ's sacrifice any more than he can merit them.³⁵ It is faith, the gift of God,³⁶ "by which the righteous lives. This is the faith that believes in him who justifies the ungodly."³⁷

This is the faith through which glorying is "cut out" [Rom. 1:17; 4:5; 3:27], whether for the exclusion of that which is self-conceit or for the making of that by which we glory in the Lord. This is the faith that gains the beautiful outpourings of the Spirit... This is the faith by which men are saved, according to the saying: "By grace

³³*ibid.*, ch. 30, 356.

³⁴*ibid.*, ch. 33, 359, 360.

³⁵*ibid.*, ch. 32, 357, 358.

³⁶Augustine, *Spirit and Letter*, ch. 54, 238, 239. Though he assents that "faith must be in our power," he immediately remarks, "Even our believing is a thing that God has granted to us," *ibid.*

³⁷*ibid.*, ch. 56, 240.

are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man be lifted up..." [Eph. 2:8, 9].³⁸

It is by faith, and not by the works of the law, that we appropriate Christ's sacrifice: "For the work which if a man do he shall live in it is done only by the one who is justified: and justification is granted to the prayer of faith... . By faith of [in] Jesus Christ is granted to us both the little beginning of salvation in possession, and its perfecting [our future resurrection] which we await in hope."³⁹

It is evident that on the salient issue of the appropriation of Christ's mediatorial work, Johnson's view varies decisively from Augustine's. Johnson held that man's "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance."⁴⁰ Augustine, by contrast, following Paul,⁴¹ concludes that, "By faith of [in] Jesus Christ is granted to us both the little beginning of salvation in possession, and its perfecting which we await in hope." For Johnson, in short, Christ's merits are contingent on and appropriated by obedience and repentance; for Augustine, while recognizing the necessity of good works which flow from faith,⁴² the hope of eternal salvation rests on Christ's merits and is appropriated by a faith divinely and gratuitously bestowed apart from the deeds of the law. For Augustine, consequently, we "await in hope" the consummation of our eternal salvation; for Johnson, we can have no certain hope for we can never be sure our obedience and repentance are enough: "[W]hat man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? A man cannot be sure himself that he has divine intimation of acceptance... ." ⁴³

³⁸*ibid.*, 240, 241.

³⁹*ibid.*, ch. 51, 235.

⁴⁰Boswell, *op. cit.*, 394.

⁴¹Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 118.

⁴²Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 67, 68, 378-380.

⁴³Boswell, *loc. cit.*

Griffith's judgment, then, that "nothing in Johnson's conversation contradicts his Augustinian Christianity" is erroneous inasmuch as it does not take into account the decisive element of salvation by grace appropriated by faith in Augustine's soteriology that is missing in Johnson's. This missing element, in addition, has momentous consequences for Johnson's Christian experience.

When Augustine argues for the valid use of the law, for instance, he alludes to the Pauline conception of its application not to the righteous, but to the unrighteous (1 Tim. 1:8, 9). The law may serve "as the 'tutor' conducting [the unrighteous man] to grace." The use of the law by the righteous, perhaps ironically, "consists in his putting the fear of it upon the unrighteous [in order that] when they too have found the plague of inveterate covetousness worsened by the stimulus of prohibition and the multiplying of transgression, they may take refuge by faith with the grace that justifies..."⁴⁴ Johnson seems to hold almost the opposite view: the law is used to vex the *righteous* who can never be certain they have fulfilled it as the appropriation of the merits of Christ. He notes in Sermon 28:

... let us likewise be careful, lest an erroneous opinion of the all-sufficiency of our Saviour's merits lull us into carelessness and security. His merits are indeed all-sufficient! But he has prescribed the terms on which they are to operate. He died to save sinners, but to save only those sinners that repent.⁴⁵

Had Johnson's soteriology been genuinely Augustinian, his scruples and anxiety would no doubt have been mollified, or at least undergirded by the sure confidence that while his standing as a child of God is influenced by his obedience and repentance, the fact of his being a Christian is certain due to the merits of Christ definitively appropriated once for all by faith.

While it may be evident that Johnson's soteriology is not correctly classified as Augustinian, his writings and conversation may seem in fact to substantiate Chadwick's description of the Doctor as "Arminian with

⁴⁴Augustine, *Spirit and Letter*, ch. 16, 206.

⁴⁵Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 304.

all the force of his forcible being."⁴⁶ The classification of Johnson's soteriology as Arminian, however, is equally—though not as obviously—incorrect.

Because Chadwick claims Johnson is "a man of a classical type of Arminian faith, with nothing abnormal, paradoxical, or superstitious in its framing,"⁴⁷ whose belief shapes significant features of his theology and life, it would be prudent to examine briefly the history and fundamental elements of Arminianism.

Arminianism was a direct reaction against some of the more staunchly Augustinian elements of Reformation soteriology, specifically total depravity, unconditional election, and the bondage of the will. Disagreement among the principal leaders of the continental Reformation did not extend to Augustinian soteriology, the cornerstone of both Luther and Calvin's salvific dogma. At the heart of soteriological Augustinianism—and, therefore, Reformational soteriology—is the anthropological insistence on the total depravity and spiritual inability of humanity.⁴⁸ From this radically pessimistic anthropology it almost necessarily follows that any scheme of salvation short of monergism ("The view that conversion is accomplished totally by the working of God"⁴⁹) is inadequate and truncated. Humanity is depicted not merely as utterly depraved but also, as Augustine recognized, spiritually impotent.

Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the late sixteenth century who was schooled at Geneva in the dogma of Calvinism, later developed some reservations about Calvinistic soteriology during his fifteen-year pastorate. When he subsequently became professor of theology at the University of Leyden, his controversial lectures questioning fundamental tenets of Calvinistic soteriology virtually divided the students as well as the local Reformed ministers.⁵⁰ Arminius's early death (1609) preceded

⁴⁶Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 129.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁸See Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, *passim*, and Calvin, *Institutes* II: i, ii, v.

⁴⁹Erickson, *Concise Dictionary*, 107.

⁵⁰Clouse, "Arminianism," 70.

the most bellicose and epochal period of the controversy, during which his followers (called Remonstrants) extended and amplified his teachings, and their opponents (the strict Calvinists) succeeded in condemning the former's "Arminianism" at Dort (1618-1619).⁵¹

Arminians alert to their history and heritage recognize the basic incompatibility between Augustinianism and Arminianism. Arminian scholar J.K. Grider, for example, notes that Arminianism "views Christian doctrine much as the pre-Augustinian fathers did and as did the later John Wesley. In several basic ways it differs from the Augustine-Luther-Calvin tradition."⁵² Arminianism is generally regarded as a foil to Reformed soteriology in its insistence on the free will of humanity and consequent synergism. Additional tenets include the following: the divine decrees are based on prescience; the pollution of sin but not its guilt is transmitted from Adam to his posterity; man is not totally depraved; and depraved man's free will is a cause of regeneration.⁵³

Arminianism differs from Augustinianism mainly over the issue of the freedom of the will: the latter denies it and therefore also man's co-operation with God in exercising faith; the former affirms it and, therefore, also that divine-human co-operation. Arminianism does not, though, dissent from the Augustinian dogma of justification by faith alone.

Chadwick buttresses his contention that Johnson's soteriology is Arminian by alluding to the Reformation controversy:

The great debate of the Reformation—the great debate of the Christian moral life—is the debate over Augustinianism; in Reformation language, Calvinism versus Arminianism. All Christians are agreed that the burden of the world and society is such that the soul is helpless without the grace of God, and that the ultimate Christian act is to trust in God and his providence.

⁵¹Jellema, "Dort," 309, 310.

⁵²Grider, "Arminianism," 79.

⁵³Nicole, "Arminianism," 65.

But do you say, "I trust you, O God, and you cannot fail me, and you will bring me to heaven for all my squalor"? Or do you say, "I trust you, O God, and you will help me, and you have given me moral freedom, and with your aid I will be the soul you want me to be"? That is: Is salvation all an act of God? Or is it a cooperation between God and man working together?⁵⁴

The differences between Calvinism and Arminianism, of course, involve more topics than merely those of the nature of man's constitutional sinfulness and the role of man in his salvation.⁵⁵ But in the sphere of *experiential* soteriology—that which so occupied Johnson's attention—Chadwick has succinctly and effectively captured the contrast between Arminianism and Calvinism.

Chadwick's statement that the issue of Arminianism centers on the question, "Is salvation all an act of God? Or is it a cooperation between God and man working together?" is true enough, for Arminianism posits synergism,⁵⁶ the view that man and God co-operate in human salvation. But Johnson, in his response to Mrs. Knowles (and elsewhere), does not merely insist that salvation is a co-operative effort, but, in addition, holds that Christ's merits are appropriated by obedience and repentance, a thesis Arminius disclaims "with all the force of *his* forcible being." Arminius was accused, in fact, of holding that "faith is not the instrument of justification,"⁵⁷ but soundly repudiates the charge. He holds, in fact, with Augustine and the Reformers, that

The Meritorious Cause of justification is Christ through his obedience and righteousness... Faith is the Instrumental Cause, or act, by which we apprehend Christ proposed to us by God for a propitiation and for righteousness, according to the command and promise of the Gospel, in which it is said, "He who believes shall be justified and saved, and he who believeth not shall be damned."⁵⁸

It is likely that Chadwick mistakes Johnson's soteriology for Arminianism because (a) Arminius and Johnson are both synergistic and

⁵⁴Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 128, 129.

⁵⁵Packer, "Arminianisms," *passim*.

⁵⁶Helm, "Synergism," 947.

⁵⁷Arminius, *Works*, II:49.

⁵⁸*ibid.*, 406, 407.

(b) Arminius, like Johnson, supposes that one who does not persevere in the faith is not justified.⁵⁹ While on the surface this appears similar to Johnson's "conditional salvation," the similarity is only apparent, not actual.

There is a vast difference, in fact, between the synergism of Arminius which posits man's co-operative assent in the Spirit's conviction of sin leading to salvation, and Johnson's belief that the co-operation extends to the necessity of the believer's performing good works for justification.

Further, Arminius, no less than Augustine,⁶⁰ maintains that one who does not persevere in good works cannot expect to receive eternal salvation.

But we have yet to consider justification,—both about the beginning of conversion, when all preceding sins are forgiven;—and through the whole life, because God has promised remission of sins to believers, those who have entered into covenant with Him, as often as they repent and flee by true faith to Christ their Propitiator and Expiator. But the end and completion of justification will be...near the close of life, when God will grant, to those who end their days in the faith of Christ, to find his mercy absolving them from all the sins which had been perpetuated through the whole of their lives. The declaration and manifestation of justification will be in the future general judgment...⁶¹

Both Johnson and Arminius insist that justification without perseverance is an impossibility, but the latter suspends the application of the merits of Christ's work on their appropriation by personal faith, while the former conditions the crediting of those merits to one's spiritual account on the practice of good works. Arminius states:

That faith and works concur together to justification, is a thing impossible... Christ has not...obtained by his merits that we should be justified by the worthiness and merit of faith, and *much less* that we should be justified by the merits of works: But the merit of

⁵⁹*ibid.*, 407.

⁶⁰Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 67, 68, 378-380.

⁶¹Arminius, *op. cit.*, II:407.

Christ is opposed to justification by works; and, in the scriptures, Faith and Merit are placed in opposition to each other.⁶²

Johnson, by contrast, asserts that

every sin, and much more any habit or course of sin long continued, is, according to the different degrees of guilt, an apostasy or defection from our Saviour; as it is a breach of those conditions upon which we became his followers; and he that breaks the condition of a covenant, dissolves it on his side. Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer, we lose the benefits of his death; nor can we have any hopes of obtaining them, while we remain in this state of separation from him... . [A]fter having alienated ourselves from Christ by sin, we are restored, upon our repentance and reformation, to pardon and favour, and the certain hopes of everlasting life.⁶³

In other words, Arminius believes that faith alone saves, and the saved must persevere; Johnson believes that faith and works save, that these are both the ground and the condition of salvation. Johnson dissents sharply from Arminius' belief that "the merit of Christ is opposed to justification by works"; for Johnson, reformation of life is a *critical* requirement of the restoration of the broken covenant, and he says nothing, in fact, of faith, and certainly not of justification by faith alone, the Reformation dictum Arminius is intent to defend.

While Johnson would agree with Arminius that justification will be granted only "to those who end their days in the faith of Christ," the two are at variance over the question of the instrumentation of the appropriation of Christ's merits by which one is justified. The equation of the two views is due to confounding the good works of perseverance as spiritual performance which perforce issue from saving faith (Arminius) with meritorious appropriation (Johnson).

Arminius asseverates

Faith and faith only, (though there is no faith alone without works,) is imputed for righteousness. By this alone we are justified

⁶²*ibid.*, 407, 408. My emphasis.

⁶³Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 100, 101.

before God, absolved from our sins, and are accounted, pronounced and declared righteous before God... I affirm, therefore, that faith is imputed to us for righteousness, on account of Christ and his righteousness.⁶⁴

According to Arminius and the Reformers, faith is the instrument of justification, though works of necessity follow from faith. According to Johnson, conversely, "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and...repentance."⁶⁵

One is warranted in concluding that Johnson's soteriology inasmuch as it supports original sin, free will and perseverance is more Arminian than Augustinian. It nonetheless adjusts both Arminianism and Augustinianism in its dogma that good works are the instrument of the application of Christ's merits to humanity, that is, that one is justified by good works. It is these non-Augustinian, non-Arminian sentiments that characterize Johnson's soteriology and thereby shape his religious ethos and life's orientation. This point is significant, for it evinces the chasm between Reformational, Arminian, and early Anglican orthodoxy on the one hand, and Roman Catholic, Restorationist Anglican, and Johnsonian orthodoxy on the other.

Although Augustinian and Arminian soteriology, as we have seen, are not suitable classifications for Johnson's soteriology, in Anglican soteriology there is a dogma that illuminates the path in search of how correctly to categorize and assess Johnson's views.

Anglican soteriology is perplexing. Initially a reaction against papal authority rather than papal dogma, the Church of England has ever mediated between Romanism and Protestantism. Indeed, Johnson's somewhat ambivalent attitude toward Romanism is less perplexing when set within the framework of historical Anglicanism.

⁶⁴Arminius, *op. cit.*, 701, 702.

⁶⁵Boswell, *loc. cit.*

The initial impulses within fledgling Anglicanism did not bear the full Puritan elements that later would vex the church. The original Anglicans were not endeavoring to purge all Roman Catholicism from the new sect, but to reform the excesses of the medieval church.⁶⁶ Nonetheless the Church of England almost immediately assimilated Reformation objections to Romanism pervasive on the continent, including the Reformers' opposition to the Roman dictum of justification by faith and works later so perspicuously and dogmatically enunciated at the Council of Trent.

Early Anglican soteriology seems unambiguous at least in the matter of justification. Both early Anglican soteriology and the Thirty-Nine Articles testify to the Protestant understanding of justification as judicial and imputational: the sinner who exercises faith is declared and regarded righteous inasmuch as the impeccable righteousness of Christ's humanity is imputed to him. Conversely, Tridentine Roman Catholicism posits justification as experiential and impartational: God imparts to the sinner who exercises faith the seed of righteousness and capacity to improve it whereby his justification increases or decreases in proportion to his obedience and repentance. The Reformation view stresses alien righteousness—Christ's righteousness credited to the sinner's account; the Roman view stresses intrinsic righteousness—Christ's righteousness infused into the sinner by which he can fulfill his own justification. Against this distinction and its historical background Johnson's soteriology is more readily comprehended.

Philip Hughes provides incontrovertible documentation of the insistence on justification by faith alone not only by leading sixteenth-century Anglican divines John Jewel, Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, Robert Barnes, George Joye, and Thomas Bilney but also by the pre-Church of England clergy John Wycliffe and John Colet.⁶⁷ Sixteenth-century Anglican soteriology—especially as expressed by Tyndale⁶⁸—was

⁶⁶Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism*, ch. 1, 2.

⁶⁷Hughes, *Faith and Works*, 9-47.

⁶⁸*ibid.*, 20, 21.

strongly influenced by Luther,⁶⁹ the avowed champion of justification by faith alone.

This pattern of early Anglican soteriology, most instructively articulated by Richard Hooker, serves as an excellent foil for comprehending Johnson's soteriological orientation.

Arguably the principal apologist of sixteenth-century Anglicanism, and certainly one of its most notable figures historically, is Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600). In his *magnum opus* titled *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* he steers a typical Anglican course between Romanism on the right and Puritanism on the left.⁷⁰ His thorough treatment of justification, for example, is an objection to (a) the Roman Catholic conception of experiential justification and (b) the Puritan belief that the Roman view of justification is so heretical and egregious that those who held it during the Middle Ages and the Reformation could not be regarded as saved, i.e., regenerate. Hooker contends that while the Roman view of justification by faith *and* works "pervert[s] the truth of Christ,"⁷¹ they err who assert that God's mercy cannot extend to those who due to ignorance embrace such false doctrine.⁷²

In making such a concession to Rome, however, Hooker by no means accommodates their idea of works-righteousness; and his description of the contrast between the Anglican view of justification and that of Rome confirms the similarity of Johnson's view to Rome's at the juncture most critical in the context of the Reformation—justification by faith *alone*. Defending Rome against the charge that she cannot be regarded as the church of Christ in any sense at all, Hooker suggests the area in which she demurs from Protestantism:

It is true, they [Roman Catholics] do indeed join other things with Christ [in salvation]; but how? Not in the work of redemption itself, which they grant that Christ alone hath performed

⁶⁹Latourette, *op. cit.* 2:798, 799.

⁷⁰Hooker, *Justification*, 1:15-75. *Laws...* is bound with *Justification* in the writer's volume.

⁷¹*ibid.*, 22.

⁷²*ibid.*, 70-73. Like the Reformers, he identifies Roman Catholicism with Antichrist, 35.

sufficiently for the salvation of the whole world; but in the application of this inestimable treasure, that it may be effectual to their salvation...⁷³

It is not the *ground* of salvation that is in dispute, but—as in the conversation of Johnson with Mrs. Knowles—its *means of application*. That is, Johnson's idea of the application of Christ's merits as contingent on good works and repentance is what Hooker identifies as precisely Roman Catholic. On certain soteriological points the Anglicans are at one with Rome:

...they teach as we do, that all have sinned; that infants which did never actually offend, have their natures defiled, destitute of justice, and averted from God. They teach as we do, that God doth justify the soul of man alone, without any other coefficient cause of justice; that in making man righteous, none do work efficiently with God, but God.⁷⁴ They teach as we do, that unto justice no man ever attained, but by the merits of Jesus Christ. They teach as we do, that although Christ as God be the efficient, as man the meritorious cause of our justice; yet in us also there is something required... . Christ hath merited to make us just: but as a medicine which is made for health, doth not heal by being made, but by being applied; so, by the merits of Christ there can be no justification, without the application of his merits. Thus far we join hands with the Church of Rome.⁷⁵

"Wherein then do we disagree?", Hooker queries.

We disagree about the nature of the very essence of the medicine whereby Christ cureth our disease; about the manner of applying it; about the number and power of means, which God requireth in us for the effectual applying thereof to our soul's comfort.⁷⁶

Romanism posits that righteousness "is a divine spiritual quality,"⁷⁷ which God imparts to believers for regeneration and for the capacity to perform good works. This quality of righteousness ("inherent grace"⁷⁸) is not static, for it increases in proportion to the increase of good works

⁷³*ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁴In other words, Romanism is not Pelagian.

⁷⁵Hooker, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁷⁶*ibid.*

⁷⁷*ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁸*ibid.*

which it makes meritorious and decreases in proportion to the commission of venial sins, and may be forfeited entirely by mortal sins. Consequently, Christians become increasingly or decreasingly justified. Venial sins are corrected by ordinary practices associated with Romanist tradition, while mortal sins can be corrected exclusively by the sacrament of penance, which "changeth the punishment eternal [imposed because of mortal sin] into a temporal satisfactory punishment... ."79

This dogma Hooker castigates as "the mystery of the man of sin [the Antichrist],"80 and counters with a Protestant insistence on the application of Christ's merits by faith alone.

Whether they speak of the first [regenerative] or second justification [that which follows our practice of good works which the inherent righteousness renders possible], they make the essence of it a divine quality inherent, they make it righteousness which is in us... but the righteousness wherein we must be found, if we will be justified, is not our own; therefore we cannot be justified by any inherent quality. Christ has merited righteousness for as many as are found in him. In him God findeth us if we be faithful; for by faith we are incorporated into him. Then, although in ourselves we be altogether sinful and unrighteous, yet even the man which in himself is impious, full of iniquity, full of sin; him being found in Christ through faith, and having his sin in hatred through repentance; him God beholding with a gracious eye, putteth away his sin by not imputing it, taketh quite away the punishment due thereunto, by pardoning it; and accepteth him in Jesus Christ, as perfectly righteous than if himself had fulfilled the whole law; shall I say more perfectly righteous than if himself had fulfilled the whole law?81

Again, Hooker in assenting that Roman Catholics hold the genuine foundation of the necessity of the efficacy of Christ's merits while improperly implementing that foundation, remarks

Our countrymen in Rhemes make the like answer that they seek salvation no other way than by the blood of Christ; and that humbly they do use prayers, fastings, alms, faith, charity, sacrifice, sacraments, priests, only as the means appointed by Christ, to

79 *ibid.*, 20.

80 *ibid.*

81 *ibid.*, 21.

apply the benefit of his holy blood to them: touching our good works, that in their own natures they are not meritorious, nor answerable unto the joys of heaven; it cometh by the grace of Christ, and not of the work itself, that we have by well-doing a right to heaven, and deserve it worthily.⁸²

Hooker then renders his estimation of this Roman conception:

If any man think that I seek to varnish their opinions, to set the better foot of a lame cause foremost, let him know, that since I began thoroughly to understand their meaning, I have found their halting in this doctrine greater than perhaps it seemeth to them which know not the deepness of Satan... For although this be proof sufficient, that they do not directly deny the foundation of faith; yet if there were no other leaven in the whole lump of their doctrine but this, this were sufficient to prove that their doctrine were not agreeable with the foundation of Christian faith.⁸³

Perhaps surprisingly, one senses in Hooker's description of the Romanist interpretation of justification Johnson's sentiments almost exactly. Johnson's scruples, succinctly epitomized in his reply to Mrs. Knowles and his noted remarks in the sermons, are motivated chiefly by his persuasion that one will be benefitted by the merits of Christ only if his works are sufficient, or, works being wanting, his repentance. When Hooker speaks of repentance in connection with justification, however, his meaning is quite different: it is the concomitant to a humble faith, the repulsion of sin that issues from the heart appealing to and trusting in God alone through Christ's works and abhorring self-righteousness. Contrary to Johnson, Hooker asserts there is no quality in man that motivates God's gift of applying Christ's merits to his credit; in short, while Johnson posits justification by works, Hooker (along with his Anglican contemporaries and several of their prominent forebears) embraces justification by faith.

In holding that one's "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then,

⁸²*ibid.*, 65, 66.

⁸³*ibid.*, 66.

as suppletory to it, repentance," Johnson advances the very Roman Catholic opinion Hooker describes as "doctrine...not agreeable with the foundation of Christian faith." Johnson, like the Romanists whose doctrines Hooker is evaluating, understands that one is saved by Christ's merits; that is not the axis of dispute. The point of disagreement turns on the issue of the means of appropriating those Christological merits. Johnson would assert—and would act according to the assertion—that one "must humbly...use prayers, fastings, alms, faith, charity, sacrifice, sacraments, priests, only as the means appointed by Christ, to apply the benefit of his holy blood to [himself]." He asserts the Romish dogma "of propitiating God by corporal austerities, of anticipating his vengeance by voluntary afflictions, and appeasing his justice by a speedy and cheerful submission to a less penalty when a greater is incurred."⁸⁴

Hooker differs by insisting that

Their doctrine as [Thomas More] thought, maketh the works of man rewardable in the world to come through the mere goodness of God, whom it pleaseth to set so high a price upon so poor a thing; and ours, that a man doth receive that eternal and high reward, not for his works, but for his faith's sake, by which he worketh: whereas in truth our doctrine is no other than that which we have learned at the feet of Christ; namely, that God doth justify the believing man, yet not for the worthiness of his belief, but for his worthiness which is believed [Christ]...⁸⁵

Far from teaching the Johnsonian dictum that Christ's merits are appropriated by works, Hooker even dissents from More's caricature of his views, that it is our faith whereby God counts us righteous. In truth, according to Hooker, neither one's work nor faith is the ground of justification, which is Christ's merits alone; faith is only the means of the application of those merits to the account of him who exercises it.

In addition, the parallel between Hooker's description of the baneful effect on the individual of the Roman conception of justification by faith and works and Johnson's spiritual anxiety is interesting. Hooker

⁸⁴Johnson, *Rambler* 110. Yale edition., 222.

⁸⁵Hooker, *op. cit.*, 67.

characterizes the Scriptural doctrine as "the comfort of them whose hearts are overcharged by sin."⁸⁶ He charges, conversely, that "the doctrine professed in the church of Rome doth bereave men of comfort, both in their lives, and at their deaths..."⁸⁷ If Hooker has accurately depicted the effects of the Roman view of justification by works, and if Johnson did in fact, as it appears, affirm the Roman view Hooker set out to confute, it is inevitable that Johnson's scruples and anxiety resulted directly from his belief in the Roman Catholic understanding of justification.

In addition, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England are straightforward enough in their Protestant soteriological orientation, especially Articles IV-XVIII. Article XI is of special interest:

Of the Justification of Man. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.⁸⁸

Although, as noted below, later divines deviated from the creed (and Newman attempted to reinterpret it), the explanation of the eleventh article by Thomas Rogers in his exposition of the Articles which first appeared in 1579 soundly sets that Article in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic idea:

Besides what hath been said, that works have no place nor portion in the matter of our justification, it is evident in the holy scripture...⁸⁹

He continually castigates the Papists,

who against the justification by faith alone, do hold a justification by merits, and that of congruity, dignity, and condignity.

⁸⁶*ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁷*ibid.*

⁸⁸Hardon, *Spirit*, 176.

⁸⁹Rogers, *Catholic*, 115.

The said Papists teach besides, that life eternal is due unto us of debt; because we deserve it by our good works.

They teach, finally, that by good works our sins are purged.⁹⁰

The Articles do indeed seem to confute unequivocally the Roman Catholic conception to which Rogers so strenuously objects.

While the sixteenth-century divines, therefore, influenced as they were by Luther, embraced the Reformational view of justification by faith alone,⁹¹ later Anglicans were not thus convinced. Nicholas Hudson asserts that the Restorationist and eighteenth-century divines of latitudinarian persuasion recognized that the Articles were stacked against their Romanist propensities and therefore "ignored" them: "...the lack of frequent or detailed discussions of grace in Anglican homiletics of the period (including Johnson's sermons) makes it very difficult to generalize on the prevailing doctrine."⁹² In a treatment of the topic published in 1669-1670, George Bull "provoked a storm"⁹³ by labeling the doctrine of justification by faith alone a paradox and "deny[ing] that faith is the only instrument of justification."⁹⁴ Bull sets forth the belief later held by Johnson that trust in the merits of Christ alone is insufficient for justification.

For it is, alas, too well known, that the greatest part of those who call themselves Christians, secure of the mercy of God, the merits of Christ, and of their own salvation, pass their days without the least anxiety, being at the same time very far short of a true Christian life... . They both know and congratulate themselves, that they truly, and unfeignedly trust in the merits of Christ... . They therefore trust truly in Christ, but not as they ought, because they do it without any grounds. They depend on the merits of Christ, but despise his commands; they eagerly embrace the promises of the gospel, but care nothing for its precepts.⁹⁵

⁹⁰*ibid.*, 116.

⁹¹Hughes, *passim*.

⁹²Hudson, *op. cit.*, 208.

⁹³Cross and More, *Anglicanism*, 296.

⁹⁴Bull, "Justification," 296, 298.

⁹⁵*ibid.*, 298.

Bull frankly admits he affirms "that good works are necessary to justification."⁹⁶

Isaac Barrow, another seventeenth-century divine, predicates justification on good works:

The virtue and effect of that first justifying act doth continue (we abide in a justified state) so long as we do perform the conditions imposed by God, and undertaken by us at our first justification... if we do persevere firm in faith and obedience, we shall (according to the purport of the evangelical covenant) continue in a state of grace and favour with God, and in effect remain justified; otherwise the virtue of our justification ceaseth, and we in regard thereto are more deeply involved in guilt.⁹⁷

Barrow reinforces the Roman Catholic understanding of justification as experiential rather than alien or judicial and as an "infusion into [one's] soul of righteousness, of grace, of virtuous habits."⁹⁸ It is a work "enabling also and quickening him to discharge the conditions of faith and obedience required from him and undertaken by him... "⁹⁹

Johnson's notion of conditional justification comports more favorably with these latter Papistic salvific schemes than with those of the early Anglicans who supported Luther's concept of justification by faith alone and of Christ's righteousness being imputed to one's account rather than imparted to his spirit. Johnson's covenantal language in Sermon 9, in fact, seems to mirror Barrow's comment above: "Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer, we lose the benefits of his death."¹⁰⁰

That Anglicanism was not historically unanimous in its adherence to the Reformation belief in justification by faith alone and other distinctively Reformational tenets is prominently evidenced in the Oxford Movement one-and-a-half generations after Johnson. Its leader, John Henry

⁹⁶*ibid.*, 299.

⁹⁷Barrow, "Justification," 302, 303.

⁹⁸*ibid.*, 301.

⁹⁹*ibid.*

¹⁰⁰Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 100.

Newman, cites the Anglican Homilies to prove the tenet of justification by faith alone does not preclude justification by other means as long as they justify in a different *sense* than does faith,¹⁰¹ a sentiment not at all in violation of earlier Anglican views.¹⁰² Newman proceeds, notwithstanding his expression of reservations about the Roman view, to import into the articles the Roman Catholic perspective of impartational justification.¹⁰³ Newman, in any case, objects much more vigorously to the Lutheran (i.e., Protestant) dictum of justification by faith alone than to “the extreme writers of the Roman school.”¹⁰⁴ He supports his novel synthesis of justification by faith and by obedience with appeals to the Anglican divines,¹⁰⁵ and reveals the soteriological latitudinarianism of Anglicanism.

It remains to demonstrate that there can be no question that Johnson’s soteriology travels within this Roman—and not Reformed—current of Anglicanism, that this current is oriented more toward experiential rather than judicial soteriological elements, and that the neglect of the judicial in favor of the experiential of this Roman current conduces to Johnson’s anxiety—as, indeed, it tends to do in anyone who embraces it, an observation Hooker understands.

Having surveyed the Roman Catholic current within the soteriology of developing Anglicanism and during the nineteenth century, it is now opportune to review Johnson’s attitude in general toward Romanism. What strikes one immediately is that while a loyal Church of England man, Johnson has a predominantly favorable estimate of Catholicism.¹⁰⁶

On October 26, 1769, Boswell sups with Johnson and later records their discussion, which includes an extended dialogue revealing Johnson’s assessment of Roman Catholicism.¹⁰⁷ In response to Boswell, Johnson

¹⁰¹Fairweather, *Oxford*, 151, 152.

¹⁰²Hooker, *op. cit.*, 37.

¹⁰³Fairweather, *op. cit.*, 152.

¹⁰⁴*ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰⁵*ibid.*, 248, 249.

¹⁰⁶Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 163-175.

¹⁰⁷Boswell, *op. cit.*, 173, 174.

concedes he is "no great enemy to the Roman Catholick religion," and goes so far as to claim he prefers Romanism to Presbyterianism. When Boswell points out that *creedally*, Anglicans are at one with the Reformed dogma, "even [in] the doctrine of predestination," Johnson demurs by attributing the inclusion of predestination in the articles to "part of the clamour of the times" and by suggesting that the topic was "mentioned...with as little positiveness as could be," a rejoinder that not unnaturally provokes Boswell to inquire whether it is necessary for Anglicans to affirm the Thirty-Nine Articles. Johnson does not respond unequivocally; instead, he sidesteps the question by drawing attention to the controversy surrounding it ("that is a question which has been much agitated").

Now it has been noted that Johnson does not personally hold Article XI on justification by faith alone, no matter how formally he may endorse the Articles.¹⁰⁸ Unless, therefore, he misunderstands the import of the article (a highly unlikely possibility), he cannot unreservedly subscribe to the Articles. Johnson does not—and cannot—dispute Boswell's observation regarding the creedal identity between Calvinism and Anglicanism; and if Johnson is squeamish about the issue of whether an Anglican must affirm the Presbyterian dictum of predestination appearing in the Articles, he is probably equally squeamish about whether one must affirm them unreservedly, knowing as he must that the Protestant view of justification, and not his own, is articulated in the Articles. Quinlan remarks,

[Johnson] knew that one must be directed by one's conscience, and his conscience told him his best hope of salvation existed in the Church of England. Furthermore, because of the latitude the Establishment permits, he could feel relatively free to follow certain practices and to adopt certain beliefs not in favor with most English churchmen but, on the other hand, not specifically interdicted. Thus on points where writers on religion disagreed, he could select the particular interpretation that seemed right to him, without thinking of himself as an apostate. The fact that *some of these interpretations*

¹⁰⁸Hudson observes, "many [eighteenth-century] Anglicans...found themselves at odds with the articles of their own church..." *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 204; also, "Very few Anglicans could say that they wholeheartedly agreed with all the Thirty-Nine Articles," *ibid.*, 205, n. 42.

were basically Roman Catholic is not necessarily evidence of a personal predilection for that faith.¹⁰⁹

In defending the Roman doctrines of apostolic succession, purgatory, prayer for the dead, confession to priests, and penance, Johnson unequivocally denies the uniform Protestant accusation that the mass is idolatrous and abominable.¹¹⁰ This acceptance of the validity of the mass, moreover, coincides well with Johnson's belief that Christ's merits are appropriated by one's works; for the mass, as Calvin recognized, is another specious attempt to appropriate Christ's merits by one's own merit:

But what is the object of the mass, except it be that by the merit of a new oblation we may be partakers of the passion of Christ?¹¹¹

For Johnson, however, the mass cannot be criticized on the grounds that it is meritorious, because he himself holds that one's works are an instrument of salvation.

At Oxford on June 10, 1784, Johnson "argued in defence of some of the peculiar tenets of the church of Rome,"¹¹² including the provision of the bread exclusively to the laity in the mass, and present communion with deceased saints. Interestingly, Johnson defends Romanism on the very issue over which he appears ambivalent some fifteen years earlier—creedal latitudinarianism.

"If you join the Papists externally, they will not interrogate you strictly as to your belief in their tenets. No reasoning Papist believes every article of their faith..."¹¹³

This latitude, whether supposed or actual, Johnson finds agreeable. Perhaps he feels consoled by it: he can thereby rationalize that, just as the Papists do not insist on absolute creedal subscription, the Anglicans should

¹⁰⁹Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 169, 170. My emphasis.

¹¹⁰note, *e.g.*, Calvin, *op. cit.*, IV:xviii, *passim*.

¹¹¹*ibid.*, 726.

¹¹²Boswell, *op. cit.*, 536.

¹¹³*ibid.*, 537.

not (do not?) either; he can thereby condone his own soteriological deviation from the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Though Johnson in conversation with Boswell expresses objections to certain Roman Catholic *practices* and perversions,¹¹⁴ his dispute with Romanism never seems to be doctrinal; at least he does not trouble himself to refute what Protestants regard as its doctrinal errors when he is questioned. To be sure, when in a disagreeable humor, Johnson can inveigh against the Catholics as easily (and vehemently) as against anybody else,¹¹⁵ but on the whole his attitude toward Romanism is agreement and especially defense.

Johnson's favorable attitude toward Romanism supports a key theme of this dissertation: Johnson's soteriology is neither Augustinian, Calvinistic, Arminian, or creedally Anglican—although on other points it partakes of deistic rationalism (on the atonement, for example). In the sphere of justification it is firmly Roman Catholic and therefore experientialist. Given Johnson's attitude toward Roman Catholicism, one should not find this surprising. Indeed, one should find it surprising if Johnson's soteriology were found *not* to be somewhat Tridentine.

That Johnson's interpretation of justification is in harmony with Romanism and not Protestantism is discovered by comparing it to the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-63), the official Roman Catholic response to Protestantism.

Trent insists against the Protestants that the death of Christ does not of itself guarantee redemption or secure universal salvation—Christ's salvific merits must be applied.

But though *He died for all*, yet do not all receive the benefit of his death, but those only unto whom the merit of his passion is communicated... . if [men] were not born again in Christ, they never would be justified; seeing that, in the new birth, there is

¹¹⁴*ibid.*, 173, 174, 301, *et al.*

¹¹⁵*ibid.*, 430.

bestowed upon them, through the merit of his [Christ's] passion, the grace wherewith they are made just.¹¹⁶

Johnson likewise asserts in Sermon 28 that "Salvation is promised to us Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance*."¹¹⁷ The "merit of [Christ's] passion," in the parlance of Trent, is applied to those who exercise the grace by which they are justified.

The crucial argument is not over the fact of the application of Christ's merits but the instrument of that application. When Trent speaks of the grace bestowed at the new birth, it refers "not [to] remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just [sic], and of an enemy a friend, so that he may be an heir according to the hope of eternal life."¹¹⁸ That is, God endows the believer with the means whereby he justifies himself before God:

For, although no one can be just, but he to whom the merits of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are communicated, yet is this done in the said justification of the impious, when by the merit of that same most holy passion, *the charity of God is poured forth*, by the Holy Spirit, *in the hearts* of those that are justified, and is inherent therein... Wherefore, when receiving true and Christian justice, they are bidden, immediately on being born again, to preserve it pure and spotless, as *the first robe* given them through Jesus Christ...¹¹⁹

Johnson holds it indeed the duty of the Christian "to preserve it [his justification] pure and spotless" if he is to possess hope of eternal life. He remarks, "Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer [by our sin], we lose the benefits of his death."¹²⁰

Trent asseverates that after adequately preparing himself for justification,¹²¹ God bestows on man the gifts of faith, hope, and charity

¹¹⁶Schaff, *op. cit.*, 2:90, 91.

¹¹⁷Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 303. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁸Schaff, *op. cit.*, 94.

¹¹⁹*ibid.*, 95-97. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁰Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 100.

¹²¹Schaff, *op. cit.*, 92.

wherewith he can appropriate Christ's merits.¹²² Because justification is not by faith alone, one is liable to forfeit his justified state by lack of good works and repentance:

For God forsakes not those who have been once justified by his grace, unless he be first forsaken by them. Wherefore, no one ought to flatter himself up by faith alone, fancying that by faith alone he is made an heir, and will obtain the inheritance...¹²³

Johnson warned similarly in Sermon 28:

Yet let us likewise be careful, lest an erroneous opinion of the all-sufficiency of our Saviour's merits lull us into carelessness and security. His merits are indeed all-sufficient! But he has prescribed the terms on which they are to operate. He died to save sinners, but to save only those sinners that repent. Peter, who denied him, was forgiven, but he obtained his pardon "by weeping bitterly."¹²⁴

One's merits, and not his faith alone, determine his standing before God.¹²⁵ The inherent grace infused into him—in contradistinction to the Protestant conception of man as justified by the alien righteousness of Christ, external to the sinner but credited to his account¹²⁶—is the means whereby one performs good works which merit eternal life.

And for this cause, life eternal is to be proposed to those working well *unto the end*, and hoping in God, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Jesus Christ, and as a reward which is according to the promise of God himself, to be faithfully rendered to their good works and merits...¹²⁷

Trent incontestably condemns the Protestant notion of justification by faith alone. Canons IX and XI in the chapter on justification pontificate:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any

¹²²*ibid.*, 96, 97.

¹²³*ibid.*, 101.

¹²⁴Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 304.

¹²⁵Schaff, *op. cit.*, 104, 105.

¹²⁶Calvin, *op. cit.*, III: xi.

¹²⁷Schaff, *op. cit.*, 107.

way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will: let him be anathema.

If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and *the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost*, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God: let him be anathema.¹²⁸

For Trent, like Johnson, good works, and not faith alone, are the condition on which the application to the individual of Christ's merits is predicated. Johnson follows Trent, rather than Augustine, Arminius, or the Reformers, in grounding justification in the experiential sphere: justification imparts the grace necessary to fulfill the good works or repentance on which the appropriation of Christ's merits is dependent. Hudson is only partially accurate therefore in assessing Johnson's views thus: "With not too much qualification, we can say that Johnson believed in justification by works, the doctrine excoriated by early Protestants as Pelagianism and Popery."¹²⁹ Johnson's soteriological views incline toward but do not embrace Pelagianism (which denies original sin altogether), and his doctrine of justification by works is not merely "Popery": it is in fact a replication of Tridentine dogma.

Because, apart from the statements in occasional dialogues recorded by Boswell, Johnson's religious ideas find their supreme and most direct expression in his sermons, they warrant special consideration in extracting and assessing his soteriology.

Not surprisingly, Johnson's sermons are devoted to little else but the sphere of sanctification. Not one is intended to elucidate what is ordinarily recognized as Christian doctrine; each is a moralistic homily. Even in Sermons 9 and 22 dealing with the sacrament of communion, Johnson devotes his attention to its practice and subjective implications and ignores its theological and doctrinal significance. Kass accurately observes that "the Sermons demonstrate that religion is efficacious in this world... .

¹²⁸*ibid.*, 112, 113.

¹²⁹Hudson, *op. cit.*, 203.

Johnson follows the reader into the street, the marketplace, and the coffeehouse as he puts religion to the test of addressing the practical realities of Monday and Tuesday."¹³⁰ Kass refers to the "pragmatic orientation of the *Sermons*."¹³¹

Kass is convinced that the overarching concern of Johnson's sermons is "that human life is in a special sense 'vacuous'... . In every *Sermon*, Johnson notes that it is the preponderous vacuity in our lives which moves us to seek the consolation and encouragement provided by religion."¹³² Gray insists that happiness "is the word, the idea, the concernment which binds the entire canon of his sermons together."¹³³

However, it would seem that the vacuity of life theme and the corresponding happiness theme are simply single dominant strands in an entire pattern of soteriology. For instance, while sermons 12, 14, and 15 specifically address the issue of the emptiness of human existence and the yearning for happiness, sermon 3 on the fear of God, though subjectively oriented as are all of the sermons, stresses the necessity of fear not mainly as an antidote to an empty existence but as a duty of the human creature to God, and only secondarily concerns itself with benefits that may accrue to the Christian.

The great purpose of revealed religion is to afford man a clear representation of his dependence on the Supreme Being, by teaching him to consider God as his Creator, and Governour, his Father and his Judge. Those to whom Providence has granted the knowledge of the holy Scriptures, have no need to perplex themselves with difficult speculations, to deduce their duty from remote principles, or to enforce it by doubtful motives.¹³⁴

In Sermon 4, the motivation Johnson mentions in urging the listeners on to charity is divine blessing in eternity for the obedient and retribution for the disobedient:

¹³⁰Kass, "Consolations," 3-5.

¹³¹*ibid.*, 9.

¹³²*ibid.*, 2, 3, 36.

¹³³Gray, *Johnson's Sermons*, 167.

¹³⁴Johnson, *op. cit.*, [Sermon 3], 29.

... harden not thy heart, but what thou knowest that in thy last moment thou shalt wish done, make haste to do, lest thy last moment be now upon thee... . And let us all, at all times, and in all places, remember, that they who have given food to the hungry, raiment to the naked, and instruction to the ignorant, shall be numbered by the Son of God, amongst the blessed of the Father.¹³⁵

It is difficult, further, to understand how in sermon 28, the address to convicts, it is "the preponderous vacuity in our lives which moves us to seek the consolation and encouragement provided by religion." Rather, it is "one earnest effort for salvation"¹³⁶ that is the chief goal of religion, and indeed, of Johnson's sermons: "The business of life is to work out our salvation."¹³⁷ Alleviating the vacuity and unhappiness of human existence is a single propitious effect of the goal of religious life—the salvation of the soul.

In a salient remark of Sermon 8 reprimanding intellectuals for their pride, Johnson reveals that adherence to the word of God is the ultimate inducement to righteousness. He suggests the proud intellectual consider the frequently exalted place of the less intelligent individuals and compare it to his own. He then states:

But if this method of obtaining humility be ineffectual, he may however establish it, upon more strong and lasting principles, by applying himself to the duties of religion, and the word of God.¹³⁸

These "more strong and lasting principles," and not the themes of the vacuity of life and the desire for happiness, are the primary inducements to virtue and morality in Johnson's religion, especially his sermons.

Johnson's sermons can be subsumed into six categories: the marital sermons (1, 25), the communion sermons (9, 22), the political sermons (24, 26), the sermons warning against sinfulness or specific sins (2, 6, 8, 10, 13,

¹³⁵*ibid.*, [Sermon 4], 51.

¹³⁶*ibid.* [sermon 28], 302.

¹³⁷*ibid.* [Sermon 15], 161.

¹³⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 8], 95.

16, 17, 18, 20, 23, 28), the sermons exhorting the practice of Christian virtue (3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 19, 27), and the sermons elucidating the vanity of human existence (12, 14, 15). The sermons are replete with instructions, exhortations, and warnings with respect to individual sanctification; even in the political sermons sanctification occupies a decisive role.

For example, Johnson locates the cause of political turmoil in the individual condition, not in social structures:

In political, as well as natural disorders, the great error of those who commonly undertake, either cure or preservation, is, that they rest in second causes, without extending their search to the remote and original sources of evil. They therefore obviate the immediate evil, but leave the destructive principle to operate again; and have their work for ever (to begin, like the husbandman who mows down the heads of noisome weeds, instead of pulling up the roots... . The only uniform and perpetual cause of publick happiness is publick virtue. The effects of all other things which are considered as advantages, will be found causal and transitory.¹³⁹

Positive legislation is only partially successful for it cannot examine or alter the state of the human heart. Indeed, "These deficiencies in civil life can be supplied only by religion."¹⁴⁰ Accordingly,

[T]he first duty of a [civil] governour is to diffuse through the community a spirit of religion, to endeavor that a sense of divine authority should prevail in all orders of men, and that the laws should be obeyed, in subordination to the universal and unchangeable edicts of the Creatour and Ruler of the world.¹⁴¹

Hence, while it would be inaccurate to assume Johnson supports civil virtue on merely utilitarian grounds, it is evident that he sees sanctification as an essential civic virtue.

Johnson's soteriological scheme operates within the Romanist current of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. To that current, salvation is neither applied by faith alone nor grounded in the Reformers' idea of Christ's

¹³⁹*ibid.* [Sermon 24], 253.

¹⁴⁰*ibid.*, 256.

¹⁴¹*ibid.*, 256, 257.

righteousness imputed, rather than imparted. Salvation is intensely experiential—it is indeed provided by Christ but is additionally dependent on man's merits. This anthropocentric view of salvation coupled with the abiding influence of Law's ascetic ideal can never permit the solace and freedom afforded those who embrace the twin Reformation dicta of salvation appropriated by faith alone and justification interpreted as the application of the impeccable alien righteousness of Christ's life and death to the sinners' account. Johnson's concern is almost perpetually religion as it expresses itself in or shapes human experience; creed and dogma are subordinate to those supreme purposes.

Chapter 2: ORIGINAL SIN

So that the fault does not lie here, that we desire to be good and perfect, but through the weakness of our nature fall short of it; but it is, because we have not piety enough to attend to be as good as we can, or to please God in all the actions of our life.

William Law

from *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, 1728

While, in the words of Kass, "one obligation of Johnson as a sermon writer was to remind his audience about the limitations of human nature,"¹ how these limitations relate to the Christian doctrine of original sin is not entirely clear in Johnson's conversation and writings. Nonetheless, it is equally true that Johnson's view of man's nature is inseparably related to his view of salvation:

Johnson asks the conventional moral questions in his *Sermons*: how are we to be saved? what solace or hope is there for man as he experiences the emptiness of life? However, his answers are always framed by his unconventional and experiential understanding of the nature of man.²

Johnson states in a rejoinder to Boswell, "'With respect to original sin, the inquiry is not necessary; for whatever is the cause of human corruption, men are evidently and confessedly so corrupt, that all the laws of heaven and earth are insufficient to restrain them from crimes'"³ Johnson avoids original sin as a tenet of speculative theology while affirming its effects.

After St. Paul himself, Augustine was the first church father to articulate a careful defence of the doctrine that in Adam's sin both his depravity and his guilt are transmitted ("imputed" is the Pauline and theological expression) to his posterity. In medieval Romanism, however, the

¹Kass, "Consolations," 8.

²*ibid.*, 33.

³Boswell, *Life*, 482. He concedes that "the greater part of mankind are base and wicked," [sermon 17] *Sermons*, 190.

definition of original sin was adjusted to highlight “the absence of original righteousness—the privation of supernatural grace through the fall.”⁴ While Augustine held that “concupiscence” was a central feature of original sin, the medieval theologians believed this depravity was not essential or inherent; rather, all men possess a propensity to temptation, accompanied by free will by which they can capitulate to the temptations of life or, conversely, overcome the propensity by good works.⁵ In simple terms, the fundamental problem of mankind for Roman Catholics was not the presence of sin, but the absence of righteousness. The Protestant Reformation included a revival of the Augustinian notion of “imputed” sin and guilt, a revival most clearly represented in Luther’s celebrated *On the Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus.

While we cannot assume Johnson is oblivious to these theological debates, it is evident they do not especially interest him. His hamartiology seems much more acclimated to the Roman Catholic conception of the inherent propensity to sin rather than the Augustinian-Protestant idea of the immediate imputation of Adam’s corruption and resultant guilt to his posterity. He does not say this in so many words, however, and one is left to deduce his hamartiology from isolated remarks in his works and in *Boswell’s Life*.

Johnson in fact argues *a posteriori* for original sin. Men are so obviously sinners in their present state that speculation as to the origin of their sinfulness is unnecessary. In sermon 5 Johnson submits that “[Edenic] happiness was forfeited by a breach of the conditions to which it was annexed, and ... the posterity of him that broke the covenant [Adam] were involved in the consequences of his fault.”⁶ One wishes Johnson had specified the nature of the “involvement” of humanity in Adamic sin, but, characteristically, his overriding concern is experiential, not theoretical.

Theoretical questions concerning man’s inward nature, the role of God and Christ in his regeneration, and the motives to repentance were of importance to Johnson primarily as they either promoted

⁴Wallace, “Original Sin,” 735.

⁵*ibid.*

⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [sermon 5], 55. See also Boswell, *Hebrides*, 88.

or hindered the individual's feeling of responsibility for his own salvation through a moral life.⁷

Owen Chadwick's conclusion that Johnson "developed a Calvinistic sense of the load of original sin"⁸ may be misleading. As Nicholas Hudson notes, Johnson's conception of original sin is not even Arminian.⁹ Much less is it Calvinistic. Calvin forcefully denies free will to all but the regenerate: "This being admitted will place it beyond all doubt, that man is not possessed of free will for good works, unless he be assisted by grace, and that special grace which is bestowed on the elect alone in regeneration."¹⁰ Calvin is convinced that the will "is so bound by the slavery of sin, that it cannot excite itself, much less devote itself to anything good; for such a disposition is the beginning of a conversion to God which in the Scriptures is attributed solely to divine grace."¹¹

Johnson suggests that by the sheer exertion of human will apart from any divine interposition man must strive for perfection both of his inward spiritual condition and his outward societal state. This conception of the relation of sin and the will repudiates the Reformation conviction that man is so utterly depraved that sheer exertion of will cannot overcome the effects of sin:

To Martin Luther it was a revolutionary discovery that the righteousness of God is 'the righteousness by which we are made righteous...'. Medieval thinkers, he believed, had led Christendom astray by teaching that human persistence in doing good moral and ritual actions would earn merit in the eyes of God and enable sinners to achieve salvation. But the appalling consequences of sin had so paralyzed the will that sinners could not take the least step towards pleasing God.¹²

Johnson does not thereby deny that sin is an inherent and pernicious feature of mankind. He affirms men bear a heavy burden of sin but does

⁷Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 203.

⁸Chadwick, "The Religion of Samuel Johnson," 130.

⁹Hudson, *op. cit.*, 206.

¹⁰Calvin, *op. cit.*, II:ii:vi and *passim*.

¹¹*ibid.*, iii:v.

¹²R. T. Jones, "Reformation Theology," 565.

not always recognize a corresponding form of justification by which that burden is relieved. This precarious equation is an essential consequence of Johnson's soteriology.

That Johnson does not deny that men are naturally and inherently sinful is evidenced from various sources. He contends, for example, "Pride is a corruption that seems almost originally ingrafted in our nature; it exerts itself in our first years, and, without continual endeavours to suppress it, influences our last."¹³ In this remark Johnson sounds at least partially Arminian. On the question of original sin, Arminianism occupies a position midway between Calvinism and Pelagianism. While the former posits the direct transmission of Adam's corruption and guilt, the latter denies both. Arminianism, by contrast, affirms the transmission of the corruption or propensity to sin, but not Adamic guilt, nor in the terms of Luther, the "bondage of the will."¹⁴ According to Johnson, however Adam's sin affected his posterity, it did not necessarily or finally corrupt their will. He contends that:

We are informed by the Scriptures, that God is not the Authour of our present state, that when he created man, he created him for happiness; happiness indeed dependent upon his own choice, and to be preserved by his own conduct... . Thus religion shews us that physical and moral evil entered the world together, and reason and experience assure us that they continue for the most part so closely united, that, to avoid misery, we must avoid sin, and that while it is in our power to be virtuous, it is in our power to be happy... .¹⁵

Indeed, Johnson's confidence in human ability is so great that he supposes that by sheer exertion of the will the individual can, however conditionally, regain a certain moral completeness. Although he is alert to the depravity of man's inclination to sin, he is staunch in his belief in the potential man has to correct or improve his lot. His comments from Sermon 5 warrant full quotation:

But a community, in which virtue should generally prevail, of which every member should fear God with his whole heart, and

¹³Johnson [sermon 6], *op. cit.*, 66.

¹⁴Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2:632-636.

¹⁵Johnson, *op. cit.*[sermon 5], 55.

love his neighbour as himself, where every man should labour to make himself "perfect, even as his Father which is in heaven is perfect," and endeavour, with his utmost diligence, to imitate the divine justice, and benevolence, would have no reason to envy those nations, whose quiet is the effect of their ignorance.

If we consider it with regard to publick happiness, it would be opulent without luxury, and powerful without faction; its counsels would be steady, because they would be just; and its efforts would be vigorous, because they would be united. The governours would have nothing to fear from the turbulence of the people, nor the people anything from the ambition of their governors. The encroachments of foreign enemies, they could not always avoid, but would certainly repulse, for scarce any civilized nation has ever been enslaved, till it was first corrupted.

With regard to private men, ... Every man would be industrious to improve his property, because he would be in no danger of seeing his improvements torn from him. Every man would assist his neighbor, because he would be certain of receiving assistance, if he should himself be attacked by necessity. Every man would endeavour after merit, because merit would always be rewarded. Every tie of friendship and relation would add to happiness, because it would not be subject to be broken by envy, rivalry, or suspicion. Children would honour their parents, because all parents would be virtuous; all parents would love their children, because all children would be obedient. The grief which we naturally feel at the death of those that are dear to us, could not perhaps be wholly prevented, but would be much more moderate, than in the present state of things, because no man could ever want a friend, and his loss would therefore be less, because his grief, like his other passions, would be regulated by his duty. Even the relations of subjection would produce no uneasiness, because insolence would be separated from power, and discontent from inferiority. Difference of opinions would never disturb this community, because every man would dispute for truth alone, look upon the ignorance of others with compassion, and reclaim them from their errors with tenderness and modesty. Persecution would not be heard of among them, because there would be no pride on one side, nor obstinacy on the other. Disputes about property would seldom happen, because no man would grow rich by injuring another, and when they did happen, they would be quickly terminated, because each party would be equally desirous of a just sentence. All care and solicitude would be almost banished from this happy region, because no man would have either false friends, or publick enemies. The immoderate desire of riches would be extinguished where there was no vanity to be gratified. The fear of poverty would be dispelled, where there was no man suffered to want what was necessary to his support, or proportioned to his

deserts. Such would be the state of a community generally virtuous, and this happiness would probably be derived to future generations; since the earliest impressions would be in favour of virtue, since those, to whom the care of education should be committed, would make themselves venerable by the observation of their own precepts, and the minds of the young and inexperienced would not be tainted with false notions, nor their conduct influenced by bad examples.

Such is the state at which any community may arrive by the general practice of the duties of religion. And can Providence be accused of cruelty or negligence, when such happiness as this is within our power? Can man be said to have received his existence as a punishment, or a curse, when he may attain such a state as this; when even this is only preparatory to greater happiness, and the same course of life will secure him from misery, both in this world, and in a future state?¹⁶

Nor should we regard Johnson's description of "this happy region" as merely a noble but unreachable goal (though Johnson does not hold that man may attain an earthly utopia).

Let no man charge this prospect of things, with being a train of airy phantoms; a visionary scene, with which a gay imagination may be amused in solitude and ease, but which the first survey of the world will shew him to be nothing more than a pleasing delusion. Nothing has been mentioned which would not certainly be produced in any nation by a general piety. To effect all this, no miracle is required; men need only unite their endeavours, and exert those abilities, which God has conferred upon them, in conformity to the laws of religion.

To general happiness indeed, is required a general concurrence in virtue; but we are not to delay the amendment of our own lives, in expectation of this favourable juncture. An universal reformation must be begun somewhere, and every man ought to be ambitious of being the first. He that does not promote it, retards it; for every man must, by his conversation [deportment], do either good or hurt. Let every man therefore, endeavour to make the world happy, by a strict performance of his duty to God and man, and the mighty work will soon be accomplished.¹⁷

¹⁶*ibid.*, 60-62.

¹⁷*ibid.*, 62, 63.

These sentiments seem extraordinary issuing from a man fully convinced that “men are evidently and confessedly so corrupt, that all the laws of heaven and earth are insufficient to restrain them from crimes’ ...,”¹⁸ yet they are perfectly consistent with what Thomas Sowell has termed in his epochal work *A Conflict of Visions* the “unconstrained” vision. Discussing the commitment of Johnson’s contemporary William Godwin to this vision, Sowell remarks, “man’s understanding and disposition were [in Godwin’s estimation] capable of intentionally creating social benefits. Godwin regarded...virtue in turn as being the road to human happiness.”¹⁹ In Godwin’s unconstrained vision the statement of possibilities of the future exercise of virtue was “not meant as an empirical generalization about the way most people currently behaved. It was meant as a statement of the underlying nature of human potential. Conceding current egocentric behavior did not imply that it was a permanent feature of human nature, as human nature was conceived in the unconstrained vision.”²⁰ Johnson’s dedication to the possibilities of societal perfectibility by means of personal piety conforms exactly to the widely-held historical idea of the unconstrained vision:

Implicit in the unconstrained vision is the notion that the potential is very different from the actual, and that means exist to improve human nature toward its potential, or that such means can be evolved or discovered, so that man will do the right thing for the right reason, rather than for ulterior psychic or economic rewards.²¹

Johnson’s proposal and depiction of perfect piety is more surprising, however, when one notes that the latter does not presuppose the miraculous imposition of regeneration. In fact, Johnson in the above citation is intent to *deny* the necessity of any direct work of providence in the spiritual amelioration of society.

Such insistence—as well as Johnson’s conviction that children properly educated would naturally preserve the morally perfect society—reveals a

¹⁸Boswell, *op. cit.*, 482.

¹⁹Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions*, 23.

²⁰*ibid.*, 24.

²¹*ibid.*, 25, 26.

great deal about his hamartiology, and especially his view of original sin. Due to their belief in man's sinful, impotent nature, earlier versions of spiritual social perfectibility were uniformly grounded in a commitment to the necessity of the direct interposition of God, whether immediately (as in the case of premillennialism), or mediately (as in the case of postmillennialism).²² In each case God is seen as the direct agent of the improvement.

To Johnson, by contrast, men possess the inherent ability to improve both themselves and society. Indeed, his view of spiritual societal amelioration is simply one of a number of cases in which the concept of original (inherent) sin plays no role whatever. It is as though in prominent instances Johnson fully discounts its effects, if not its existence. Men may perform good works, repent, and improve society without the gracious miracle of divine interposition.

Johnson's confidence in humanity is more easily reconciled with his devotion to orthodox Christianity when one comprehends Johnson's conviction that man is capable of both impeccable morality and abysmal depravity—it is all a matter of the proper exercise of the will, without whose freedom virtue is an impossibility:

If we examine all the afflictions of mind, body, and estate, by this rule, we shall find God not otherwise accessory to them, than as he works no miracles to prevent them, as he suffers men to be masters of themselves, and restrains them only by coercions applied to their reason. If God should, by a particular exertion of his omnipotence, hinder murder or oppression, no man could then be a murderer or an oppressor, because he would be withheld from it by an irresistible power; but then that power, which prevented crimes, would destroy virtue; *for virtue is the consequence of choice*. Men would be no longer rational, or would be rational to no purpose, because their actions would not be the result of free-will, determined by moral motives; but the settled and predestined motions of a machine impelled by necessity.²³

²²Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, 21 and *passim*.

²³Johnson, *op. cit.*, 56. My emphasis.

Hudson marshalls evidence of Johnson's ambivalent attitude toward free will:

On the one hand, he asserted like Hobbes or Collins that the will was regulated entirely by self-interest. On the other hand, he agreed with Bramhall and other advocates for liberty that men very often act without clear reasons, or even in direct opposition to their 'last judgment' concerning the greatest good.²⁴

To Johnson, overwhelming rational speculation of the nature of the will is a pragmatic moral concern. "How, then," Hudson asks after considering Johnson's attribution of human choice to self-interest, "could [Johnson] avoid acknowledging the validity of the philosophical arguments for necessity?"²⁵ He responds with justification:

It is not too unfair, I think, to suggest that his objections to necessity were largely practical rather than philosophical: he was concerned that belief in necessity would destroy the incentives to virtuous conduct by dictating that an individual could not have avoided committing vice.²⁶

Johnson admits as much to Boswell in 1781:

"Do not, Sir, accustom yourself to trust to *impressions*. There is a middle state of mind between conviction and hypocrisy, of which many are conscious. By trusting to impressions, a man may gradually come to yield to them, and at length be subject to them, so as not to be a free agent, or what is the same thing in effect, to *suppose* that he is not a free agent. A man who is in that state should not be suffered to live; if he declares he cannot help acting in a particular way, and is irresistibly impelled, there can be no confidence in him, no more than in a tyger."²⁷

However inconsistent Johnson may appear in his speculative approach to the question of free will, it is certain his compelling moral interest and immediate concern to move men to do good force him to affirm it.

²⁴Hudson, *op. cit.*, 88.

²⁵*ibid.*, 93.

²⁶*ibid.*, 94.

²⁷Boswell, *op. cit.*, 481. Emphasis in original.

Because one's views of original sin, human nature, free will, and predestination are ordinarily inextricable, Johnson accordingly has difficulty with predestination as a divine decree and even omniscience as a divine attribute. Johnson is painfully aware of the problems which exhaustive prescience pose for moral freedom, as the following 1769 exchange with Boswell²⁸ evidences.

BOSWELL. "It appears to me, Sir, that predestination, or what is equivalent to it, cannot be avoided, if we hold an universal prescience in the Deity." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, does not God every day see things going on without preventing them?" BOSWELL. "True, Sir; but if a thing be *certainly* foreseen, it must be fixed, and cannot happen otherwise; and if we apply this consideration to the human mind, there is no free will, nor do I see how prayer can be of any avail." He mentioned Dr. Clarke, and Bishop Bramhall on *Liberty and Necessity*, and bid me read South's *Sermons on Prayer*; but avoided the question which has excruciated philosophers and divines, beyond any other. I did not press it further, when I perceived that he was displeased...²⁹

He responds similarly about nine years later in dialogue with Boswell in which the latter again adduces the relation between predestination, prescience, and free will:

BOSWELL. "...The argument for the moral necessity of human actions is always, I believe, forfeited by supposing universal prescience to be one of the attributes of the Deity." JOHNSON. "You are surer that you are free, than you are of prescience; you are surer that you can lift up your finger or not as you please, than you are of any conclusion from a deduction of reasoning. But let us consider a little the objection from prescience. It is certain I am either to go home to-night or not; that does not prevent my freedom." BOSWELL. "That it is certain you are *either* to go home or not, does not prevent your freedom; because the liberty of choice between the two is compatible with that certainty. But if *one* of these events be certain *now*, you have no *future* power of volition. If it is certain you are to go home to-night, you *must* go home." JOHNSON. "If I am well acquainted with a man, I can judge with great probability how he will act in any case. [sic] without his being restrained by my judging. God may have this probability increased to certainty." BOSWELL. "When it is

²⁸It appears in the context of a discussion regarding a comparison of Romanism and Anglicanism.

²⁹Boswell, *op. cit.*, 173.

increased to *certainty*, freedom ceases, because that cannot be certainly foreknown, which is not certain at the time; but if it be certain at the time, it is a contradiction in terms to maintain that there can be afterwards any *contingency* dependent on the exercise of the will or any thing else." JOHNSON. "All theory is against freedom of the will; all experience for it."³⁰

Again, as has been frequently noted, Johnson "is not very concerned with explicating doctrine or developing a formal theology."³¹ Predestination as a corollary of prescience, an orthodox attribute of God, is denied not so much on the grounds that it is philosophically untenable but that it is morally deleterious: "So long as men believed that they were morally accountable for their actions, he [Johnson] was not preoccupied with refuting every possible restriction on human liberty."³²

Attributing to man freedom of the will while simultaneously affirming the transmission of Adamic corruption to his posterity is an Arminian tenet. As Hudson points out, however, Johnson deviates even from Arminianism and so embraces "original sin in its most diluted form"³³ by transferring the *locus* of sin from a corrupt nature to the actual commission of transgressions.³⁴ Hudson alludes to Johnson's comment that "thoughts are only criminal, when they are first chosen, and then voluntarily continued,"³⁵ in evincing Johnson's deviation from the traditional Arminian and Wesleyan idea that, while man's will is free to choose good or evil, corruption adheres to man's very nature and sin consists not only in the performance of evil but also in its propensity.

This mollified conception of sin Johnson employs in a sermon on repentance in commending to the sinner the mercy of God:

But there is mercy with him, therefore shall he be feared. It is reasonable, that we should endeavour to please him, because we know that every sincere endeavor will be rewarded by him; that

³⁰*ibid.*, 392, 393. Emphasis in original.

³¹Stock, "Johnson Ecclesiastes," 17.

³²Hudson, *op. cit.*, 98.

³³*ibid.*, 207.

³⁴*ibid.*

³⁵Johnson, *Rambler* 3:45 (number 8).

we should use all the means in our power, to enlighten our minds, and regulate our lives, because our errors, *if involuntary*, will not be imputed to us; and our conduct, *though not exactly agreeable to the divine ideas of rectitude*, yet if approved, after honest and diligent inquires, by our own consciences, will not be condemned by that God, who judges of the heart, weighs every circumstance of our lives, and *admits every real extenuation of our failings and transgressions*.³⁶

One may suggest that Johnson's moralistic and externalist definition of sin is an attempt to counter a superabundance of the vexing scruples with which he already contends. Fully convinced of the depravity of mankind in its present state, it would be utterly crushing to define sin in such a way that it includes will, reason, propensity, and intent— features associated, in fact, with a Reformational, though not necessarily Thomistic, hamartiology.³⁷ Since, as was noted in the introduction, Johnson understands justification as contingent on the improvement of divinely endowed capacities, mankind would despair to purge sin if the latter were conceived as blighting not merely one's actions but also his very will and propensities.

Hudson alludes to Isobel Grundy's view that Johnson desires to relocate the concern about man from the ideal to the actual.³⁸ When applied to Johnson's soteriology this creates a tension. Johnson agrees with Law that man should pursue perfection but recognizes man is far from perfect; he asserts men are inherently corrupt yet is convinced they can drastically improve their world. Johnson's soteriology oscillates between the actual and the potential, sometimes accommodating the former so as not to overburden man, and sometimes stressing the latter so as not to engender moral laxity.

Reformational theology can posit such a comprehensive view of original sin and consequent human depravity because it concurrently stresses the imputational idea of justification by which Christ's impeccable righteousness is credited to one's account irrespective of his depravity.

³⁶*ibid.*, *Sermons* [Sermon 2], 19. My emphasis.

³⁷J. E.C[olwell], "Sin," 641-643.

³⁸Hudson, *op. cit.*, 158.

Johnson's soteriology, suspending the application of Christ's merits not on simple faith but on, in addition, obedience and repentance, can scarcely afford to include the will and propensities in the definition of the objects of sin. Such inclusion would effectively crush the individual who is already under compulsion to contribute to his own justification.

It may be misleading, however, to neglect Johnson's recognition of the necessity of special grace for the performance of righteousness, a recognition that adjusts his assertions that morality resides within man's power. In one of his sermons on repentance, for example, he cautions

But as this reformation is not to be accomplished by our own natural power, unassisted by God, we must, when we form our first resolutions of a new life, apply ourselves, with fervour and constancy, to those means which God has prescribed for obtaining his assistance.³⁹

In contradistinction to the Arminian-Wesleyan idea of "prevenient grace,"⁴⁰ Johnson seems to hold that divine assistance follows, rather than engenders, "our first resolutions of a new life." That is, God assists men in their salvific efforts after they have demonstrated a willingness to apply his prescribed means of salvation. This patently is not the Arminian idea that God helps men *to* help themselves; it is rather the reasoning undergirding the stoic maxim, "God helps *those* who help themselves." He states this sentiment plainly in Sermon 9 on communion:

When we thus enter upon a new life by a solemn, deliberate, and serious dedication of ourselves to a more exact and vigilant service of God, and oblige ourselves to the duties of piety by this sacrament, we may hope to obtain, by fervent and humble prayer, such assistances from God as may enable us to perform those engagements, which we have entered into by his command, and in the manner appointed by him. Always remembering, that we must use our own endeavours, and exert our utmost natural powers, for God only co-operates with the diligent and the watchful.⁴¹

³⁹Johnson, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁴⁰Erickson, *op. cit.*, 634. See also Arminius, *Works*, 2:189-196.

⁴¹Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 101.

Thus Johnson's understanding of the necessity of grace does not contradict his belief that repentance and moral improvement are within man's power—men act, and God subsequently assists them. This is further evidence that Johnson's idea of original sin is minimal. Grace, according to Johnson, is co-operative, not prevenient.

Johnson's view of original sin serves a critical role in his general soteriology. There is an essential relation between one's ideas of original sin and salvation. There is an inverse relation between the extent of depravity and the extent of human participation in salvation: as one's view of the extent of depravity increases, the view of man's participation in his salvation decreases. As one's view of the extent of depravity decreases, one's view of man's participation in his salvation increases. Reformational soteriology, for example, insists on such a minimal role of man in his salvation because it conceives of his depravity as so extensive that he is virtually helpless to save himself. By contrast, Johnson's soteriology, similar by degrees to Arminianism, semi-Pelagianism, and Romanism, insists on a more active role of man in his salvation since it does not regard the effects of sin as radically blighting his spiritual will.

Johnson's reluctance to affirm an orthodox understanding of divine prescience derives from his unwillingness to curb free will; but his concern for the preservation of free will, in turn, is morally rather than speculatively driven: affirmation of determinism may conduce to vice. The vice, in addition, which man commits cannot be defined as anything other than sinful *actions*. The human will, reason, and propensities are not themselves sinful. To concede their intrinsic sinfulness is to impose an unbearable load on man who is already responsible for purging his sin and thus earning salvation.

Johnson's idea of original sin influences his conception of the atonement. If men do not inherit Adam's depraved nature or guilt, the crucifixion cannot be interpreted as the complete vicarious punishment of that depraved nature and guilt, inherited from Adam: as Hudson queries, "With no conception of inherited guilt, of what benefit was Christ's

atonement?"⁴² Johnson's view of the atonement must therefore be considered.

⁴²Hudson, *op. cit.*, 207.

Chapter 3: ATONEMENT

So here is the problem. Man is a guilty sinner, God is a holy God. How can the two be brought together? The answer is the cross of Christ.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones
from *The Cross*, 1986

While Johnson mentions the atonement in both his sermons and diaries, the most memorable expression of his conception of the atonement is found in Boswell's *Life*. The sermonic and other personal comments reflect the ideas related to Boswell.

Even in Johnson's scant treatment of the objective features of soteriology he is loath to ground his salvific views in the judicial, objective operation of God and instead clearly opts for experientialism: the salvific scheme of God is calculated *first* to create some subjective alteration of or impression in man. Johnson's idea of the atonement of Christ on the cross affords a striking example of the interrelatedness of his soteriology. While it is not expressed systematically, it is *embraced* systematically.

Johnson's idea of original sin stresses morally unacceptable dispositions and actions rather than inherent or inherited guilt:

We are informed by the Scriptures, that God is not the Authour of our present state, that when he created man, he created him for happiness; happiness indeed dependent upon his own choice, and to be preserved by his own conduct... Thus religion shews us that physical and moral evil entered the world together, and reason and experience assure us that they continue for the most part so closely united, that, to avoid misery, we must avoid sin, and that while it is in our power to be virtuous, it is in our power to be happy...¹

Accordingly, since man needs rescue from his skewed dispositions and actions but not a sinful nature, the atonement is conceived not as reversing federal and intrinsic sin but as deterring the sinful dispositions

¹Johnson [sermon 5], *Sermons*, 55.

and actions. This concept of the atonement clearly cannot be forensic and judicial, for such an interpretation of the atonement is meaningful only on the grounds that sin itself is forensic and judicial : if Adam acting as the federal head of humanity plunged his posterity into sin and its resultant guilt, Christ must act as its federal head to erase both sin and guilt by his impeccable active obedience in life and sacrificial, passive obedience in death, both of which may be credited to the sinner's account.

It is almost self-evident that this latter Reformational idea can have little place in Johnson's scheme. For Johnson, morality is the goal of religion, and atonement is calculated to make men moral beings. The atonement can never dispose of the guilt of sin entirely. Charles Pierce observes, "He [Johnson] was reluctant to admit that even in a future state, after man had presumably been redeemed, man could sin again and thus expect to be punished again. And this reluctance sprang ultimately from his fear that God could *never be appeased*, that man could *never be certain he had been redeemed*. Behind this carefully reasoned discourse lurked Johnson's fear that man could never escape fully the wrath of God nor enjoy fully the love of God—either in this life or the next."²

Johnson implied in his conversation with Mrs. Knowles that the inducement of morality is the principal goal of the atonement:

I expressed [recalls Boswell] a horror at the thought of death. MRS. KNOWLES. "Nay, thou should'st not have a horror for what is the gate of life." JOHNSON. (standing upon the hearth rolling about, with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air,) "No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension." MRS. KNOWLES. "The Scriptures tell us, 'The righteous shall have *hope* in his death.'" JOHNSON. "Yes, madam; that is, he shall not have despair. But, consider, his hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance. But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No

²Pierce, *Religious Life*, 37. My emphasis.

man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation.³

One's refusal to conform to the conditions of the application of the atonement renders him subject to divine condemnation. Since in Johnson's understanding the inducement of morality is the motivation of the atonement, it is not surprising that the efficacy of the atonement is contingent on morality. In brief, Johnson's idea of the atonement is that the great salvific work changes the way men *act*, not the way they *are*. This concern coincides perfectly with Johnson's overriding interest in experiential religion.

On his birthday in 1738 Johnson requested God "Create in [him] a clean heart, that [he] may worthily lament [his] sins, acknowledge [his] wickedness, and obtain Remission and forgiveness through the satisfaction of Jesus Christ."⁴ He requested that God grant his petitions "for the merits and through the mediation of our most holy and blessed Saviour."

On April 10 of 1773, three-and-one-half decades later, Johnson prayed, "Almighty God, by whose mercy I am now about to commemorate the death of my Redeemer, grant that from this time I may so live as that his death may be efficacious to my eternal happiness."⁵

In his controversial and final diary entry of December 5, 1784, he petitioned:

Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now, as to human eyes it seems, about to commemorate for the last time, the death of thy son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant, O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits and in thy mercy: forgive and accept my late conversion, enforce and accept my imperfect repentance; make this commemoration [of] him available to the confirmation of my Faith, the establishment of my

³Boswell, *Life*, 394. See also Pierce, *op. cit.*, 56.

⁴Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, Annals*, 38.

⁵*ibid.*, 155,

hope, and the enlargement of my charity, and make the death of thy son Jesus Christ effectual to my redemption...⁶

Significantly, in each entry, one at the beginning and the others near the end of his adult life, Johnson understands the benefit of Christ's merits to be contingent on his own actions, either repentance or obedience. This experiential orientation to the atonement is a prime example of the pattern of Johnson's soteriology.

In the sermons this conception of the atonement is more explicit. Johnson declares in Sermon 11 that the "high price" of redemption is "the precious blood of Christ," which accomplishes "the salvation of [our] souls."⁷ While this description conforms perfectly to both Roman Catholicism and the Reformation Faith, in the issue of the application of Christ's merits, Johnson's view is much narrower.

In Sermon 6, for instance, he asserts that "the blood of Christ was poured out upon the cross to make [our] best endeavours acceptable to God,"⁸ and in Sermon 9 he asseverates, "The terms, upon which we are to hope for any benefits from the merits of Christ, are faith, repentance, and subsequent obedience."⁹

Another declaration in Sermon 9 on communion clearly links the benefits of Christ's atonement to human obedience:

For certainly nothing can be more dreadful than to live under the displeasure of God, in constant danger of appearing before him, while he is yet unappeased, and of losing the benefits of our redemption.¹⁰

Johnson's patent conviction is that the appropriation of Christ's redemptive merits is contingent on conformity to the will of God and that such conformity appeases God's wrath. It is not Christ's death alone that

⁶*ibid.*, 417, 418.

⁷*ibid.*, [Sermon 11], *Sermons*, 117.

⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 6], 72.

⁹*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 104.

¹⁰*ibid.*, 103.

appeases God's wrath; man's obedience also plays a propitiatory role.¹¹ Johnson expressed himself categorically in Rambler 110¹²:

In times and regions so disjoined from each other, that there can scarcely be imagined any communication of sentiments either by commerce or tradition, has prevailed a general and uniform expectation of propitiating God by corporal austerities, of anticipating his vengeance by voluntary afflictions, and by appeasing his justice by a speedy and cheerful submission to a less penalty when a greater is incurred.

Man and Christ co-operate in propitiating the wrath of God: because man cannot hope to fulfill the insurmountable requirement of perfection, Christ died "to make [our] best endeavours acceptable to God"; man however is required to exert his "best endeavours" to appease God's wrath against man's sin.

Charles Pierce underscores Johnson's last recorded comment to Boswell on Christ's atonement and deems it a significant revision in favor of a more propitiatory or expiatory view.¹³ Earlier (1773) Boswell records:

I spoke of the satisfaction of Christ. He said that his notion was, that it did not atone for the sins of the world; but, by satisfying divine justice, by shewing that no less than the Son of God suffered for sin, it shewed to men and innumerable created beings, the heinousness of it, and therefore rendered it unnecessary for divine vengeance to be executed against sinners, as it otherwise must have been; that in this way it might operate even in favour of those who did not hear of it: as to those who did hear of it, the effect it should produce would be repentance and piety by impressing upon the mind a just notion of sin.¹⁴

Boswell discloses that Johnson's explanation of the atonement "removed the notion of imputed righteousness in co-operating; whereas by this view, Christ has done already that he had to do, or is ever to do for

¹¹*ibid.* [Sermon 13], 144.

¹²Yale edition, 222.

¹³Pierce, *op. cit.*, 156-159.

¹⁴Boswell, *Hebrides*, 88.

mankind, by making his great satisfaction; the consequences of which will affect each individual according to the particular conduct of each."¹⁵

In 1781, however, Boswell quoted Johnson as saying that

"Whatever difficulty there may be in the conception of vicarious punishments, it is an opinion that has had possession of mankind in all ages. There is no nation that has not used the practice of sacrifices. Whoever, therefore, denies the propriety of vicarious punishments, holds an opinion which the sentiments and practice of mankind have contradicted, from the beginning of the world. The great sacrifice for the sins of mankind was offered at the death of the MESSIAH, who is called in Scripture, 'The Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.' To judge the reasonableness of the scheme of redemption, it must be considered as necessary to the government of the universe, that God should make known his perpetual and irreconcilable detestation of moral evil. He might indeed punish, and punish only the offenders; but as the end of punishment is not revenge of crimes, but propagation of virtue, it was more becoming the Divine clemency to find another manner of proceeding, less destructive to man, and at least equally powerful to promote goodness. The end of punishment is to reclaim and warn. *That* punishment will both reclaim and warn, which shews evidently such abhorrence of sin in God, as may deter us from it, or strike us with dread of vengeance when we have committed it. This is effected by vicarious punishment. Nothing could more testify the opposition between the nature of God and moral evil, or more amply display his justice, to men and angels, to all orders and successions of beings, that that is was necessary for the highest and purest nature, even for DIVINITY itself, to pacify the demands for vengeance, by a painful death; of which the natural effect will be, that when justice is appeased, there is a proper place for the exercise of mercy; and that such propitiation shall supply, in some degree, the imperfections of our obedience, and the inefficacy of our repentance: for obedience and repentance, such as we can perform, are still necessary. Our SAVIOUR has told us, that he did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill; to fulfill the typical law, by the performance of what those types had foreshewn; and the moral law, by precepts of greater purity and higher exaltation."¹⁶

Boswell continues citing:

¹⁵*ibid.*, 88, 89.

¹⁶Boswell, *Life*, 482.

"The peculiar doctrine of Christianity is, that of an universal sacrifice, and perpetual propitiation. Other prophets only proclaimed the threatenings of God. CHRIST satisfied his justice."¹⁷

James Gray justifiably concludes that the later "argument ... is not greatly different from that of the 1773 conversation... ." ¹⁸ He may be less justified, however, in assuming that Johnson's view of the atonement is consistently classifiable as propitiatory.

There is much evidence to support Nicholas Hudson's identification of Johnson's notion of the atonement with that of Hugo Grotius,¹⁹ whose early seventeenth-century treatise provided a compromise between the classic Reformation concept of penal substitution and the prevalent Socinian idea—which denied Christ's death as an atonement altogether.²⁰ Grotius (like Johnson) did in fact speak of Christ's death as a satisfaction, but its nature was not nearly so significant as its goal:

God is the supreme rector of the world. To punish or liberate from punishment belongs essentially to this relationship. Not so if God is conceived as a judge [as in the historic Protestant view]. A judge administers the law; he cannot go against it to free the guilty from its punishment or to transfer the guilt to another. The guilty one must himself bear what the law decrees. If God were chiefly lawgiver, then a law attached to a certain crime must be carried out without relaxation. But God is chiefly ruler, whose concern is not the mere self-vindication of the law but the general good. As ruler, then, God can either abrogate or alter his law. Socinus had opted for the former alternative and so eliminated from his concept of God any regard for justice. Grotius takes the second alternative. God alters the law; for the commendable reasons of his own glory and man's salvation he toned it down... .

... Chapter four of [Grotius'] *Defensio* deals with the issue of punishment at length. His main conclusion is that it is required in the interests of government... This gives him justification for his declaration that "all punishment presupposes some common good—the conservation and example of order."

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Gray, *Johnson's Sermons*, 82.

¹⁹ Hudson, "Johnson, Socinianism, and the Meaning of Christ's Sacrifice," 240.

²⁰ McDonald, *Atonement*, 196, 197.

Grotius ...presents Christ's work as a sacrifice of satisfaction to the necessities of the relaxed law. He accepts Socinus' criticism of the penal doctrine of Christ's sufferings as an exact equivalent for the divine penalty of sin. Since, however, the law is toned down, the idea that punishment need not correspond exactly to the transgression follows.²¹

This concept of a "relaxed law" as a correlate of the atonement is echoed in Johnson's statement to Mrs. Knowles: one's "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance."²² Christ does not penally substitute on the cross, bearing the full wrath of the Father for the sins of mankind. Rather, God as the moral Governor of the universe suspends his own law to provide salvation: the atonement is a demonstration of God's just government.

The notion of the atonement as having the maintenance of God's order as its ultimate concern shifts attention from Christ's sufficient satisfaction for actual sins to the possible moral benefit to mankind. In fact, "Grotius does not see the death of Christ as itself an atonement for sin."²³ Rather, it is well calculated by the Father to serve the ends of his just governance of the universe by serving as an example of the hideous consequences of the subversion of that government.²⁴ Regard for justice therefore is subordinated to regard for sound universal government, the "common good." Similarly, justice is subordinated to the propitious effects the atonement will secure for the individual in his daily conduct.

Hudson dissents from Maurice Quinlan's opinion (later adopted in large part by Charles Pierce) that Johnson's view of Christ's atonement was shaped by the "exemplary" (as opposed to "propitiatory") understanding of the atonement found in William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* and later modified to the substitutionary interpretation under the influence of Samuel Clarke's *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable*

²¹*ibid.*, 203-205.

²²Boswell, *op. cit.*, 394.

²³McDonald, *op. cit.*, 206.

²⁴*ibid.*

Obligations of Natural Religion.²⁵ Hudson suggests that Johnson embraces the governmental or rectoral theory of the atonement which recognizes propitiatory elements of Christ's death without surrendering the concept of the "notion of the purpose of punishment,"²⁶ as the propitiatory theory as then expressed assertedly had. Johnson, in Hudson's opinion, holds the synthetic view first propagated by Grotius and transmitted to Johnson by Richard Fiddes' *The Body of Divinity*, "a work owned and consulted by Johnson."²⁷ In short, according to Hudson, Johnson's view is both rectoral *and* substitutionary.²⁸ Similarly, James Gray's theory differs from Quinlan's that Johnson revised his view of the atonement later in life and asserts instead that Johnson never deviated from belief in a propitiatory conception of the atonement.²⁹

A clue to the alleged alteration in the later Johnson to which Quinlan alludes as well as the consistency between the views of the earlier and later Johnson lay in Pierce's comment that in the later, expiatory concept that Johnson adopts "Christ's death had at least *partially* atoned for man's sins."³⁰ This partial admission of the expiatory work of Christ on the cross differs from the earlier "exemplary" view only in degree, not in kind. Failure to recognize the truly basic similarity of Johnson's earlier and later views contributes to Hudson's and Gray's flawed thesis that Johnson never deviates from a substitutionary conception of the atonement, for neither the "exemplary" (the supposed earlier) concept nor the "government/rectoral" (the supposed later) concept can be classified as truly propitiatory or substitutionary.

For example, Hudson, it appears, is convinced Johnson never deviates from substitutionism merely because Johnson always believes (and never

²⁵Hudson, "Johnson, Socinianism, and the Meaning of Christ's Sacrifice," *passim*. For the influence of Clarke's theology on Johnson's view of the atonement and other theological tenets, see Gray, *op. cit.*, 65-92.

²⁶Hudson, *op. cit.*, 240.

²⁷*ibid.*

²⁸Quinlan too insists that Johnson, "during most of his adult life...favored the interpretation that the Atonement was in the nature of a penal and an exemplary sacrifice," Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 51.

²⁹Gray, *op. cit.*, 86.

³⁰Pierce, *op. cit.*, 158. Emphasis in original.

repudiates, in spite of his possible late altered understanding) that the atonement satisfied the justice of God. What Hudson apparently fails to recognize, however, is that the exclusive and defining characteristic of the substitutionary theory of the atonement is not its result but its means.

As H.D. McDonald has observed,³¹ the theological school whose views have historically been associated with the definition of the atonement as the satisfaction of justice is that of the Protestant Reformers—Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Zwingli, and their heirs. This Reformation conception of the atonement is entirely at odds with the sort of exemplary view later affirmed by Johnson and the latitudinarians.

For Luther it was the demands of the law that must be satisfied if Christ was to make effective atonement.

Christ is personally innocent. Personally, he did not deserve to be hanged for any crime of His own doing. But because Christ took the place of others who were sinners, He was hanged like any other transgressor. The Law of Moses leaves no loopholes. It says that a transgressor should be hanged. Who are the other sinners? We are. The sentence of death and everlasting damnation had long been pronounced over us. But Christ took all our sins and died for them on the cross... All the prophets of old said that Christ should be the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, blasphemer that ever was or could be on earth. When he took the sins of the whole world upon Himself, Christ was no longer an innocent person. He was a sinner burdened with the sins of a Paul who was a blasphemer; burdened with the sins of a Peter who denied Christ; burdened with the sins of a David who committed adultery and murder, and gave the heathen occasion to laugh at the Lord. In short, Christ was charged with the sins of all men, that he should pay for them with his own blood. The curse struck him. The Law found him among sinners. He was not only in the company of sinners. He had gone so far as to invest Himself with the flesh and blood of sinners. So the Law judged and hanged him for a sinner.

In separating Christ from us sinners and holding him up as a holy exemplar [as the Papists do], errorists rob us of our best comfort.

³¹McDonald, *Atonement*, 181.

They misrepresent Him as a threatening tyrant ready to slaughter us at the slightest provocation.³²

It is significant that, in espousing substitutionism, Luther defines the nature of the divine justice satisfied by Christ's atonement as penal—mankind violated the law whose penalty must be satisfied; in his atonement Christ bore that penalty in the stead of the offenders who rightly deserved it. Luther inveighs against the Roman Catholics who—like their Anglican Restorationist successors and Johnson—diminish the absolute quality of penal substitution in favor of the exemplary view. Luther sees that their denial of the satisfaction of legal demands renders sinful humanity liable to suffer the penalty. That is, if Christ has not suffered the penalty of the law, we sinners must.

Likewise, Calvin avers

Now, there is no room for reconciliation without a previous offense. The sense [of Rom. 5:10, 11] therefore is, that God, to whom our sins had rendered us odious, has been appeased by the death of his Son, so as to be propitious to us... . Now we know what Moses frequently says—that an atonement shall be made for sin, and it shall be forgiven. In short, the ancient figures give us a fine exhibition of the power and efficacy of the death of Christ... . we too much undervalue the death of Christ, unless we attribute to his sacrifice an expiatory, placatory, and satisfactory efficacy... . it would be unnecessary, and consequently absurd, for Christ to be loaded with a curse [Gal. 3:13], except in order to discharge the debts due from others, and thereby to obtain a righteousness for them."³³

Calvin proceeds to articulate and defend penal satisfaction—the idea that Christ not only perfectly conformed his life to the law but also that he bore its penalty in our stead. In thus atoning he fully merited for us what we could not.

We are justified or acquitted before God, because [Christ's] blood is a complete satisfaction for us... . hence we conclude, that we must seek from Christ what the law would confer upon any one who

³²Luther, *Galatians*, 116, 117. Luther's last sentence seems eerily to foreshadow the scruples and anxieties Johnson's soteriology produced.

³³Calvin, *Institutes*, II:xviii:iii, iv.

fulfilled it; or, which is the same, that we obtain by the grace of Christ what God promised in the law to our works... . Hence [we have] that imputation of righteousness without works, of which Paul treats [Rom. 4:5]; because that righteousness which is found in Christ alone is accepted as ours.³⁴

The continental Reformational view of penal substitution therefore stands somewhat in contradistinction to the "exemplary" view. For Johnson the expiation cannot be penal because it only "supplies our lack of obedience and repentance: such propitiation shall supply, in some degree, the imperfections of our obedience, and the inefficacy of our repentance: for obedience and repentance, such as we can perform, are still necessary." For Luther and Calvin, on the other hand, Christ's obedience alone is "accepted as ours," for there is nothing wanting in Christ's impeccable conformity to the law.

In short, Christ does not simply supply our lack of obedience and repentance as in the Johnsonian conception; *his entire obedience in life and death is credited to us*. For this reason Calvin in the citation above and elsewhere insists with the other Reformers on "imputation of righteousness without works"; Johnson naturally finds it necessary to predicate the application of Christ's merits to us on obedience because, in his understanding, Christ did not penally substitute; he only satisfied for the specific areas of our lack of conformity to the law. The Reformers can insist on justification by faith alone precisely because they conceive of Christ as securing not merely propitiation for the sinners' lack of conformity to the law but the rewards of *entire* obedience to the law.

The relation between one's ideas of atonement and justification is direct: if atonement secures penal satisfaction as in the Reformers' conception, justification is appropriated by faith alone (since Christ's perfect obedience is credited to one's account and there are therefore no works wanting); if atonement secures only propitiation for the lack of perfect conformity to the law and repentance on the part of man as in the latitudinarian and Johnsonian conception, justification is appropriated by both faith and

³⁴*ibid.*

works (since God did not intend for Christ's perfect obedience to be applied to the sinner's account in lieu of the latter's obedience).

The misunderstanding of the vicarious atonement is particularly obvious in Hudson's explanation of the influences of Law's satisfaction views on Johnson's. In *A Serious Call*, Law contends:

Thus was the Cross of Christ, in St. Paul's days, the glory of Christians; not as it signified their not being ashamed to own a Master that was crucified, but as it signified their glorying in a religion which was nothing else but a doctrine of the Cross, that called them to the same suffering spirit, the same sacrifice of themselves, the same renunciation of the world, the same humility and meekness, the same patient bearing of injuries, reproaches and contempts, and the same dying to all the greatness, honors, and happiness of the world, which Christ showed upon the Cross.³⁵

Law proceeds to explain in what sense the atonement may be understood to save:

To have a true idea of Christianity, we must not consider our Blessed Lord as suffering in our stead, but as our Representative, acting in our name, and with such particular merit, as to make our joining with him acceptable unto God.

He suffered, and was a Sacrifice, to make our sufferings and sacrifice of ourselves fit to be received by God. And we are to suffer, to be crucified, to die, and rise with Christ; or else his Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection, will profit us nothing.³⁶

Plainly the dimension of Christ's suffering as providing an example for our own differs from Johnson's conception of the atonement as an example for the purpose of just government, but the idea that the appropriation of Christ's death is contingent on our sacrificial efforts mirrors in fact Johnson's idea that the contingency is man's obedience and repentance.

³⁵Law, *Serious Call*, 197.

³⁶*ibid.*

Of Law's idea and its apparent influence on Johnson, Hudson correctly suggests, "[Law's] primary concern was that Christians do not believe that this satisfaction renders their own endeavors unnecessary."³⁷ Johnson said as much in Sermon 28, the famous sermon written for the incarcerated William Dodd. After showing how comforting the exercise of faith is to the weary sinner, Johnson warns:

Yet let us likewise be careful, lest an erroneous opinion of the all-sufficiency of Christ's merits lull us into carelessness and security. His merits are indeed self-sufficient! But he has prescribed the terms on which they are to operate. He died to save sinners, but to save only those sinners that repent.³⁸

The concern is existential and moralistic—not the definitive abrogation of inherent sin, but the example Christians may follow to procure eternal life. Hudson believes Law and Johnson preserve the doctrine of satisfaction in that both recognize "that Christ's death served to render our endeavors acceptable and our sins pardonable in the judgement [sic] of God."³⁹ Yet neither Law nor Johnson depict Christ as bearing the exact or an equivalent penalty for man's sins, an indispensable ingredient of the satisfaction theory.

It is difficult, in the first place, to understand how Johnson's 1773 statement could be construed as affirming a substitutionary view of the atonement when Boswell quotes him as plainly saying he does not. Johnson stated:

I spoke of the satisfaction of Christ. He said that his notion was, that it did not atone for the sins of the world; but, by satisfying divine justice, by shewing that no less than the Son of God suffered for sin, it shewed to men and innumerable created beings, the heinousness of it, and therefore rendered it unnecessary for divine vengeance to be executed against sinners, as it otherwise must have been; that in this way it might operate even in favour of those who did not hear of it: as to those who did hear of it, the effect it

³⁷Hudson, *op. cit.*, 239.

³⁸Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 304.

³⁹*ibid.*

should produce would be repentance and piety by impressing upon the mind a just notion of sin.⁴⁰

Hudson avers that Johnson's is "a distinctive understanding of this doctrine which, as was typical of so much eighteenth-century theology, emphasized the moral importance of the sacrifice."⁴¹ He is convinced that Johnson's admission in 1773 that God's justice was satisfied in Christ's atonement proves Johnson affirmed substitutionism. But the question is not, "Did Christ satisfy God's justice?" It is, rather, "What is the nature of the justice it satisfied?" Divine justice can be—and has been—variously construed. Johnson, in fact, seems to construe God's justice as being satisfied by his "mak[ing] known his perpetual and irreconcilable detestation of moral evil," a matter altogether different from the historic Protestant conception of substitution and propitiation.

There are, in fact, any number of explanations of the nature of the divine justice satisfied by Christ's atonement. The classical expression of substitutionary atonement, however, issues from the Reformation tradition, and it decidedly insists on the nature of the justice satisfied: it is *penal* satisfaction. It is this view that Johnson and the Anglican latitudinarians⁴² significantly adjust.

Hudson concedes as much when he cites Isaac Barrow's opinion as an instance of the "exemplary" view and subsequently remarks,

...the sacrifice was 'exemplary' so far as it was intended to promote virtue. This idea was formulated not only as the result of the century's preoccupation with Christianity's ethical role, but in order to vindicate the attributes of God from what were considered to be the implications of a purely 'propitiatory' sacrifice.⁴³

This latter view of the propitiatory sacrifice of the atonement was none other than the historic Protestant view of the vicarious atonement.

⁴⁰Boswell, *Hebrides*, 88.

⁴¹Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 239.

⁴²*ibid.*, 207, 208.

⁴³Hudson, "Johnson, Socinianism, and the Meaning of Christ's Sacrifice," 240.

What requires further examination in Hudson's analysis is his statement that the latitudinarian and Johnsonian "exemplary" view was a favorable appendage and needed corrective to the idea of a "purely 'propitiatory' sacrifice," as though one could concurrently insist on the exemplary and the propitiatory views. The exemplary view as expressed by Johnson and the latitudinarian divines, however, is, as noted above, a significant *revision* of the historic Protestant propitiatory idea.

That Johnson shows little support for the Protestant propitiatory theory is demonstrated in a striking statement in Sermon 13. In warning of the error of equating external religious duties with authentic holiness, Johnson remarks,

The religion of the Jews, from the time of Moses, comprized a great number of burdensome ceremonies, required by God for reasons which perhaps human wisdom has never fully discovered. Of these ceremonies, however, some were typically representative of the Christian institution, and some, by keeping them distinct, by dissimilitude of customs from the nations that surrounded them, had a tendency to secure them from the influence of ill example, and preserve them from the contagion of idolatry.

To the use of such observances, thus important, they were confined by the strongest obligations. They were indeed external acts, but they were instituted by divine authority; they were not to be considered merely as instrumental and expedient, as means which might be omitted, if their ends were secured: they were positively enjoined by the supreme legislator, and were not left to choice or discretion, or secular laws; to the will of the powerful, or the judgement of the prudent.

Yet even these sacred rites might be punctually performed, without making the performer acceptable to God; the blood of bulls and of goats might be poured out in vain, if the desires were not regulated, or the passions subdued. The sacrifices of the oppressour, or extortioner, were not an atonement, but an abomination. Forgiveness was obtained, not by incense, but by repentance; the offender was required to rend his heart, and not his garment: a contrite and a broken heart was the oblation which the supreme Judge did not despise.

So much was the moral law exalted above all ceremonial institutions, even in that dispensation by which so many ceremonies were commanded, that those two parts of duty were

distinguished by the appellations of body and spirit. As the body, separated from the spirit, is a mass lifeless, motionless and useless; so the external practices of ritual observances was ineffectual and vain, an action without a meaning, a labour by which nothing was produced...⁴⁴

Johnson does not recognize the rich typical significance of the sacrificial ceremonies of the Jewish covenant because propitiation, the prime goal of the sacrifices (Lev. 17:11), is not a dominant factor in his soteriology. He therefore must express puzzlement at the plethora of ceremonies "representative of the Christian institution" with the proviso that they are valid if for no other reason than that God required them. Johnson presents no reasons for God's requiring them because their significance is clearly propitiatory; and just government of the universe, not propitiation, is the guiding principle of Johnson's theory of atonement.

Johnson's opinion that the moral law was greatly "exalted above" the ceremonial institution of the Old Covenant is perfectly consistent with his proclivity to overshadow Christ's atonement in the present dispensation by human morality.

He is quick to seize upon Jehovah's warnings to Israel for the performance of external ceremonies with a concomitant sinful disposition because they seem to reinforce a critical feature of Johnson's view of the atonement—it was effected mainly to influence morality, not to propitiate divine wrath kindled by mankind's violation of divine law.

For Johnson, just as the sacrificial ceremonies were necessary but meaningless without the morality of the worshippers, so the "external practice" of Christ's death is "ineffectual and vain, an action without a meaning, a labour by which nothing [is] produced" if "the desires [are] not regulated, or the passions subdued." That is, the sacrifice is ineffectual *of itself*. Only when accompanied by moral regulation is it meaningful. This conception of sacrifice can scarcely accommodate the propitiatory view of the atonement according to which, apart from any human act or

⁴⁴Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 13], 139, 140.

disposition whatsoever, Christ bore the penalty of the sins of mankind and so appeased God's wrath.

To be sure, Protestants espousing penal substitution insist as heartily as their moralistic colleagues (and the latitudinarians and Johnson who followed them) on the necessity of good works and repentance, but these virtues in the Protestant scheme fall within the province of sanctification, not justification. In the words of Calvin,

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we apprehend the righteousness of Christ, which is the only medium of our reconciliation to God. But this [justification] you cannot attain, without at the same time attaining to sanctification... . Christ therefore justifies no one whom he does not also sanctify. For these benefits are perpetually and indissolubly connected, so that whom he illuminates with his wisdom, them he redeems; whom he redeems, he justifies; whom he justifies, he sanctifies... . Since, then, the Lord affords us the enjoyment of these blessings only in the bestowment of himself, he gives them [justification and sanctification] both together, and never one without the other. Thus we see how true it is that we are justified, not without works, yet not by works; since union with Christ, by which we are justified, contains sanctification as well as righteousness.⁴⁵

When, in the 1773 statement, Johnson concludes that divine vengeance was unnecessary against sinners in that the atonement demonstrated God's aversion to sin, he denies substitution, just as he states at the outset of that dictation. The Protestant view of substitution is not that God may pardon sinners in that in requiring Christ's sacrifice he has publicly demonstrated his aversion to sin, but in that Christ has suffered their exact or an equivalent penalty in their stead.

Johnson did not, then, support the historic idea of atonement as the satisfaction of God's justice, for in the Protestant conception God's justice is deemed satisfied only by perfect conformity to the law or payment of the penalty for violating that law. According to the historical Reformation view, Christ did both: he bore the penalty for man's disobedience in

⁴⁵Calvin, *op. cit.*, III:xviii.

man's stead, and his impeccable conformity to the law is credited to the sinner's account when the latter exercises faith in Christ.

While Hudson holds that Johnson never deviates from an acceptance of substitution, Quinlan⁴⁶ and Pierce⁴⁷ believe the 1781 summary Johnson dictates to Boswell "reveals," in the words of Quinlan, "an important change."⁴⁸

Quinlan elaborates:

Johnson no longer believes that it is man alone who must make propitiation for his sins. Christ by his universal sacrifice has made a perpetual propitiation. And this propitiation supplies the imperfections of man's obedience and repentance. True, Johnson qualifies the [later] statement by saying that Christ makes up for man's inadequacy "in some degree," a qualification that implies, as we have indicated, a shift in emphasis rather than a complete reversal of opinion. Nevertheless, by 1781 his idea of the Atonement had clearly altered and the former view that it served chiefly as an exemplary act is no longer predominant. Instead, he has now arrived at the more generally held Christian belief that the death on the Cross was truly an expiatory sacrifice.⁴⁹

On the premise that sermons 6 and 21 were written relatively late in Johnson's life, Quinlan argues further that, "in what may be deemed late sermons, those probably composed in the last ten years of his life, Johnson makes several specific allusions to the sacrifice as a vicarious act."⁵⁰

This assumption, offered as evidence of Quinlan's conclusions both that Johnson's "1781 ... idea of the Atonement had clearly altered" his earlier view and that his revised view "arrived at the more generally held Christian belief that the death on the Cross was truly an expiatory sacrifice," is dubious. The fact that Johnson spoke more freely of the

⁴⁶Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 55.

⁴⁷Pierce, *op. cit.*, 157.

⁴⁸Quinlan, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁹*ibid.*, 55, 56.

⁵⁰Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 97.

atonement as a sacrifice later in his life is not evidence that he changed his view to one more correctly classified as expiatory.

First, despite Quinlan's recognition of Johnson's qualification in the later statement, Johnson's conception of vicarious punishment is incongruous with the name. Johnson declares that God "might indeed punish, and punish only the offenders." The key phrase which follows is, "the end of punishment is not revenge of crimes, but propagation of virtue." Johnson belies his insistence on a vicarious view of the atonement. In the Protestant satisfaction conception, "revenge of crimes" is precisely the "end of punishment."

Johnson asserts that the atonement was necessary to display so publicly "such abhorrence of sin in God, as may deter us from it, or strike us with dread of vengeance when we have committed it." This, Johnson states, would not be accomplished were God merely to punish the offenders. However, by allowing his Son, very God in the flesh, publicly to suffer and appease divine justice, he has demonstrated his repulsion toward sin. Johnson seems therefore to turn attention away from the nature of the penalty Christ suffered on our behalf and instead stress, as in his earlier statement, the demonstrative effects of atonement on humanity.

He says much in 1781 what he does in 1773: "the effect it [the atonement] should produce would be repentance and piety by impressing upon the mind a just notion of sin."⁵¹ The fact that in 1781 Johnson employs the terminology of substitution is no evidence he either alters his exemplary view or appends to it vicarious substitution.

In the 1773 statement, Johnson explicitly states the grounds on which he believes God may justly forgive sins for Christ's sake: "by shewing that no less than the Son of God suffered for sin, [the atonement] shewed to men and innumerable created beings, the heinousness of it, and therefore rendered it unnecessary for divine vengeance to be executed against sinners, as it otherwise must have been." Similarly, in the 1781 dictation,

⁵¹Boswell, *op. cit.*, 482.

Johnson reveals that all men need not suffer the penalty of sin in that the death of "DIVINITY itself" evinces God's utter detestation of sin.

The introduction of the idea of the satisfaction of divine justice cannot be construed to imply penal substitution, for Johnson in the very context refers to Christ's conformity to the law, but not, as in the Protestant conception, as the bearer of its penalty on the cross, but, rather, in typical Johnsonian fashion, as an example for the redeemed to follow. Law holds that "[Christ] suffered, and was a Sacrifice, to make our sufferings and sacrifice of ourselves fit to be received by God. And we are to suffer, to be crucified, to die, and rise with Christ; or else his Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection, will profit us nothing."⁵² This "weakened conception of satisfaction," in the words of Hudson, is attributable to the fear "that too heavy an emphasis on the satisfaction would delude men into believing that continued obedience to the moral law had been rendered unnecessary by the crucifixion."⁵³

Second, in arguing that Christ's death does not emancipate man from his obligations of obedience and repentance, he betrays his retention of the "exemplary" theory. As noted above, affirmation of the necessity of good works is a crucial feature of the Reformation view, but Johnson's "exemplary" view suspends the application of Christ's merits on good works, a belief the early Protestants deplored. They held that good works were the province of sanctification, not justification.

Justification, then, according to the Church of Rome, includes or comprehends not only the remission of sin, or deliverance from guilt, but also the sanctification or renovation of man's moral nature, or deliverance from depravity. In short, they [Roman Catholics] comprehend under the one name or head of justification, what Protestants—following, as they believe, the guidance of Scripture—have always divided into the two heads of justification and regeneration, or justification and sanctification, when the word sanctification is used in its widest sense, as descriptive of the whole process, originating in regeneration, by which depraved men are restored to a conformity to God's moral image.⁵⁴

⁵²Law, *loc. cit.*

⁵³Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 207.

⁵⁴Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 2:14

In Johnson's soteriological scheme, however, these works of *sanctification* are an aspect of the ground or basis of *justification*, which Calvin and the other Reformers believe is appropriated by faith alone. Johnson's earlier view, according to Boswell, "removed the notion of imputed righteousness..."; we have no reason to suppose from the 1781 dictation that Johnson reintroduced it.

Not only in the later statement to Boswell but also in the supposed later sermons, Johnson suspends the application of Christ's merits on "our best endeavors."⁵⁵ This is no deviation from his earlier view expressed in the 1778 remark to Mrs. Knowles that, "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance."⁵⁶ Hence, Quinlan's belief that "Johnson's interpretation of this doctrine [the atonement] had changed by 1777"⁵⁷ does not seem supported by the evidence.

Third, to say that Johnson's later view of the atonement mirrors "the more generally held Christian belief that the death on the Cross was truly an expiatory sacrifice" is accurate only if it is understood to exclude the concept of expiation as posited by historic Protestantism. Yet it seems it is this very view Quinlan supposes Johnson was close to embracing in 1781.

To the contrary, his emphasis on expiation and vicarious punishment in the latter explication of his views accords with his earlier view that the atonement "satisfied divine justice" and served as a demonstration of God's hatred of sin but retained his estimate that Christ's atonement was not penal in the sense that Christ did not bear the equivalent of the full penalty due to those who violate God's law. If, according to Quinlan, Easter Sunday, 1776 "appears to mark a climax in the development of Johnson's belief in the propitiatory nature of [Christ's] sacrifice,"⁵⁸ we

⁵⁵Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 104.

⁵⁶Boswell, *op. cit.*, 394.

⁵⁷Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 100.

⁵⁸*ibid.*, 59.

may be certain he never sanctioned the historic Protestant penal satisfaction theory.

In his view of the atonement Johnson remains true to his general soteriological emphasis on the experiential rather than the judicial. The atonement, even if satisfying God's justice, is calculated not to wipe away judicially the necessity of good works to obtain justification as it does in the Protestant view. Rather, it is designed as in Grotius' view, to instill in mankind a horror for sin dreadfully dealt with by God in Christ at the cross and supply the lack of good works and of repentance which are the means of appropriating justification.

Johnson, like the latitudinarian divines, demurred from the judicialism of Reformation soteriology in that, in the latter's assessment, only on the grounds of Christ's penal substitution on the cross could the Father justly declare sinners guiltless. In contradistinction to Johnson, their concerns were not primarily experiential—the effects of the atonement on mankind. Rather, they were judicial—maintenance of justice. Only afterward, i.e., after justice was served, was God free to address the experiential: the justification by grace through the instrumentality of faith alone of those whose salvation was secured by the judicial satisfaction of Christ.

Chapter 4: REPENTANCE

... every hour, in which repentance is delayed, produces something new to be repented of.

Samuel Johnson
from Sermon 2

Since Johnson believes repentance throughout one's life is an instrument and condition of salvation, it is an indispensable dimension of his soteriology. He states: "Salvation is promised to us Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance.*"¹ Johnson's view of repentance coheres with his other soteriological convictions: it is predominantly experiential and anthropocentric.

Hudson recognizes the unique eighteenth-century matrix influencing Anglican views of repentance: "On the issue of repentance, as on many others, any neat division between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' doctrines was breaking down. It is difficult to examine Johnson's thought according to this traditional division because his beliefs addressed modern issues and problems quite different from those which faced theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."²

Quinlan and Hudson concur on "Johnson's acceptance of both contrition and attrition,"³ the former being the belief that repentance consists chiefly in fear of reprobation, and the latter the belief it consists in amendment of life as a result of hatred of sin itself and faith in God's promise to pardon the penitent. It is clear that Johnson embraced not merely contrition, as Pierce concludes: "Johnson believed that it is not enough for man to feel sorrow for such sin; for repentance to be genuine it must result in discernable reformation."⁴ What is soteriologically crucial about Johnson's view of repentance, however, is his insistence on both contrition and

¹Johnson [Sermon 28], *Sermons*, 303. An expanded version of this sentiment is found in Boswell, *Life*, 394.

²Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 214, 215.

³*ibid.*, 213, 214. See also Quinlan, *Layman's Religion*, 67.

⁴Pierce, *Religious Life*, 81.

attrition when wedded to his belief in their *saving* efficacy. It should be recalled that while the Thirty-Nine Articles specified faith alone as the instrument by which the merits of Christ are procured (Article XI), Johnson appends obedience and repentance as conditions of justification.

Rambler 110 discloses Johnson's general ideas regarding repentance. He frankly associates it with "propitiation and atonement."⁵ He seems to justify the Christian idea of repentance principally on historical and experiential grounds:

In times and regions so disjoined from each other, that there can scarcely be imagined any communication of sentiments either by commerce or tradition, has prevailed a general and uniform expectation of propitiating God by corporal austerities, of anticipating his vengeance by voluntary afflictions, and by appeasing his justice by a speedy and cheerful submission to a less penalty when a greater is incurred.

Incorporated minds will always feel some inclination towards exterior acts, and ritual observances.⁶

Johnson seems obviously to have in mind the Roman Catholic idea of repentance, or "penance" as the Greek *metanoia* is translated in the Douai Version.⁷ It introduces a subtle but clear shift away from the etymological denotation of repentance as individual feeling of contrition to specific external acts of self-abasement. More significantly, Trent includes satisfaction for sins as an aspect of the role of penance,⁸ a view Johnson plainly shares.

By affirming both contrition and attrition, Johnson loses the solace each affords. The attrition of Romanism stresses the motive of repentance as the fear of damnation but is not accompanied by any doctrine of the inevitable sanctification of the believer.⁹ Conversely, the contrition of Protestantism lays no importance on fear of damnation but accents hatred

⁵Johnson, Yale Edition, 221.

⁶*ibid.*, 222.

⁷Grogan, "Repentance," 837.

⁸Norman, "Penance; Penitence," 762.

⁹Berkhof, *History*, 213-216.

for the transgression that offends God and determination of reformation, regarded as inevitable in believers.¹⁰ Johnson weds the Roman Catholic fear of damnation over specific sins to the Protestant fear of damnation over lack of reformation. Papists are assured they are saved if they remain within the fold of the visible church; Protestants see reformation issuing from the operation of the Holy Spirit as the index of salvation. By stressing attrition alone, Johnson could have left room for union with the church and its stipulations of satisfaction as the source of salvific confidence apart from any anxiety over the Protestant idea of inevitable sanctification, or "growth in grace." By stressing contrition alone, he could have avoided the internal scourging attrition entails while positively accenting spiritual reformation. By stressing *both*, however, Johnson can scarcely avoid spiritual vexation.

Surveying the origin and course of repentance, Johnson asserts that man's "reasonable diffidence" in assuring himself of the efficacy of his repentance has conduced to the "desire to ascertain by some outward marks the state of the soul" which has led to two unfortunate results: on the one hand, a proliferation of rules and scruples that vex "tender and flexible minds" and, second, an utter abandonment of repentance on the part of those who recognize the excessiveness of these scruples and, often, the fraud with which their subscription is accompanied.¹¹ Johnson contends that repentance is nonetheless "easily understood"; it "is the relinquishment of any practice, from the conviction that it has offended God."

In sermon 2 Johnson enunciates the necessity of prompt and genuine repentance, on which individual salvation is contingent. That for Johnson repentance is soteriologically related and a requisite to salvation is clear. In insisting that delinquency in full restitution for sins and ills committed is incompatible with genuine repentance, Johnson remarks:

¹⁰Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 229-239.

¹¹Johnson, *op. cit.*, 222, 223.

Restitution must be made to those who have been wronged, and whatever he [the offender] with-holds from them, he with-holds at the hazard of eternal happiness.¹²

"Eternal punishments" await the sinful who defer or neglect reformation, which is "the chief and essential part of repentance."¹³ To Johnson, repentance generates reconciliation with God,¹⁴ and he who does not repent is "debarred from eternal felicity."¹⁵ As much, therefore, as Johnson prefers "horizontal" religion and disdains a form of Christianity oblivious to the domestic and social obligations of this life,¹⁶ in the elucidation of his views of repentance he espouses the traditional orthodox tenet¹⁷ that repentance has grave implications not principally for this life but rather for the next.

Johnson is intent to distinguish true from false repentance, complaining that the former "has been misrepresented by the weakness of superstition, or the artifices of interest."¹⁸ He enumerates three prime examples of misrepresentations or artifices of true repentance.

First, some hold that repentance consists of "outward expressions of sorrow for sin, ...tears and sighs,...[and] dejection and lamentation."¹⁹ Yet, according to Johnson, these are "variable and uncertain tokens, as proceed more from the constitution of the body than the disposition of the mind,"²⁰ and are consequently no certain sign of repentance. He inserts parenthetically that while the public repentance that so frequently embodies emotional sorrow is sometimes necessary, particularly "where the crime is public," such public confessions "are necessary only, for the sake of destroying the influence of a bad example, and are no otherwise essential to this duty [i.e., repentance]."²¹ Johnson, in fact, warns that

¹²*ibid.* [Sermon 2], *Sermons*, 24.

¹³*ibid.*

¹⁴*ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵*ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 60, 61, 92-94.

¹⁷Berkhof, *op. cit.*, 204-210.

¹⁸Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 2], 20.

¹⁹*ibid.*

²⁰*ibid.*, 21.

²¹*ibid.*, 20.

public repentance may be harmful inasmuch as "to confess crimes may be, in some measure, to teach them, and those may imitate him in wickedness, who will not follow him in his repentance."²²

Second, some believe their penitent duty is discharged if, after a life of transgressions, they cloister themselves from the temptations whose enticement leads them to the sin of which they are repenting. To be sure, Johnson concedes, it is erroneous to conclude that intentional exposure to temptation will conduce to anything but transgression; conversely, "any retirement from the world does not necessarily precede or follow repentance, because it is not requisite to reformation."²³

Third, others have "attempted to quiet their consciences" by "partial restitution," transforming their illicitly procured wealth into gifts of charity; but the contributions resulting in the furtherance of religion, benevolence, and education "will never atone for the violation of justice,"²⁴ as will not the sinner's decision to will his ill-gotten assets to Christian charity at his death.

Johnson concedes that the Roman Catholic view of confession to the priest as an aspect of repentance is valid as long as it is "convenient to observe" and that it is helpful more in its subjective benefits ("disburthening the conscience" and "receiving comfort or instruction") than in the objective divine forgiveness posited by Roman Catholicism.²⁵

Johnson believes one of the disastrous effects of persistent sin and delayed repentance is increasing hardness toward the spiritual and noble in life which eventually renders one virtually impervious to the woings and reprimands of God. God may discontinue his redemptive interest in such obstinate individuals. Some "unaccustomed acts" like fasting and devotional seclusion will preclude "hardness of heart," which results from "alienation of the thoughts" from God, and, in more desperate cases,

²²*ibid.*

²³*ibid.*, 21, 22.

²⁴*ibid.*, 24.

²⁵*ibid.*, 20.

from intentional suppression of the memory of some "enormous wickedness."²⁶ In Sermon 4 pertaining to charity Johnson warns his congregation, "To-morrow is to *all* uncertain, to *thee* almost hopeless; to-day if thou wilt hear the voice of God calling thee to repentance, and by repentance to charity; harden not thy heart... ." ²⁷

Likewise, in exhorting to frequent communion, he declares:

All ideas influence our conduct with more or less force, as they are more or less strongly impressed upon the mind; and they are impressed more strongly, as they are more frequently recollected or renewed. For every idea, whether of love, fear, grief, or any other passion, loses its force by time; and, unless revived by accident, or voluntary meditation, will at last vanish. But by dwelling upon, and indulging any idea, we may increase its efficacy and force, make it by degrees predominant in the soul, and raise it to an ascendant over our passions, so that it shall easily overrule those affections or appetites which formerly tyrannized within us.²⁸

While the hardening of the heart will render us impervious to God's subjective dealings with us, so "hardening" of virtuous habits will assure our virtue.

Interestingly, while Johnson affirms the freedom of the will, he asserts that "grace ... when it has been offered and refused," may not certainly be "offered again": "He cannot expect to be received among the servants of God who will obey him only at his own time."²⁹ Johnson seems to be saying that repentance is initiated by divine concern, and that if an individual persists in sin he may develop a condition in which he will not or cannot repent. This view, however, is not materially different from the Calvinistic idea that will is shaped by one's spiritual condition, and varies widely from the semi-Pelagian, Roman Catholic and Arminian idea of the freedom of the will. In this Johnson seems inconsistent.

²⁶*ibid.* [Sermon 3], 36.

²⁷*ibid.* [Sermon 4], 51.

²⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 101.

²⁹*ibid.* [Sermon 10], 114.

To Johnson, moral reformation is the index of genuine repentance:³⁰ one "is only to expect mercy upon his reformation"³¹ which consists not merely of the forsaking of sin but also reparation of the harm one has done.³²

The eighteenth-century Anglican ambivalence toward the Calvinistic conception of unregenerated man's spiritual and moral incapacity to obtain salvation³³ underlies the anthropological dimension of Johnson's understanding of repentance, which may be accurately described as semi-Pelagian.³⁴ Calvinism is employed here as a foil to Johnson's primarily Anglican views since it was the prime alternative to Anglicanism among Protestants in England in the eighteenth century. While Johnson, in typical semi-Pelagian terminology, recognizes that the moral reformation necessarily springing from all true repentance "is not to be accomplished by our own natural power, unassisted by God,"³⁵ he urges with equal fervor to repent "those that have polluted themselves with studied and premeditated wickedness; that have violated his commands in opposition to conviction; and gone on, from crime to crime, under a sense of the divine disapprobation."³⁶

Even these are not forever excluded from his favour, but have in their hands means, appointed by [God], of reconciliation to him; means by which pardon may be obtained, and by which they may be restored to those hopes of happiness, from which they have fallen by their own fault.³⁷

Though the "means" are divinely "appointed," no immediate gift of repentance is necessary to its performance, as it is in the Calvinistic version.³⁸ Man innately possesses the capacity to turn from evil and to God and thereby assure his eternal bliss by his moral reformation:

³⁰*ibid.*, [Sermon 2], 24.

³¹*ibid.*, 21.

³²*ibid.*, 22.

³³Calvin, *Institutes*, II:ii, *passim*.

³⁴Kyle, "Semi-Pelagianism," 1000, 1001.

³⁵Johnson, *op. cit.*, 24

³⁶*ibid.*, 19.

³⁷*ibid.*

³⁸Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 487, 489.

Repentance is always difficult, and the difficulty grows still greater by delay. But let those who have hitherto neglected this great duty, remember, that it is yet *in their power, and that they cannot perish everlastingly but by their own choice!*³⁹

³⁹Johnson, *op. cit.*, 26. My emphasis.

Chapter 5: CONVERSION

This fit of sickness continued on me for seven weeks, and a glorious visitation it was. The blessed Spirit was all this time purifying my soul. One day, perceiving an uncommon drought and a disagreeable clamminess in my mouth and using things to allay my thirst, but in vain, it was suggested to me, that when Jesus Christ cried out, "I thirst," his sufferings were near at an end. Upon which I cast myself down on the bed, crying out, "I thirst! I thirst!" Soon after this I found and felt in myself that I was delivered from the burden that had so heavily oppressed me. The spirit of mourning was taken from me... . Now did the Spirit of God take possession of my soul, and, as I humbly hope, seal me unto the day of redemption.

George Whitefield
from *George Whitefield's Journals*, 1735

Both Maurice Quinlan¹ and Donald Greene² have detailed the events surrounding the controversy of Samuel Johnson's "late conversion," a significant remark in a written prayer offered soon before Johnson's death. Greene provides the historical background of the controversy:

Such was the prayer which that very great Christian, Samuel Johnson, composed and uttered... eight days before his death, when, in his sick room, he, with a few friends, received his last communion at the hands of the Reverend George Strahan... . The transmission of the text of this prayer has had a curious history, involving very important questions concerning the nature of Johnson's fundamental religious beliefs. Eight months after Johnson's death, George Strahan became one of the first to publish in the field of competing Johnsonian biographers and editors, bringing out a book which he called *Prayers and Meditations, composed by Samuel Johnson, LL.D., and published from his manuscripts*. In this volume, heavily edited throughout, Strahan printed the prayer composed for Johnson's last communion—with silent alterations. The most drastic of these was the deletion of its second petition, "Forgive and accept my late conversion." Hawkins later published, both in his *Life of Johnson* and in Volume XI of the

¹Quinlan, "The Rumor of Dr. Johnson's Conversion."

²Greene, "Dr. Johnson's 'Late Conversion': A Reconsideration."

collected *Works* of Johnson, the full text of the prayer. But Boswell, in his *Life*, chose to reproduce the version emended by Strahan...³

Quinlan insists that evangelicals like William Cowper misinterpreted Johnson's reference in his prayer of December 5, 1784 to refer to the Methodist and evangelical "conversion experience," and even that Johnson's biographers may have skewed the evidence in favor of an "evangelical conversion," just as Strahan and Boswell apparently attempted to obscure the comment to prevent such speculation. Quinlan believes that, in any case, since Johnson understood conversion as moral reformation, he did not have in mind the sort of emotional, often enthusiastic experience the evangelical view of conversion denoted.

Greene, on the other hand, claims that there is no essential difference between the major branches of Christianity with respect to the definition of conversion and that, therefore, when Johnson employed the term, he attached to it no unique denotation.⁴ This view is endorsed by Pierce, who remarks, "there was no evidence for the belief that the phrase 'my late conversion' ever meant to Johnson... a change from the Anglican to the Evangelical faith... . We should thus now look at this prayer not as an expression of new belief but rather as an affirmation of an old dispensation, of a lifelong desire to believe in the truths of Christianity."⁵

This dispute is clouded by the differing interpretations of the term *conversion*. There is no question about its Biblical denotation; it means an active turning away from sin to God and religious virtue.⁶ The dispute concerns what this turning entails. Greene recognizes the genuine dispute but insists the necessity of conversion is a moot point inasmuch as all conceive of it as a turning away from sinfulness to righteousness.⁷ The very questions which Greene concedes do surround the issue of conversion in general impinge on the controversy of Johnson's "late conversion." He cites the employment of the terminology of conversion

³*ibid.*, 60, 61.

⁴*ibid.*, 73-79.

⁵Pierce, *Religious Life*, 163.

⁶Goetzmann, J. and Laubach, F. "Conversion, Penitence, Repentance, Proselyte," 1:353-359.

⁷Greene, *op. cit.*, 73.

by several Anglican divines who influenced Johnson to prove a consensus regarding the general idea of conversion. The issue is not so simple, however. For example, Greene himself admits one of the doctrinal controversies surrounding conversion is "about the degree of distinction to be made between the concepts of conversion and regeneration."⁸ Indeed, this issue is most relevant to Johnson's conversion. There is no evidence Johnson even held to the evangelical doctrine of regeneration.⁹ For the Methodists regeneration was intimately tied to conversion.¹⁰ They recognized conversion as the human response to regeneration, a gratuitous and instantaneous act of God by which the dead spiritual nature of the unbeliever is enlivened. This feature of eighteenth-century, as well as contemporary, evangelical soteriology which conceives of man as passive prior to regeneration because of his innate spiritual inability is absent from Johnson's ethical and moralistic understanding of salvation. For instance, in a sermon urging charity Johnson states:

Men are not charitable, as they are not just; because they suffer themselves to be captivated by their senses, because they are wholly engrossed by present happiness, and extend not their prospects to another state; they do not contemplate the duration of their future existence, or impress upon their minds, the great importance of pleasing God; and the danger of falling into everlasting misery; and have therefore no motives, which they can oppose to the solicitations of appetite, the incitements of passion, or the tranquility of negligence; but pass their lives, some in the slumbers of indolence, and others in the hurry of business or of pleasure, without any preparation for that change, which must determine their state to all eternity.¹¹

Likewise, in Sermon 9 on communion, Johnson's extensive exhortation to self-examination is void of any reference to the necessity of reliance on God as supplier of our conversion:

We cannot receive the sacrament unless, unless we believe in Christ, because by receiving it, we declare our belief in him, and a lying tongue is an abomination to the Lord. We cannot receive it without repentance, because repentance is the means, by which,

⁸*ibid.*

⁹In fact, in the *Dictionary* Johnson identifies conversion as regeneration.

¹⁰Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans*, 195-202.

¹¹Johnson, *Sermons* [Sermon 27], 293.

after sin, we are reconciled to God; and we cannot, without dreadful wickedness, by partaking of the outward tokens of reconciliation, declare that we believe God at peace with our souls, when we know, that by the omission of repentance, we are yet in a state of voluntary alienation from him. We cannot receive it, without a sincere intention of obedience; because, by declaring ourselves followers, we enter into obligations to obey his commandments.¹²

In Sermon 14 Johnson expresses his idea of conversion; and here, moreover, he omits any allusion to the divine supply of regeneration as the cause of man's turning to God:

He that hopes to find peace by trusting God, must obey him; and when he has at any time failed in his obedience, which amongst the best men will be very frequent, he must endeavour to reconcile God to him by repentance... This constant and devout practice, is both the effect, and cause, of confidence in God. He will naturally pour out his supplications to the Supreme Being, who trusts in him, for assistance and protection; and he, who, with proper fervour and humility, prostrates himself before God, will always rise with an increase of holy confidence. By meditating on his own weakness, he will hourly receive new conviction of the necessity of soliciting the favour of his Creatour; and by recollecting his promises, will confirm himself in the hope of obtaining what he desires, and if, to secure these promises, he steadily practices the duties on which they depend, he will soon find his mind stayed on God, and be kept in perfect peace, because he trusteth in him.¹³

Significantly, one's "holy confidence" in this conversion rests not with God's actions, but man's. Man can be relatively certain of God's promises if "he steadily practices the duties on which they depend."

It is incumbent on individuals to prepare for "that change," conversion, "which must determine their state to all eternity."¹⁴ However, to the evangelicals, following the Reformers, conversion is a "human response to regeneration, the infusion of new life into the soul."¹⁵ It is not an act for which one can prepare; he must be regenerated that conversion may occur. The key difference between the views of Johnson and the

¹²*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 104, 105.

¹³*ibid.* [Sermon 14], 157, 158.

¹⁴*ibid.* [Sermon 27], 293.

¹⁵Bloesch, "Conversion," 273.

evangelicals is the stress the latter place on special grace as a requisite of conversion. Johnson believes each individual has within himself the capacity to convert himself. In Sermon 2 he enjoins:

But it is of the highest importance to those who have so long delayed to secure their salvation, that they lose none of the moments which yet remain; that they omit no act of justice or mercy now in their power; that they summon all their diligence to improve the remains of life, and exert every virtue which they have opportunities to practice.¹⁶

This citation is typical of Johnson's numerous exhortations to conversion: there is no hint it is contingent on and engendered by a particular elective grace so indispensable to the Reformation and evangelical understanding of conversion. All men are given the means to convert themselves; they are under divine requirement to do so.

While divine regeneration apart from human co-operation is no essential antecedent to Johnson's view of conversion as it is for evangelicals, "amendment of life" in the act of repentance clearly is.

An amendment of life is the chief and essential part of repentance. He that has performed that great work, needs not disturb his conscience with subtle scruples, or nice distinctions.¹⁷

The divine assistance necessary to this conversion is not regeneration, of course, but "those means which God has prescribed for obtaining his assistance," including "prayer," "the holy sacrament," and indeed "all those institutions that contribute to the increase of piety."¹⁸

In his view of conversion, as in his conception of justification, sanctification, and assurance, the cast of Johnson's mind is largely Tridentine. While the Reformers and evangelicals insist that God must regenerate and convert the totally unable sinner,¹⁹ Trent holds that God enlivens the sinner so he may convert *himself*.

¹⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 2], 25.

¹⁷*ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸*ibid.*

¹⁹Jones, "Reformation Theology," 565-569; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:942-946.

...they, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through his quickening and assisting grace, to convert themselves to their own justification, by freely assenting to and co-operating with that said grace: in such sort that, while God touches the heart of man by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, neither is man himself utterly inactive while he receives that inspiration, forasmuch as he is also able to reject it... [Individuals are justified] when, understanding themselves to be sinners, they, by turning themselves, from the fear of divine justice whereby they are profitably agitated, to consider the mercy of God, are raised unto hope, confiding that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; and they begin to love him as the fountain of all justice; and are therefore moved against sins by a certain hatred and detestation, to wit, by that penitence which must be performed before baptism: lastly, when they purpose to receive baptism, to begin a new life, and to *keep the commandments of God...* . This disposition, or preparation, is followed by justification itself... .²⁰

Eight days before his death did Johnson experience an "evangelical conversion" distinct from the "amendment of life" he consistently equated with repentance and conversion? It hardly seems possible. The strongest evidence, in fact, that Johnson's soteriology remains essentially unchanged even at the end of his life is the text of the controversial prayer itself. Johnson prays:

Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now, as to human eyes it seems, about to commemorate for the last time, the death of thy son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant, O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits and in thy mercy: forgive and accept my late conversion, enforce and accept my imperfect repentance; make this commemoration [of] him available to the confirmation of my Faith, the establishment of my hope, and the enlargement of my charity, and make the death of thy son Jesus Christ effectual to my redemption... .²¹

It will be recalled Johnson's soteriological foundation is that "Salvation is promised to all Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance,*"²² key actions on the application of which Christ's merits are

²⁰Schaff, *Creeds*, 92, 93. Emphasis in original.

²¹Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, Annals*, 417, 418.

²²*ibid.*, [Sermon 28], *Sermons*, 303. Emphasis in original.

suspended.²³ Interestingly, Johnson's final recorded prayer adverts to these actions in precise order. First, he mentions his faith: "Grant, O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits and in thy mercy." Second, he petitions God to take account of his most recent amendment of life: "forgive and accept my late conversion." Third, he appeals to God to accept his flawed but sincere repentance: "enforce and accept my imperfect repentance." Greene is quite justified, then, to chide "even the most assiduous Johnsonian students" for their lack of sensitivity to "the nuances of Johnson's style."²⁴ I believe, though, such sensitivity may lead Johnsonians to conclusions differing somewhat from Greene's own that Johnson always affirmed justification by faith alone and that his understanding of conversion was no different from that of the Methodists and other evangelicals.

For one thing, as Hudson observes,

... at a time when many orthodox theologians [including the evangelicals] were trying to reintroduce real passion into Christianity, Johnson was still cautious and concerned to place limitations on this notion of piety. His idea of the Christian life ... saw Christianity not as a joyful celebration of God's love for mankind, but above all as a particularly impressive ethical code.²⁵

In addition, the Restorationist divines and, it appears, Johnson, identify justification by faith alone with antinomianism.²⁶ Johnson is deeply concerned with morality to his dying day (as his diaries evince), and it can scarcely be expected that he can sustain such a radical change of heart weeks before his death.

Further evidence that Johnson's "late conversion" represented no alteration in his essential soteriology is the advice in a paragraph in Sermon 28 to convicts whose death was impending just as Johnson's was in 1784:

²³Boswell, *Life*, 394.

²⁴Greene, *op. cit.*, 79.

²⁵Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 203.

²⁶*ibid.*, 196.

Nothing therefore remains, but that we apply with all our speed, and with all our strength, to rectify our desires, and purify all our thoughts; that we set God before us in all his goodness and terrors; that we consider him as the father and judge of all the earth; as a father, desirous to save; as a judge, who cannot pardon unrepented iniquity: that we fall down before him self-condemned, and excite in our hearts an intense detestation of those crimes which have provoked him; with vehement and steady resolutions, that if life were granted to us, it should be spent hereafter in the practice of our duty; that we pray the giver of *grace* to strengthen and impress these holy thoughts, and to accept our repentance, though late, and in its beginnings violent: that we improve every good motion by diligent prayer: and having *declared* and *confirmed* our faith by the holy communion,—we deliver ourselves into his hands, in firm hope, that he who created and redeemed us will not suffer us to perish.²⁷

This style of linked clauses urging Christian dedication is reminiscent of Law, who, like Johnson, indicates his concern for the application of the faith to “common life.” Note the similarities:

Our blessed Saviour and His Apostles are wholly taken up in doctrines that relate to common life. They call us to renounce the world, and differ in every temper and way of life, from the spirit and way of the world: to renounce all its goods, to fear none of its evils, to reject its joys, and have no value for its happiness; to be as new born babes, that are born into a new state of things; to live as pilgrims in spiritual watching, in holy fear, and heavenly aspiring after another life: to take up our daily cross, to deny ourselves, to profess the blessedness of mourning, to seek the blessedness of poverty of spirit: to forsake the pride and vanity of riches, to take no thought for the morrow, to live in the profoundest state of humility, to rejoice in worldly sufferings: to reject the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; to bear injuries, to forgive and bless our enemies, and to love mankind as God loveth them: to give up our whole hearts and affections to God, and strive to enter through the strait gate into a life of eternal glory.²⁸

There is every reason to assume the expression “accept our repentance, though late” in Sermon 28 is equivalent to Johnson’s death-bed petition, “accept my late conversion.” In both the sermon and petition holy communion is coincident; both depict repentance and amendment of life,

²⁷Johnson, *op. cit.*, 308, 309. Emphasis in original.

²⁸Law, *Serious Call*, 6.

or at least intent to do so, as essential; both appeal to God's mercy; both express a confidence in personal salvation. Most importantly, both harmonize with Johnson's foundational dictum of soteriology: the application of Christ's merits are contingent on faith, obedience, and repentance.

In addition, Johnson's description and defence of the viability of "death-bed repentance" in Sermon 28 conforms to his own "conversion experience." Johnson implored,

Fix in your minds this decision, "Repentance is a change of the heart, of an evil to a good disposition." When that change is made, repentance is complete. God will consider that life as amended if he had spared it. Repentance in the sight of man, even of the penitent, is not known but by its *fruits*: but our Creatour sees the fruit, in the blossom, or the seed. He knows those resolutions which are fixed, those conversions which would be permanent; and will receive them who are qualified by holy desires for works of righteousness, without exacting from them those outward duties which the shortness of their lives hindered them from performing.²⁹

That is, God will accept sincerity in lieu of virtuous action as repentance and conversion. In his heart an individual repents and converts himself. We must not rely on faith alone³⁰ as the evangelicals, following the Reformers, insist; rather, we must alter our intent and, if possible, our actions, if God is to receive us. Johnson's "late conversion" in no way deviates from this conception of conversion: he recognizes the error of his way and determines to amend his life. This is the essence of the Johnsonian conception of conversion.

Finally, we would do well to remember that the very day of this entry Johnson tells John Ryland that he understands that the hopes of salvation are conditional, and that he is not certain he has conformed to the *conditions*. Pierce cites Johnson's comment to Ryland that "we have hopes given us; but they are conditional, and I know not how far I have fulfilled

²⁹*ibid.*, 308.

³⁰*ibid.*, 304.

those conditions.”³¹ He would have said as much at any time in his adult life. Hence, the final prayer does not represent any alteration in his Tridentine conception of salvation as conditional, justification as processional, and absolute assurance as impossible.

³¹Pierce, *op. cit.* 161. Citing ed., G. B. Hill, *Johnson Miscellanies* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1897; reprint New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 2:156.

Chapter 6: SANCTIFICATION

*Consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask.*

John Milton
from "On His Blindness," circa 1652

Sanctification as a dimension of Reformation soteriology is understood as "the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy. By 'holy' here is meant 'bearing an actual likeness to God.' Sanctification is a process by which one's moral condition is brought into conformity with one's legal status before God [justification]. It is a continuation of what was begun in regeneration, when a newness of life was conferred upon and instilled within the believer."¹ Johnson's view of sanctification, however, bears the character of the *via media* of Anglicanism that became especially pervasive after the Restoration.

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England do not treat sanctification as a separate category. In Article XVII addressing the doctrines of predestination and election, however, the framers' general conception of sanctification is clear:

As the Godly consideration of Predestination, and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to Godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of

¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:967, 968.

eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God.²

The regenerate are those “such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things.” In contradistinction to Trent, Article XII contends that good works, which “are the fruits of faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins,” though they “are... pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”³

The three sections of the chapter on sanctification in the Westminster Confession (XIII) are more specific. The truly regenerate possess a new heart and spirit; and by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection and by means of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit who indwells them, they are gradually sanctified as the principle of indwelling sin is “weakened and mortified.” While affecting every aspect of man, this process is “yet imperfect in this life”; it thus entails a conflict with “the remnants of corruption in every part.” The success of sanctification is predetermined, however, and “the regenerate part doth overcome” in the end.

By contrast, it should be evident that Johnson’s soteriology permits no sharp distinction between justification and sanctification. Indeed, Johnson’s view of justification seems similar to the Anglican and Reformed view of *sanctification*. This confounding of justification with sanctification is another instance of Johnson’s Tridentine orientation to soteriology. William Cunningham, eminent nineteenth-century Scottish church historian, notes:

Justification, then, according to the Church of Rome, includes or comprehends not only the remission of sin, or deliverance from guilt, but also the sanctification or renovation of man’s moral nature, or deliverance from depravity. In short, they [Roman Catholics] comprehend under the one name or head of justification,

²Hardon, *Spirit*, 178.

³*ibid.*, 176.

what Protestants—following, as they believe, the guidance of Scripture—have always divided into the two heads of justification and regeneration, or justification and sanctification, when the word sanctification is used in its widest sense, as descriptive of the whole process, originating in regeneration, by which depraved men are restored to a conformity to God's moral image.⁴

This is even more apparent when one considers that Johnson's sermons are not directed to the regenerate to the exclusion of the unregenerate. Pierce notes that "Johnson, in particular, could not accept the Evangelical notion of 'saving faith' nor the role of the Holy Spirit in the act of 'conversion.'"⁵ Johnson does not perceive humanity as divided into the saved and unsaved as did the Wesleyans and other evangelicals; rather, like Romanism, he perceives salvation as processional, or, in a negative sense, recessional. One's salvation is contingent on the maintenance of good works and is jeopardized by evil works. In urging "those who have so long delayed to secure their salvation,"⁶ he declares:

But as this reformation is not to be accomplished by our own natural power, unassisted by God, we must, when we form our first resolutions of a new life, apply ourselves, with fervour and constancy, to those means which God has prescribed for obtaining his assistance. We must implore a blessing by frequent prayer, and confirm our faith by the holy sacrament. We must use all of those institutions that contribute to the increase of piety, and omit nothing that may either promote our progress in virtue, or prevent a relapse into vice.⁷

He argues that one's sin threatens his eternal standing before God. There is no hint of the necessity of a supernatural regeneration that engenders sanctification; man possesses the inherent capacity to conform to God's requirements, in intent if not in performance.

The terms, upon which we are to hope for any benefits from the merits of Christ, are faith, repentance, and subsequent obedience. These are therefore the three chief and general heads of examination. We cannot receive the sacrament unless, unless we

⁴Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 2:14.

⁵Pierce, *Religious Life*, 53, asterisk footnote.

⁶Johnson [Sermon 2], *Sermons*, 25.

⁷*ibid.*, 24.

believe in Christ, because by receiving it, we declare our belief in him, and a lying tongue is an abomination to the Lord. We cannot receive it without repentance, because repentance is the means, by which, after sin, we are reconciled to God; and we cannot, without dreadful wickedness, by partaking of the outward tokens of reconciliation, declare that we believe God at peace with our souls, when we know, that by the omission of repentance, we are yet in a state of voluntary alienation from him. We cannot receive it, without a sincere intention of obedience; because, by declaring ourselves followers, we enter into obligations to obey his commandments.⁸

It would be impossible, in fact, to direct sermons exclusively to the converted on the basis of Johnson's soteriology, because

every sin, and much more any habit or course of sin long continued, is, according to the different degrees of guilt, an apostacy or defection from our Saviour; as it is a breach of those conditions upon which we became his followers; and he that breaks the condition of a covenant, dissolves it on his side. Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer, we lose the benefits of his death; nor can we have any hopes of obtaining them, while we remain in this state of separation from him.⁹

To the extent to which Johnson's sermons frequently exhort to sanctification, therefore, they cannot simply urge believers to perseverance in the faith; they must account for the number listening who have indeed violated the conditions of the bilateral covenant and thereby forfeited their salvation. He states in Sermon 14:

He that hopes to find peace by trusting God, must obey him; and when he has at any time failed in his obedience, which amongst the best men will be very frequent, he must endeavour to reconcile God to him by repentance... . By meditating on his own weakness, he will hourly receive new conviction of the necessity of soliciting the favour of his Creatour; and by recollecting his promises, will confirm himself in the hope of obtaining what he desires, and if, to secure these promises, he steadily practices the duties on which they depend, he will soon find his mind stayed on God, and be kept in perfect peace, because he trusteth in him.¹⁰

⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 104, 105.

⁹*ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰*ibid.* [Sermon 14], 157, 158.

Johnson's sermons, then, are exhortations to justification and sanctification simultaneously, since to Johnson there is no material distinction between the two.

Whether in comprehending the nature of divine prescience, the human will, the atonement, or justification, Johnson's concern is essentially experiential. Therefore, it is entirely characteristic for him to adopt the Roman view of justification which unites virtually all the threads of salvation. To posit the fine distinction of Protestantism that justification is a judicial and forensic *act* while sanctification is an experiential *process* is incongruous with Johnson's religious outlook. It is not that Johnson is unconcerned with or oblivious of the judicial and abstract; it is simply that he is overwhelmingly concerned with the experiential. In this orientation he is strikingly pre-Romantic. Several instances from the sermons will suffice to demonstrate this experiential orientation.

He argues in Sermon 2 that God does not require perfection of his human creatures, taking account of their frailty, and "every real extenuation of our failings and transgressions."¹¹ He continues:

But the mercy of God extends not only to those that have made his will, in some degree, the rule of their actions, and have only deviated from it by inadvertency, surprize, inattention, or negligence, but even to those that have polluted themselves with studied and premeditated wickedness; that have violated his commands in opposition to conviction, and gone on, from crime to crime, under a sense of the divine disapprobation.¹²

There is nothing here of the Protestant insistence on the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity and of Christ's righteousness to the elect, nor of regeneration as the requisite of true repentance. It is a moralistic and pragmatic concern with man as he is in reality, a gentle inducement to repentance with the assurance of the goodness of a forgiving God.

¹¹*ibid.*, [Sermon 2], 19.

¹²*ibid.*

Johnson is not reluctant to employ reprobation as an inducement to specific acts of morality, especially charity:

Charity is likewise obstructed in particular persons by particular vices and habits, which, though, perhaps in themselves, not enormous or detestable, ought yet, to be, very diligently, corrected, since, in their consequences, they may prove equally pernicious with greater crimes, by hindering the practice of that virtue, without which no salvation has been promised.¹³

Sanctification is clearly equated with what Protestants recognize as justification. Listeners are urged to note that their salvation is contingent on their sanctification: Johnson's burden is experiential and pragmatic.

Johnson states, in fact, that cognizance of theological axioms and nuances is unnecessary; one simply looks to the Bible and obeys:

The great purpose of revealed religion is to afford man a clear representation of his dependence on the Supreme Being, by teaching him to consider God as his Creator, and Governour, his Father and his Judge. Those to whom Providence has granted the knowledge of the holy Scriptures, have no need to perplex themselves with difficult speculations, to deduce their duty from remote principles, or to enforce it by doubtful motives. The Bible tells us, in plain and authoritative terms, that there is a way to life, and a way to death; that there are acts which God will reward, and acts that he will punish.¹⁴

Johnson manifests in his sermons, though not always in his conversation, an impatience with abstruse theological issues, one of which is the fine differentiation between justification and sanctification. Perhaps, as Jordan suggests, this is due to the fact that "Johnson assumes an audience similar to those who might be able to follow his *Idler* essays. Generally he seems to follow the rule laid down by Swift in his *Letter to a Young Clergyman* to avoid "hard words" and abstruse theological diction."¹⁵ In the case of Johnson, however, the avoidance of "abstruse theological diction" seems more than an attempt to render theological

¹³*ibid.* [Sermon 27], 295.

¹⁴*ibid.*, [Sermon 3], 29.

¹⁵Richman, "Political Sermons," 29.

truth understandable; it is the logical expression of a theological conviction: religion is meant to be experienced, and if it cannot be experienced, it is not sound religion.

Richard Brantley, in fact, contends that "Johnson's temperament was often decidedly Wesleyan," that "Wesleyan religion is not far from Romantic poetry," and that "the religious imagination for which Wesley was largely responsible related directly to Johnson's mind."¹⁶ Elements of Johnson's soteriology may have been a reaction to the apparently abstract judicialism of Protestant orthodoxy just as Romanticism was a reaction to the alleged aridity of neo-classicism.

Brantley links Johnson's reaction to this influence of Wesleyanism. Many of Johnson's writings, Brantley insists, "show signs of the evangelical feeling and thought represented best by Wesley's intellect and sincerity."¹⁷ Further, Johnson's orientation mirrored Wesley's "generally pietistic outlook," "emphasis on religious feeling... as distinct from intellectual belief," and "faith...as a blend of syncretic thought and pietistic practice."¹⁸ As such, "Johnson was close to the Evangelical Movement."¹⁹

It is questionable, however, whether Johnson's experiential orientation in religion is specially the result of evangelical influence; experientialism is a critical feature of Roman Catholicism, and Johnson's soteriological experientialism—for example, his affirmation of justification by works virtually identical to that of Romanism while at odds with evangelicalism—seems more the effect of *via media* Anglicanism than evangelicalism. Johnson and the "Romantic" Methodists both reacted to Protestant judicialism: the former from the standpoint of *via media* Anglicanism, and the latter from the standpoint of emotional religion.

It is difficult to understand Greene's conclusion that "the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the foundation of the whole edifice of

¹⁶Brantley, "Johnson's Wesleyan Connection," 144.

¹⁷*ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸*ibid.*, 146

¹⁹*ibid.*, 149.

Johnson's religion."²⁰ Greene, it seems, is led to this questionable conclusion by his conviction that justification by faith alone is principally the antithesis of the idea that one may merit salvation by his good works. He insists the "kernel of the doctrine"²¹ is the belief that faith alone is the condition of salvation, although good works necessarily flow from genuine faith. Greene presents evidence that a number of the Anglican divines held to the Protestant view of justification, and claims virtually all Protestants, including Johnson, embraced it.²² Hudson, however, recognizes that by the eighteenth century the doctrine of justification by faith alone had fallen into disrepute among Anglicans. Indeed, as early as the first decade after the Restoration, the doctrine of justification by faith alone became controversial.²³ Greene believes that the extremes in connection with justification are formal externalism and moralism, on the one hand, and antinomianism, the idea that one need not perform good works if he is justified, on the other. He even couches the necessity of the Reformation in these terms.²⁴ Nothing could be more misleading. The heart of the theological controversy of the Reformation had nothing to do with the necessity of good works, on which all sides agreed; rather, it hinged on the nature of the application of Christ's righteousness to sinners and the method of appropriating that righteousness.

Johnson forcefully and consistently repudiates that justification is appropriated by faith alone. To Mrs. Knowles he states that "hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance."²⁵ In Sermon 9 he declares that "The terms, upon which we are to hope for any benefits from the merits of Christ, are faith, repentance, and subsequent obedience."²⁶ He remarks in Sermon 14 that "Trust in God, that trust to which perfect peace is promised, is to be obtained only by

²⁰Greene, "Dr. Johnson's 'Late Conversion': A Reconsideration," 87.

²¹*ibid.*, 81.

²²Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 171.

²³Cross and More, *Anglicanism*, 296.

²⁴Greene, *op. cit.*, 81.

²⁵Boswell, *Life*, 390.

²⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 9], 104. Emphasis in original.

repentance, obedience, and supplication."²⁷ Likewise, in Sermon 28 he avers unequivocally that "Salvation is promised to all Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance*."²⁸ Johnson denies most insistently the Reformation and pre-Restoration Anglican idea of justification by faith alone.

A clear differentiation between justification and sanctification is indispensable to the historic Protestant faith which stresses justification by faith alone.²⁹ For instance, after expressing his affirmation of the definition of sanctification as found in the Westminster Confession, noted nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge distinguishes justification from sanctification at six critical points:

(1.) In that the former [justification] is a transient act, the latter [sanctification] is a progressive work. (2.) Justification is a forensic act, God acting as judge, declaring justice satisfied so far as the believing sinner is concerned, whereas sanctification is an effect due to divine efficiency. (3.) Justification changes, or declares to be changed, the relation of the sinner to the justice of God; sanctification involves a change of character. (4.) The former is founded on what Christ has done for us; the latter is the effect of what He does in us. (6.) Justification is complete and the same in all, while sanctification is progressive, and is more complete in some than others.³⁰

Justification as the declaration of individual righteousness which the Reformation view grounds in the passive and active obedience of Christ and suspends on the exercise of faith alone Johnson binds inextricably to consistent conformity to the divine standard, on pain of forfeiture of salvation if one fails: justification equals sanctification.

In Johnson's soteriology as revealed in his sermons, the obedience that is a condition of salvation consists principally of devotion,³¹ the means of attaining sanctification, which issues in good works. The Tridentine

²⁷*ibid.* [Sermon 14], 156.

²⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 28], 303.

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, III: xvi. The Lutheran distinction between justification and sanctification is even sharper than the Reformed. See Forde, "The Lutheran View," 17-23.

³⁰Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:213.

³¹Pierce, *op. cit.*, 63.

formula that salvation is conditioned on practising virtue and avoiding vice is therefore a recurrent theme. In Sermon 10, for example, Johnson warns:

... every action shall at last be followed by its due consequences; we shall be treated according to our obedience or transgressions; the good shall not miss their reward, nor the wicked escape their punishment; but when men shall give account of their works, they that have done good shall pass into everlasting life, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.³²

The statement is a literary apposition. It conveys well Johnson's firm conviction that justification is suspended on behavior.

In addition, supporting Johnson's Tridentine concept of conditional salvation is his notion that all of life is a state of spiritual prohibition, a conviction saliently revealed in a statement in Sermon 19:

As it hath pleased God to place us in a state, in which we are surrounded by innumerable temptations; so it has pleased him, on many occasions, to afford us temporal incitements to virtue, as a counterbalance to the allurements of sin; and to set before us rewards which may be obtained, and punishments which may be suffered, before the final determination of our eternal state.³³

Interestingly, Johnson believes that God's incitements to obedience intentionally correspond to temptations to commit evil. The idea that God postpones his decision regarding our eternal state until he has noted our actions is a virtual denial of election and predestination. Sanctification, therefore, is the variable of the probation. In short, man's salvation is contingent on his sanctification.

Five powerful themes comprise Johnson's view of sanctification: the responsibility of charity, the necessity of the fear of God, the perniciousness of pride, the inefficacy of religious externalism, and the indispensability of communion.

³²Johnson, *op. cit.* [sermon 10], 115.

³³*ibid.* [Sermon 19], 208.

Charity, "the most excellent of all moral virtues,"³⁴ occupies a place of almost disproportionate emphasis in Johnson's thought and sermons. Johnson follows Law, who stated plainly, "charity is the greatest of all virtues."³⁵ "[F]or Johnson," Chapin remarks, "points of doctrine fade in importance before the sine qua non of Christian charity."³⁶ A religious species of charity, as distinguished from mere personal concern for humanity, should characterize all Christians.

In commending the practice of charity Johnson maintains:

Whatever superiority may distinguish us, and whatever plenty may surround us, we know, that they can be possessed but a short time, and that the manner in which we employ them must determine our eternal state...³⁷

Johnson deems the practice of charity to be an aspect of spiritual probation of this life. He is even more insistent in Sermons 27 that lack of charity renders one unfit for the kingdom of God:

At that day, when all the generations of the earth, shall stand forth in the immediate presence of their God, will the practice or neglect of charity be chiefly noted; then they, who have looked with indifference upon the calamities of others, who have scoffed at the mourner, and insulted the captive; who have diverted the uneasiness of sympathy by vicious enjoyments, and suffered others to languish in pain or poverty, for want of that relief, which would cost only a momentary pleasure, shall be condemned to an everlasting society, with those beings, whose depravity incites them to rejoice at the destruction of mankind... The man, who places his felicity in riches, and the power and influence, which are confer'd by them, who passes, without regard, by the wretched and the poor, and forgets to "lay up treasures in heaven," may, surely, employ one moment in considering that his "soul" may "this night be required of him"; and that he may enter, in a few hours, into a state, in which all distinctions will be for ever obliterated, but those of virtue; and where only he can hope for mercy by whom mercy has been shewn. He, who counts his days by a succession of pleasures, nor knows any other use of time, than to squander it in amusements; who thinks on the misery of others,

³⁴*ibid.* [Sermon 27], 298.

³⁵Law, *Serious Call*, 229.

³⁶Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 48. See also Hudson, *op. cit.*, 58-65.

³⁷Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 4], 44.

only to heighten his own felicity, or declines the thought, only that his own enjoyments may not be interrupted, will surely start from his dream at the sound of age and death; at the mention of that time, in which he shall say, "I have no pleasure in it"; and of that hour, that shall translate him to scenes of horror and of misery; where nothing of his past gratifications, shall be remember'd, but the guilt.³⁸

The gravity of the subject matter is reinforced by the accumulation of clauses. One reason Johnson's sermons are so effective is that his warnings are all-embracing. He seems to comprehend intuitively every chief impediment to righteousness and point out the hazard it is to the individual.

Further, the extent to which Johnson's views follow those of Law is most apparent. Law begins a section of his defence of the necessity of charity with the very Biblical text to which Johnson alludes in Sermon 27, Matthew 25: 31: "When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory."³⁹ Law then contends that he cannot expect salvation who refuses to practise charity:

You own that you have no title to salvation if you have neglected these good works; because such persons as have neglected them are at the last day to be placed on the left hand, and banished with a "Depart, ye cursed."⁴⁰

Johnson's sentiment of works-righteousness conforms to the temper of the times, as Hudson notes:

A historian of the eighteenth-century might easily forget that there had never been any question that men 'merit' salvation through good works. Hostility towards the doctrine of meritorious works had in fact been one of the founding tenets of Protestantism, and continued to be the official position of the Anglican Church as set down in its articles. But Article XI, which condemns justification by works, was one of the many official doctrines which eighteenth-century orthodoxy completely ignored. There was little doubt not

³⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 27], 292, 294.

³⁹Law, *op. cit.*, 54.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 55.

only that men would finally be judged by their works, but that charity was exalted above all other virtues as the chief condition of salvation.⁴¹

Because Johnson holds neither a forensic view of justification nor a supernatural view of regeneration, he cannot insist on charity as an organic effect of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the divine nature as implied in the statement on sanctification in the Thirty-Nine Articles; hence, the inducement to charity is moral and utilitarian, rather than theological or spiritual:

Such are the general motives which the religion of Jesus affords, to the general exercise of charity, and such are the peculiar motives for our laying hold of this opportunity, which Providence has this day put into our power for the practice of it. Motives no less than the hope of everlasting happiness, and the fear of punishment which shall never end. Such incitements are surely sufficient to quicken the slowest, and animate the coldest...⁴²

Johnson's view of charity affords a striking example of how his soteriology influences prominent features of his outlook on life. While according to the Reformed idea, for example, virtue issues from the indwelling Spirit as a *result* of regeneration,⁴³ to Johnson, the "most excellent of all moral virtues" is a key *condition* on which salvation is contingent. Johnson adds, similarly, that forgiveness of others is a condition of our own forgiveness by God.⁴⁴

In addition, the theme of the fear of God occupies a dominant place in Johnson's view of sanctification:

In consequence of this general doctrine, the whole system of moral and religious duty is expressed, in the language of Scripture, by the "fear of God." A good man is characterised, as a man that feareth God; and the fear of the Lord is said to be the beginning of wisdom; and the text [Prov. 28:14a], that happy is the man that feareth always.⁴⁵

⁴¹Hudson, *op. cit.*, 171.

⁴²Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 4], 48.

⁴³Calvin, *op. cit.*, III:vii.

⁴⁴Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 309.

⁴⁵*ibid.* [sermon 3], 30.

Johnson contrasts the appeal of heathen philosophers to human pride with the Christian appeal to humility. The great object of human fear should be sin—the consequence of the commission of which is the judgment bar of God before whom we “must in a short time appear.”⁴⁶ The Godly man fears not merely sin but also temptation, since the latter is the cause of the former. The solution to the problem of temptation, however, is not actual monasticism and asceticism, which preclude temptation, and correspondingly prohibit the performance of Godly duties,⁴⁷ but the self-discipline of fear that “carries about... in the world the temper of the cloister.”⁴⁸ Johnson explains that

This can only be done, by fearing always, by preserving in the mind a constant apprehension of the divine presence, and a constant dread of the divine displeasure; impressions which the converse of mankind, and the solicitations of sense and fancy, are continually labouring to efface, and which we must therefore renew by all such practices as religion prescribes...⁴⁹

Johnson proposes a sort of practical asceticism. Since in sequestering himself from the world one would be unable to perform his duties to mankind, he must carry about within him the “temper of the cloister,” that is, he must retain the ascetic attitude while engaging in social intercourse. Additionally, it will sometimes be necessary to engage in “unaccustomed acts of devotion,”⁵⁰ including “fasts and other austerities” which “have a natural tendency to disengage the mind from sensuality.”⁵¹ One is thus able to avoid the tragedy of “hardness of heart,” the antithesis of the fear of God, and a state that may become irremediable.⁵² Thus, fear of God is the engine of sanctification.

⁴⁶*ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁸*ibid.*

⁴⁹*ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁰*ibid.*

⁵¹*ibid.*, 35.

⁵²*ibid.*, 36.

For Johnson, moreover, pride is a chief impediment to sanctification. There was occasion in the chapter dealing with original sin to advert to Johnson's belief that "Pride is a corruption that seems originally ingrafted in our nature," and here should be noted his conviction of the pervasiveness of this vice:

... it exerts itself in our first years, and, without continual endeavors to suppress it, influences our last. Other vices tyrannize over particular ages, and triumph in particular countries. Rage is the failing of youth and the avarice of age; revenge is the predominant passion of one country, and inconstancy the characteristic of another; but pride is the native of every country, infects every climate, and corrupts every nation.⁵³

The style is an instance of the healthy generalities in which Johnson speaks, the near exhaustiveness of his declarations. As Richman notes, "Swift wrote for a particular congregation, Johnson for mankind."⁵⁴

Sermon 8, a particularly insightful and poignant tract, is devoted entirely to the elucidation of the nature and egregiousness of intellectual pride.

Pride is defined as "an immoderate degree of self-esteem, or an over-value of a man set upon himself, and, like most other vices, is founded on an intellectual falsehood."⁵⁵ This definition of pride, "conventional" and "down-to-earth,"⁵⁶ is far removed from the eighteenth-century controversies relating to the definition of pride and its role in morality and the Christian religion. Its utility was "homiletic" and "could convince even the most unintellectual congregation that pride blocked the way to worldly wisdom, as well as the way to heaven."⁵⁷ In this understanding of pride Johnson seems characteristically unconcerned about, though not oblivious of, the abstract distinctions of the philosophical moralists of his day. Rather, he is committed almost pastorally to the spiritual requirements of his listeners.

⁵³*ibid.* [Sermon 6], 66.

⁵⁴Richman, *op. cit.* 28.

⁵⁵*ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁶Hudson, *op. cit.*, 136.

⁵⁷*ibid.*

He is convinced pride is not merely speculative, but conduces to "effects equally injurious to others, and destructive to itself."⁵⁸ Johnson insists that pride has disastrous social consequences when permitted to fester in the life of political leaders:

He that overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he that undervalues others will oppress them. To this fancied superiority it is owing, that tyrants have squandered the lives of millions, and looked unconcerned on the miseries of war. It is indeed scarcely credible, it would without experience be absolutely incredible, that a man should carry destruction and slaughter round the world, lay cities in ashes, and put nations to the sword, without one pang or tear; that we should feel no reluctance at seizing the possessions of another, at robbing parents of their children, and shortening or imbittering human lives. Yet this fatal, this dreadful effect, has pride been able to produce.⁵⁹

Johnson is convinced the accumulation of wealth is frequently motivated by pride: "To pride therefore must be ascribed most of the fraud, injustice, violence, and extortion, by which wealth is frequently acquired."⁶⁰ In addition, pride is often accompanied by the vice of envy, causing one to be "uneasy and dissatisfied, when any of those applauses are bestowed on another, which he is desirous of himself."⁶¹ The proud man incessantly endeavors to increase his esteem in the eyes of his peers; Johnson believes, however, that God, who must as it were recoil in disbelief at the existence of pride among a race so weak and confused, seldom permits the proud to achieve their sinful ambitions: "But for the most part it is ordered by Providence, that the schemes of the ambitious are disappointed, the calumnies of the envious are detected, and false pretences to reputation ridiculed and exposed, so that still 'when pride cometh, then cometh shame, but with the lowly is wisdom.'"⁶²

⁵⁸Johnson, *op. cit.*, 68.

⁵⁹*ibid.*

⁶⁰*ibid.*, 69.

⁶¹*ibid.*

⁶²*ibid.*, 70.

Interestingly, Sermon 6 proscribing pride reveals two specific tenets of Johnson's soteriological scheme. He warns of "a species of pride" "more dangerous"⁶³ than the common carnal pride of mankind. He refers to "spiritual pride," which "represents a man to himself beloved of his Creatour in a particular degree, and, of consequence, inclines him to think others not so high in his favour as himself."⁶⁴ While this form of pride as a transgression of God's law is most pernicious, it is not beyond forgiveness. Its remedy is reformation, for "the blood of Christ was poured out upon the cross to make [our] best endeavors acceptable to God."⁶⁵ Christ's death, in other words, does not benefit the proud by eliminating the penalty in some vicarious transaction as historic Protestants understand; they contend, in the words of Luther, that "Christ was charged with the sins of all men, that he should pay for them with his own blood. The curse struck him. The Law found him among sinners. He was not only in the company of sinners. He had gone so far as to invest Himself with the flesh and blood of sinners. So the Law judged and hanged him for a sinner."⁶⁶ In Johnson's view, conversely, Christ's sacrifice compensates for our lack of perfection by allowing our "best efforts" to stand in lieu of that perfection.

Second, Christ's humility in life and death benefit us only if we imitate his spirit in our own lives: "God of his infinite mercy grant, that, by imitating his humility, we may be made partakers of his merits!"⁶⁷ Johnson follows Law's conviction that

[Christ] suffered, and was a Sacrifice, to make our sufferings and sacrifice of ourselves fit to be received by God. And we are to suffer, to be crucified, to die, and rise with Christ; or else his Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection, will profit us nothing. ⁶⁸

⁶³*ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁴*ibid.*

⁶⁵*ibid.*

⁶⁶Luther, *Galatians*, 116, 117.

⁶⁷Johnson, *op. cit.*, 73.

⁶⁸Law, *op. cit.* 197.

The proud have consolation then not that Christ has actually borne the penalty for their sins but that God will transfer Christ's merits to them if they repent, forsake their pride, and follow in Christ's steps.

For Johnson external religion and ritualism are insufficient. "[E]ven the Christian religion has been depraved by artificial modes of piety, and succedaneous practices of reconciliation."⁶⁹ Sanctification, on the other hand, entails "love of God and of our neighbour."⁷⁰ Johnson does not, however, set religious duties and true sanctification in opposition: "it is necessary to the Christian life, that the form and the power of Godliness should subsist together."⁷¹

From Johnson's two communion sermons (9 and 22) one deduces the importance he attaches to this sacrament. It is true that, as noted above, Johnson follows Clarke and the Restoration divines in his "skepticism with ritual";⁷² nonetheless, it is incumbent on believers to partake of the table, for refusal to do so is to disobey the Lord's command:⁷³ "Johnson considered participation in this sacrament to be, along with attendance at church, one of the two principal duties of a practising Christian."⁷⁴

Johnson's concern with communion, as Hudson points out, is moralistic—as a sacrament it is designed to evoke good works.⁷⁵ This concern is characteristic of Johnson's soteriology as a whole. In this sense, in fact, communion fills a more prominent role in his soteriological scheme than has often been recognized.

Hudson perceives that Johnson's limitation of the significance of the sacrament to the commemoration of Christ's death classifies him with the nonconformists in their eighteenth-century controversy with the high-

⁶⁹Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 13], 141.

⁷⁰*ibid.*, 146.

⁷¹*ibid.*, 147.

⁷²Hudson, *op. cit.*, 215, 216.

⁷³Johnson, *op. cit.* [sermon 9], 103.

⁷⁴Pierce, *op. cit.*, 70.

⁷⁵Hudson, *op. cit.*, 215-218.

church Anglicans, for whom the sacrament was central.⁷⁶ He notes Johnson's accord with the latitudinarian propensity to value the sacrament for its moral rather than supernatural effects in distinction from the high-church Anglicans.⁷⁷ I believe, however, while recognizing the ecclesiological and political import of Johnson's view of communion, Hudson underemphasizes the soteriological significance. For instance, Johnson attaches such importance to the sacrament that it becomes, as in Romanism, an instrument of re-entry into the family of God following sin:

Thus the sacrament is a kind of repetition of baptism, the means whereby we are readmitted into the communion of the church of Christ, when we have, by sin, been separated from it; for every sin, and much more any habit or course of sin long continued in, is, according to the different degrees of guilt, an apostacy or defection from our Saviour.⁷⁸

Johnson's rejection of the Roman Catholic conception of transubstantiation may be attributed, as Gray remarks, to "the scrupulously rational mind of Samuel Johnson, unwilling to accept anything which was not absolutely evident to the sense and to the mind."⁷⁹ Quinlan, like Gray, concentrates his discussion of Johnson's idea of communion on Johnson's rejection of transubstantiation.⁸⁰ This metaphysical deviation from Romanism, nonetheless, should not blind one to Johnson's soteriological continuity with Romanism in his understanding of the sacrament. When observed in the light of his soteriology, Johnson's understanding of communion may be judged indispensable to his view of sanctification, no matter how infrequently he may have partaken of the sacrament himself.

It will be recalled that in Johnson's opinion the application of Christ's merits is dependent on obedience and repentance. One example of obedience is partaking of communion. But to Johnson communion is more than that. Because it is a renewal of the baptismal vow, it is a means

⁷⁶*ibid.*, 218-22.

⁷⁷Hudson, *op. cit.*, 218-221.

⁷⁸Johnson, *op. cit.*, [sermon 9], 100.

⁷⁹Gray, *Johnson's Sermons*, 140.

⁸⁰Quinlan, *A Layman's Religion*, 173-175.

of sanctification inasmuch as it restores us to a place of salvation forfeited after sin. It is, in fact, the preeminent means of sanctification:

But vain had been the sufferings of our Saviour, had there not been left means of reconciliation to him; since every man falls away from him occasionally, by sins of negligence at least, and perhaps, by known, deliberate, premeditated offences. So that some method of renewing the covenant between God and man was necessary; and for this purpose this sacrament was instituted; which is therefore a renewal of our broken vows, a re-entrance into the society of the church, and the act, by which we are restored to the benefits of our Saviour's death, upon performance of the terms prescribed by him.⁸¹

This Johnson regards as adequate inducement to frequent participation.

If we consider this sacrament as a renewal of the vow of baptism, and the means of reconciling us to God, and restoring us to a participation of the merits of our Saviour, which we had forfeited by sin, we shall need no persuasions to a frequent communion. For certainly nothing can be more dreadful than to live under the displeasure of God, in constant danger of appearing before him, while he is yet unappeased, and of losing the benefits of our redemption.⁸²

That Johnson understands salvation as a bilateral covenant is therefore clear in his view of communion. When man sins, he has violated his covenantal obligation. God, therefore, is under no compulsion to honor his own obligation, the application of Christ's merits to the obedient and repentant. If, in fact, his life expires while he is in a state of sin and before he comes to the Lord's table, the sinner is in danger of "losing the benefits of [Christ's] redemption."⁸³ The sacrament functions, then, as the divinely ordained means of "a renewal of our sacred vows, a re-entrance into the society of the church, and the act, by which we are restored to the benefits of our Saviour's death." Inasmuch as it is an essential covenantal ratification on which hope of salvation hinges, it is a critical feature of Johnson's comprehension of sanctification and hence his soteriology.

⁸¹Johnson, *loc. cit.*

⁸²*ibid.*, 103.

⁸³*ibid.*

While one may question Quinlan's conclusion that "[William] Law, more than any other single writer, gave the temper to Johnson's religion,"⁸⁴ one can scarcely disagree that none so influenced Johnson's view of sanctification. And "the key to Law throughout his whole writing career," Quinlan continues, "is that he believed in, practiced, and preached the doctrine of Christian perfection."⁸⁵ From this source to which Johnson was exposed at such a tender age he would have learned of perfectionism, though it is true, as Hudson reminds, that "Johnson did not have to go to Law to learn perfectionism:"⁸⁶ it was existent—if not prevalent—among the Anglican divines and the Methodists.

It is imperative to understand that neither Law nor the other proponents of perfectionism contend for the necessity or possibility of absolute perfection in the Christian life. They adjusted the definition of perfection to account for sins unintentional and those inherent in the condition of human frailty.⁸⁷ Intention of righteousness and abstinence from known sin were crucial. To this view Johnson perfectly conforms. Clearly man cannot be impeccably sinless, asserts Johnson:

He who falleth seven times a day may yet, by the mercy of God, be numbered among the just; the purest human virtue has much faeculence. The highest flights of the soul soar not beyond the clouds and vapours of the earth; the greatest attainments are very imperfect...⁸⁸

Further, God accepts pure intention and amendment of life and does not demand absolute perfection of his human creatures:

It is reasonable, that we should endeavor to please him [God], because we know that every sincere endeavor will be rewarded by him; that we should use all the means in our power, to enlighten our minds, and regulate our lives, because our errours, if involuntary, will not be imputed to us; and our conduct, though not exactly agreeable to the divine ideas of rectitude, yet if

⁸⁴Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁸⁵*ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁶Hudson, *op. cit.*, 191.

⁸⁷*ibid.*, 196, 197.

⁸⁸Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 13], 146.

consciences, will not be condemned by that God, who judges the heart, weighs every circumstance of our lives, and admits every real extenuation of our failings and transgressions.⁸⁸

In the accent on intention and the belief that God accepts assiduous efforts instead of perfection, Johnson replicates the teaching of Law:

If you are as forward in the Christian life as your best endeavours can make you, then you may justly hope, that your imperfections will not be laid to your charge; but if your defects in piety, humility, and charity are owing to your negligence, and want of sincere intention, to be as eminent as you can in these virtues, then you leave yourself as much without excuse as he that lives in the sin of swearing, through the want of a sincere intention to depart from it.⁸⁹

The idea that involuntary sins are not marked against the sinner underscores Johnson's conviction that intention is the axis of virtue. In Sermon 28 he assures the convicts with the statement that "If we are tempted to think that the injuries we have done are unrepaired, and therefore repentance is vain; let us remember that the reparation which is impossible is not required; that sincerely to will, is to do, in the sight of him to whom all hearts are open; and that what is deficient in our endeavours is supplied by the merits of him who died to redeem us."⁹⁰

Similarly, in Sermon 15 on the vanity of human existence he remarks: "From errors, to which, after a most diligent examination, the frailty of our understandings may sometimes expose us, we may reasonably hope, that he, who knows whereof we are made, will suffer no irremediable evil to follow; but it would be unreasonable to expect, that the same indulgence shall be extended to voluntary ignorance; or, that we shall not suffer by those delusions to which we resign ourselves by idleness or choice."⁹¹

⁸⁸Johnson, *op cit.* [Sermon 2], 19.

⁸⁹Law, *op. cit.*, 19.

⁹⁰Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 304.

⁹¹*ibid.*, [Sermon 15], 160.

Intention is in fact the foundational factor of Law's view of sanctification: "the first and most fundamental principle of Christianity [is] an intention to please God in all our actions."⁹²

This view is in sharp contrast to the Reformation idea of the culpability of the individual for every sin committed. Article VI of chapter six of the Westminster Confession declares: "Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal."

Here a correlate of Johnson's view of the atonement is discernable. The Reformers saw Christ's death as itself an exact or equivalent payment for sin; hence, they could affirm the full force of human depravity and the divine requirement of absolute perfection since Christ had endured the penalty for sin on the cross. Johnson, on the other hand, perceives Christ's death as rendering sincere efforts acceptable to God; therefore, he is content to stress an imperfect but diligent obedience.

Quinlan⁹³ and Gray⁹⁴ document the specific influences of Law on Johnson's religion and sermons. They overlook, however, an overarching soteriological theme of both Law and Johnson relating to sanctification: the virtual absence of any organic relation between God himself and the human work of sanctification. They note Law is convinced sanctification is within the possibility of the force of human will; the avoidance of sin and the practice of piety are within human power.

Quinlan draws attention to Law's conviction that, while man is a frail creature, he "has the will to free himself from the snares of earthly pleasures and to live piously."⁹⁵ Law concedes that divine grace is essential to holy living, but the necessity of the continual infusion of the

⁹²Law, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁹³Quinlan, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

⁹⁴Gray, *op. cit.*, 50-65.

⁹⁵*ibid.*, 9.

operation of the Holy Spirit so integral to the Reformation idea of sanctification is obscured by the twin dicta of pure intention and human ability:

This doctrine does not suppose that we have no need of divine grace, or that it is in our own power to make ourselves perfect. It only supposes that through the want of sincere intention of pleasing God in all our actions, we fall into such irregularities of life as by the ordinary means of grace we should have power to avoid.⁹⁶

Indeed, Law asserts: "For whenever we fully intend it, it is as possible to conform to all this regularity of life as it is possible for a man to observe times of prayer."⁹⁷ This view, according to Quinlan, conduced significantly to Johnson's view of sanctification: its influence "was to increase the severity of his scruples and to contribute to his fear that he might not be saved."⁹⁸

Gray acknowledges the stylistic and ideational influence of Law on Johnson.⁹⁹ Johnson follows Law in employing "a methodical approach to self-examination,"¹⁰⁰ in "hammer[ing] out his arguments with convincing logic and persuasive rhetoric,"¹⁰¹ in "invest[ing] his arguments with a powerful sense of urgency,"¹⁰² and in embracing the following convictions: "the human tendency to regard one act of benevolence or charity by oneself as a proof of invariable virtue; the assumption that the act of approving virtuous conduct constitutes a virtue in itself; our proneness to treat acts of intemperance and anger as isolated or merely occasional, and therefore excusable and insignificant; and the habit of rationalizing or minimizing our guilt by comparing ourselves favorably with others whose sins, we believe, are greater than our own."¹⁰³

⁹⁶Law, *op. cit.*, 17

⁹⁷*ibid.*

⁹⁸Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 26.

⁹⁹Gray, *op. cit.*, 50 f.

¹⁰⁰*ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰¹*ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰²*ibid.*

¹⁰³*ibid.*, 56.

Law's general orientation to sanctification, however, more than any specific ideas, was the principal influence on Johnson. The conviction that the individual possesses inherently the capacity to adhere to the law of God, that his task is not so monumental as to require the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, dominated Johnson's conception of sanctification.

This moralistic, inorganic, and mechanical conception of sanctification is not difficult to evince from Johnson's sermons. The numerous admonitions to virtuous living and warnings against vice of which the sermons consist contain no suggestion for one to rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit or principle of righteousness. While the Westminster divines spoke of "the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ" by which "the regenerate part [of man] doth overcome [the unregenerate part],"¹⁰⁵ Johnson leaves the sanctifying operation almost entirely in the hands of man. In Sermon 2 on repentance, Johnson encourages his listeners with the admonition, "But let those who have hitherto neglected this great duty, remember, that it is yet in their power, and that they cannot perish everlastingly but by their own choice!"¹⁰⁶ Even "those that have polluted themselves with studied and premeditated wickedness... are not forever excluded from [God's] favour, but have in their hands means, appointed by himself, of reconciliation to him; means by which pardon may be obtained..."¹⁰⁷

Likewise, in Sermon 5 Johnson states:

We are informed by the Scriptures, that God is not the Authour of our present state, that when he created man, he created him for happiness; happiness indeed dependent upon his own choice, and to be preserved by his own conduct... . Thus religion shews us that physical and moral evil entered the world together, and reason and experience assure us that they continue for the most part so closely united, that, to avoid misery, we must avoid sin, and that while it is in our power to be virtuous, it is in our power to be happy... . Complaints are doubtless irrational in themselves, and unjust with respect to God, if the remedies of the evils we lament are in our hands; for what more can be expected from the beneficence of our

¹⁰⁵Westminster Confession, ch. XIII, article iii.

¹⁰⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 2], 26.

¹⁰⁷*ibid.*

Creator, than that he should place good and evil before us, and then direct us in our choice.¹⁰⁷

In Sermon 10, moreover, addressing self-deception and the course of sin, Johnson states:

It is now certain that we are *here*, not in our *total*, nor in our *ultimate existence*, but in a state of exercise and probation, commanded to qualify ourselves, by pure hearts and virtuous actions, for the enjoyment of future felicity in the presence of God; and prohibited to break the laws which his wisdom has given us, under the penal sanction of banishment from *heaven* into *regions of misery*.¹⁰⁸

Further, in the celebrated Sermon 28 to the convicts, Johnson announces:

Nothing therefore remains, but that we apply with all our speed, and with all our strength, to rectify our desires, and purify all our thoughts; that we set God before us in all his goodness and terrors; that we consider him as the father and the judge of all the earth... that we fall down before him self-condemned, and excite in our hearts an intense detestation of those crimes which have provoked him; with vehement and steady resolutions, that if life were granted us, it should be spent hereafter in the practice of our duty...¹⁰⁹

In Sermon 2 Johnson argues that we “cannot perish everlastingly but by [our] own choice.” In Sermon 5 he suggests the “remedies of the evils we lament are in our hands.” In Sermon 10 we are “commanded to qualify ourselves, by pure hearts and virtuous actions, for the enjoyment of future felicity”; In Sermon 28 Johnson declares his conviction that we may “excite in our hearts an intense detestation” of sin. Lacking from all these exhortations is the idea, so prominent in the Reformed dogma of sanctification, that the Holy Spirit is given to assist in this monumental task. Since, however, Johnson holds a higher estimate of human ability than do the Reformed, since he dissents from their view that Christ’s atonement was designed actually to cancel the sinner’s need to propitiate

¹⁰⁷*ibid.* [sermon 5], 55.

¹⁰⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 10], 109. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹*ibid.* [Sermon 28], 308.

God, and since he is convinced God will accept sincere intentions in lieu of actual conformity to God's law, he perforce maintains that man possesses within his own power the means of personal sanctification.

While Johnson, then, exhorts his listeners to appeal to God for the grace to undertake these tasks, he does not refer to the potent operation of the indwelling Holy Spirit as in Reformation soteriology. This is the persuasion of Law who charged "that the fault does not lie here, that we desire to be good and perfect, but through the weakness of our nature fall short of it; but it is, because we have not piety enough to intend to be as good as we can, or to please God in all the actions of our life."¹¹¹

Significantly, Hudson remarks, "A second influence on the creation of an Anglican idea of perfection was the desire to confute supposedly antinomian doctrines of justification by faith. Justification by faith is, of course, not equivalent to antinomianism, a heresy with a limited and often uncertain history among the early Anti-baptists [sic: anabaptists?] and certain commonwealth sects such as the Ranters. Most Protestant groups have regarded outward obedience to the law as a manifestation or sign of inward regeneration or election."¹¹² This, of course, was the perpetual charge the Roman Catholics leveled against the Protestants, and though Hudson does not cite it, a sentiment Johnson specifically shared. After consoling the convicts in Sermon 28 with God's receptivity to those who appeal to Him in faith, he nonetheless warned:

Yet let us likewise be careful, lest an erroneous opinion of the all-sufficiency of our Saviour's merits lull us into carelessness and security. His merits are indeed all-sufficient! But he has prescribed the terms on which they are to operate. He died to save sinners, but to save only those sinners that repent. Peter, who denied him, was forgiven, but he obtained his pardon "by weeping bitterly."¹¹³

Of course, in the Protestant conception "security" (though not "carelessness," as Hudson recognizes) is what recourse to "the all-

¹¹¹Law, *loc. cit.*

¹¹²Hudson, *op. cit.*, 196.

¹¹³Johnson, *op. cit.*, 304.

sufficiency of our Saviour's merits" is all about. As documented in the chapter on Johnson's theological orientation, nonetheless, by "conditions" of salvation Johnson denoted faith, obedience, and repentance and thus deviated from the *sola fide* (by faith alone) dictum of the Reformation. He shared the concern of Romanism and *via media* Anglicanism that affirmation of justification by faith alone potentially inhibits sanctification, protests of the Reformers to the contrary notwithstanding.

Interestingly, Johnson endorses the peculiarly Tridentine concept of preparation for justification. Trent contended on January 13, 1547 in its decree on justification that when adults are aided by God's grace, they affirm the promises of God about salvation

and when, understanding themselves to be sinners, they, by turning themselves, from the fear of divine justice whereby they are profitably agitated, to consider the mercy of God, are raised unto hope, confiding that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; and they begin to love him as the fountain of all justice; and are therefore moved against sins by a certain hatred and detestation, to wit, by that penitence which must be performed before baptism: lastly, when they purpose to receive baptism, to begin a new life, and to *keep the commandments of God*... . This disposition, or preparation, is followed by justification itself... .¹¹³

Similarly, in issuing caveats to those delinquent in charity, Johnson states:

Men are not charitable, as they are not just; because they suffer themselves to be captivated by their senses, because they are wholly engrossed by present happiness, and extend not their prospects to another state; they do not contemplate the duration of their future existence, or impress upon their minds, the great importance of pleasing God; and the danger of falling into everlasting misery; and have therefore no motives, which they can oppose to the solicitations of appetite, the incitements of passion, or the tranquility of negligence; but pass their lives, some in the slumbers of indolence, and others in the hurry of business or of pleasure, without any preparation for that change, which must determine their state to all eternity.¹¹⁴

¹¹³Schaff, *Creeds*, 93, 94. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁴Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 27], 293.

Johnson's description of the oblivion and apathy of the uncharitable to their responsibilities and salvation finds striking correspondence in distinction to Trent's description of the urgency of those preparing for justification. In the Reformation understanding, preparation for justification is an impossibility, given the belief that righteousness can only follow, and never precede, justification;¹¹⁵ according to Trent and Johnson, however, one exerts himself in righteousness and so prepares himself for justification.

For all Johnson's exhortation to austere devotion, he believes that spiritual intensity may become excessive and therefore counterproductive:

That a precept of courtesy is by no means unworthy of the gravity and dignity of an apostolical mandate, may be gathered from the pernicious effects which all must have observed to have arisen from harsh strictness and sour virtue: such as refuses to mingle in harmless gaiety, or give countenance to innocent amusements, or which transacts the petty business of the day with a gloomy ferociousness that clouds existence. Goodness of this character is more formidable than lovely; it may drive away vice from its presence, but will never persuade it to stay to be amended; it may teach, it may remonstrate, but the hearer will seek for more mild instruction.¹¹⁶

Despite his lack of development of any doctrinal themes, Johnson is convinced of an inextricable link between dogma and sanctification:

The serenity and satisfaction at which we arrive by a firm and settled persuasion of the fundamental articles of our religion, is very justly represented by the expression of finding rest for the soul. A mind restless and undetermined, continually fluctuating betwixt various opinions, always in pursuit of some better scheme of duties, and more eligible system of faith, eager to embrace every new doctrine, and adopt the notions of every pretender to extraordinary light, can never be sufficiently calm and unruffled, to

¹¹⁵Calvin, *op. cit.*, III:xiv.

¹¹⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 11], 125.

attend to those duties which procure that peace of God which passeth all understanding.¹¹⁸

Tenuous dogma, according to Johnson, conduces to a tenuous sanctification. For this reason, one's dogma should be sound.

There is a much closer connection between practice and speculation than is generally imagined. A man disquieted with scruples concerning any important article of religion will, for the most part, find himself indifferent and cold, even to those duties which he practised before with the most active diligence and ardent satisfaction. Let him then ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and he shall find rest for his soul. His mind, once set at ease from perplexity, and perpetual agitation, will return with more vigour to the exercises of piety.¹¹⁹

Johnson considers the inspired New Testament and the early church fathers the "old paths," the pattern for Christian belief and practice and sufficient criteria for judging valid Christian practice.

The oral doctrines, and occasional explications of the apostles, would not be immediately forgotten, in the churches to which they had preached, and which had attended to them, with the diligence and reverence which their mission and character demanded Every thing, at least, that was declared by the inspired teachers, to be necessary to salvation, must have been carefully recorded... . Thus by consulting first the holy Scriptures, and next the writers of the primitive church, we shall make ourselves acquainted with the will of God¹²⁰

Johnson's firm commitment to orthodox belief and concomitant aversion to skepticism¹²¹ and ecclesiastical vacillation¹²² are more easily conceived when his conviction of the intimate association between belief and action is recognized. While the theologians may insist that action is important inasmuch as it is the result of dogma, Johnson seems to hold that dogma is important in that it produces a certain life practice, the heart of Johnson's concern.

¹¹⁸*ibid.* [Sermon 7], 83.

¹¹⁹*ibid.*, 84.

¹²⁰*ibid.*, 83.

¹²¹Boswell, *op. cit.*, 347.

¹²²*ibid.*, 394, 395.

Johnson's conception of justification and sanctification highlights an interesting irony of the relation between atonement and sanctification in both the Reformational and latitudinarian schemes. The latter insist on a rigorous, almost inhuman, dedication to obedience as a condition of salvation, yet even *that* condition is short of strict divine requirements. For this reason, in fact, the atonement is necessary: in the words of Johnson "such propitiation shall supply, in some degree, the imperfections of our obedience, and the inefficacy of our repentance."¹²² Conversely, as noted in the introduction, the Reformational idea of judicial and imputed righteousness recognizes that nothing short of perfect conformity to the law will appease God. It refuses the latitudinarian and Johnsonian solution of obviating man's sinfulness by diluting the divine requirements. It preserves the undiminished justice of God by positing the notion that Christ himself bore the full blow of punishment for sins. The regenerate, in this Reformational idea, while ever striving toward the ideal of perfection, need not fret over their occasional failure, for Christ has conformed to the law in their stead. The irony is that the diluted conditions of justification understood by Johnson engender much greater anxiety than the absolute conditions as conceived by the Reformers. The key to the spiritual anxiety of the former is that, no matter how diluted the conditions may be, man is under compulsion to fulfill them if he is to be saved; the key to the spiritual confidence of the latter is that, no matter how formidable the conditions may be, Christ has fulfilled them in his vicarious life and death.

It is thus evident how experiential is Johnson's soteriology. He does not distinguish between justification and sanctification. He directs his sermons not to the children of God as a separate group but to all men who may or may not be the children of God, depending on their actions. He avoids theological argumentation in favor of experiential exhortation. He employs fear of reprobation as an inducement to virtuous conduct. He stresses the responsibility of charity, the necessity of the fear of God, the perniciousness of pride, the inefficacy of religious externalism, and the

¹²²*ibid.*, 482.

indispensability of communion as key themes of sanctification. He denies any organic connection between the work of the Holy Spirit and sanctification, though he concedes divine grace is necessary to holiness. He agrees with Trent that one possesses the ability and is under obligation to prepare himself for justification. He holds, finally, that sound dogma is the foundation of sanctification.

Chapter 7 : ASSURANCE

And you all know security is mortal's chiefest enemy.

William Shakespeare
from *Macbeth*, Act III, Scene v, Lines 32, 33

The patent anxieties Samuel Johnson suffers as a result of his religious beliefs can be understood more readily when considered against the background of his soteriology. Indeed, as Pierce observes,

The second particular concern that grew out of Johnson's general question regarding his salvation was: how could he be sure that he had fulfilled the conditions for salvation? His intellect told him that he could never achieve this certainty but his heart demanded an answer just the same... [T]he great desire of Johnson's soul was to know whether he had done enough to be saved. He knew, as we have seen, that obedience and repentance were the principal requisite conditions for salvation, but he also knew that no true believer could ever be certain that he had satisfactorily met these terms.¹

There has been a propensity by some Johnsonians, I believe, to psychoanalyze excessively Johnson's anxieties, a trend not surprising in an age bereft of deep religious conviction. Max Byrd, for instance, depicts Johnson's anxieties as arising from his role as a transitional figure in an increasingly nihilistic world:

If it is possible to see [Johnson] stretching back toward the Renaissance and its vividly drawn struggles of faith, it is also possible to see him, as if at the center of a vast historical figure eight, stretching forward to the twentieth century and the beginnings of Christian existentialism. I am thinking in particular of the philosophical issue buried within Johnson's terror: the anguished demand for meaning from a world that absurdly refuses to disclose it.²

¹Pierce, *Religious Life*, 56, 57.

²Byrd, "Johnson's Spiritual Anxiety," 368, 369.

While “the anguished demand for meaning” is a feature of many reflective souls, including Johnson’s, I am not certain it is the fundamental source of his anxiety. Since Johnson understands, “The business of life is to work out our salvation,”³ it is more likely that the vexing philosophical questions issue from his religious views than vice versa.

Similarly, William Siebenschuh argues that Johnson’s evidentialist bent to ground religious certainty not only in the revelation of the Holy Scriptures but also in human experience evidences an internal struggle with orthodox belief in the Bible:

The singular characteristic in Johnson’s sermons is that while in general they formally uphold a doctrine of acceptance of the Scriptures on faith, he persistently changes the grounds of argument within them and moves inexorably towards the painful necessity (rather than the clear duty) of accepting them.⁴

Yet while Johnson’s evidential (*a posteriori*) rather than presuppositional (*a priori*) apologetic is quite evident from the sermons, it is unwarranted and tendentious to argue that this evidentialism springs from the “painful necessity” of affirming the authority of the Scriptures. In examining the sermons I did not derive the sense that Johnson finds his faith commitment a laborious task; I did sense that he recognizes the numerous difficulties a life of faith must confront. Whatever may be the causes of Johnson’s anxieties, I am convinced it is not that he was unsure of Christian orthodoxy.

R. D. Stock wisely observes:

The late eighteenth-century and Victorian stereotype of Johnson the bully and John Bull, pompously upholding the Thirty-Nine Articles, has long deserved a place on the scrapheap of asinine and condescending prejudices.⁵

³Johnson, *Sermons* [Sermon 15], 161.

⁴Siebenschuh, “On the Locus of Faith in Johnson’s Sermons,” 114.

⁵Stock, “Johnson Ecclesiastes,” 15.

Stock recognizes, in addition, the recent trend "to point to the existentialist elements in Johnson [as] a way of making him accessible to the modern sensibility"6 He continues insightfully:

... it is doing Johnson and his reputation no good turn if we come to perceive him as just an early version of the tormented neurotics and angst-suffering geniuses that now litter our intellectual landscapes. Nor, since Johnson took his beliefs seriously, is it doing his cause any good if we wind up sympathizing with the neurotic but dismissing his faith as a relic of superstition that he could never discard, a crutch on which the eccentric psychic cripple hobbled along, counting his thirty-nine articles [sic] much as he counted his steps.⁷

Johnson's orthodoxy may indeed contribute to his anxieties, but it the mysterious and awesome doctrines orthodoxy entails, and not affirmation of the faith itself, that causes the turmoil.

With respect to Johnson's popular image, Basney alludes to "how a secular present misunderstands and misrepresents the experience of a Christian past."⁸ When the social role of religion is reduced to sentimental opinion in an increasingly secular society, literary scholars are tempted to omit serious consideration of our forebears' theological convictions as the chief cause of human delights and anxieties and instead attribute them to psychological phenomena. In short, they psychoanalyze in order to secularize. This temptation Siebenschuh himself seems to insinuate in his comment that "The human element—Johnson's struggles with his doubts and fears—rather than the strictly theological element has always had the greatest appeal for scholars and admirers."⁹ Johnson's religious beliefs wield a potent influence over "his life, his critical taste, his moral attitudes,"¹⁰ however, and the undergirding of his religious beliefs is his soteriology.

⁶*ibid.*

⁷*ibid.*, 15, 16.

⁸Basney, "The Popular Image of Johnson's Religion," 5.

⁹Siebenschuh, *op. cit.*, 103, 104.

¹⁰Humphreys, "Dr. Johnson, Troubled Believer," 37.

J. H. Hagstrum, then, is justified in opposing William Krutch's suggestion that Johnson's "much-discussed fear may perhaps have resulted from lack of faith and may be considered further evidence of the skeptical tenor of Johnson's mind."¹¹ In fact, as Pierce recognizes, "The tragic irony of Johnson's religious life was that the faith to which he turned to rescue himself from despair rapidly created within him its own anxieties."¹² In due time I will examine how the nature of Johnson's theology contributed to this anxiety.

Johnson's justly famous outburst expressing anxiety over his eternal state is a testimony not only to the extent of his acute anxieties but also to the intensity of his soteriological convictions and the anxiety they necessitate:

Dr. Johnson surprised [Mr. Henderson] not a little, by acknowledging with a look of horror, that he was much oppressed by the fear of death. The amiable Dr. Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. JOHNSON. "That he is infinitely good, as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an *individual*, therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be *sure* that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned," (looking dismally). DR. ADAMS. "What do you mean by damned?" JOHNSON. (passionately and loudly) "Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly."¹³

Johnson mentions two theological beliefs which conduce to lack of personal salvific assurance: the goodness of God does not preclude punishment, and salvation is conditional. The latter of these is the foundation of Johnson's soteriology. In his response to Mrs. Knowles he remarks:

... consider, [God's] hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our SAVIOUR shall be applied to us,—namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance. But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in

¹¹Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," 308.

¹²Pierce, *op. cit.*, 34.

¹³Boswell, *Life*, 539. Emphasis in original.

another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation.¹⁴

Not coincidentally, Johnson issues this soteriological comment in a context of the question of spiritual assurance and anxiety.

That Johnson holds the subjective role of conditional salvation to cut in both directions is seen in his advice to Dr. Dodd in a "soothing letter" of June 26, 1777 soon before the minister's execution:

That which is appointed to all men is coming upon you. Outward circumstances, the eyes and the thoughts of men, are below the notice of an immortal being about to stand the trial for eternity, before the Supreme Judge of heaven and earth. Be comforted: your crime, morally or religiously considered, has no very deep die of turpitude. It corrupted no man's principles; it attacked no man's life. Of this, and of all other sins, you are earnestly to repent; and may God, who knoweth our frailty, and desireth not our death, accept your repentance, for the sake of his Son JESUS CHRIST our Lord.¹⁵

One can be reasonably (though not infallibly) certain of his salvation if he has fulfilled the conditions of salvation.

In Sermon 28 that Johnson wrote for Dodd and his fellow convicts he characteristically declares: "Salvation is promised to us Christians, on the terms of *faith, obedience, and repentance*."¹⁶ Similarly, in Sermon 9 he states, "The terms, upon which we are to hope for any benefits from the merits of Christ, are faith, repentance, and subsequent obedience."¹⁷ In short, we may *relatively* be assured of our eternal state before God if we have avoided sins or confessed those we have committed; but we have reasons for anxiety if we have repeatedly transgressed God's commandments.

¹⁴*ibid.*, 394.

¹⁵*ibid.*, 345.

¹⁶Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 303. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷*ibid.* [Sermon 9], 104.

In perhaps no other aspect of Johnson's soteriology is his Tridentine orientation as salient as in his understanding of Christian assurance. On Sunday, June 3, 1781 he expresses himself in response to Boswell's statement of his desire to live a godly life.

Favourable impressions at particular moments, as to the state of our souls, may be deceitful and dangerous. In general no man can be sure of his acceptance with God; some, indeed, may have had it revealed to them. St. Paul, who wrought miracles, may have had a miracle wrought on himself, and may have obtained supernatural assurance of pardon, and mercy, and beatitude; yet St. Paul, though he expresses strong hope, also expresses fear, lest having preached to others, he himself should be a cast-away."¹⁸

In Sermon 28 written for William Dodd and other capital convicts, Johnson addresses the issue of assurance even more fully:

The reception of the *holy sacrament*, to which we shall be called, in the most solemn manner, perhaps a few hours before we die, is the highest act of Christian worship. At that awful moment it will become us to drop for ever all worldly thoughts, to fix our hopes solely upon Christ, whose death is represented; and to consider ourselves as no longer connected with mortality.—And possibly, it may please God to afford *us* some consolation, some secret intimations of acceptance and forgiveness. But these radiations are not always felt by the sincerest penitents. To the greater part of those whom angels stand ready to receive, nothing is granted in this world beyond rational *hope*; — and with *hope*, founded on *promise*, we may well be satisfied.¹⁹

While Johnson does concede in this life we may procure a "rational hope," of special interest is Johnson's contention that full assurance is an impossibility except in unique cases in which "one may have obtained supernatural assurance of pardon."

This sentiment virtually replicates Trent. In Canon XVI following the decree of justification, Trent asserts

¹⁸Boswell, *Life*, 482. In the final sentence Johnson is alluding to Paul's remark in 1 Cor. 9:27.

¹⁹Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 28], 306 Emphasis in original.

If any one saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end,—unless he have learned this by special revelation: let him be anathema.²⁰

A paragraph in Sermon 14 sets forth Roman Catholic dogma with regard to assurance:

Trust in God, that trust to which perfect peace is promised, is to be obtained only by repentance, obedience, and supplication, not by nourishing in our own hearts a confused idea of the goodness of God, or a firm persuasion that we are in a state of grace; by which some have been deceived, as it may be feared, to their own destruction... . We are, without expecting any extraordinary effusions of light, to examine our actions by the great and unchangeable rules of revelation and reason... .²¹

Johnson's concern that the affirmation of the Reformation dictum of justification by faith alone may render one diffident to indwelling personal sin is expressed in Sermon 28:

Yet let us likewise be careful, lest an erroneous opinion of the all-sufficiency of our Saviour's merits lull us into carelessness and security. His merits are indeed all-sufficient! But he has prescribed the terms on which they are to operate. He died to save sinners, but to save only those sinners that repent. Peter, who denied him, was forgiven, but he obtained his pardon "by weeping bitterly."²²

The sentiment of the Council of Trent is virtually identical:

... . But neither is this to be asserted—that they who are truly justified must needs, without any doubting whatever, settle within themselves that they are justified, and that no one is absolved from sin and justified, but he that believes for certain that he is absolved and justified; and that absolution and justification are effected by this faith alone: as though whoso has not this belief, doubts the promises of God, and the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ. For even as no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, of the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, even so each one, when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; seeing that no one can know with a

²⁰Schaff, *Creeds*, 2: 113, 114.

²¹Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 14], 157.

²²*ibid.* [Sermon 28], 304.

certainty of faith, which can not be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.²³

Conversely, Reformational soteriology provides for assurance apart from any supernatural revelations.²⁴ Indeed, the Westminster Confession devotes an entire chapter (XVIII) to assurance, a portion of which declares:

... yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace... . This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation... .

Significantly, the framers of the Confession seem almost intentionally to refute the Tridentine canon: "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet... he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use or ordinary means, attain thereunto" (ch. XVIII).

In light of Johnson's Tridentine experientialism documented in earlier chapters one finds odd, even disconcerting, amidst Donald Greene's evaluation of Johnson's famed "conversion experience" the remark:

When [Sir John] Hawkins tried to comfort Johnson [in the latter's vexation over his spiritual state] with "the services he had rendered to the cause of religion and virtue, as well by his example as his writings," he was not at all comforted—nor should he have been; for as a devout adherent to the Augustinian Christianity taught by the Book of Common Prayer, he could have had no belief in the doctrine that any man's works in themselves can contribute to the salvation of his soul.²⁵

On the contrary, had Johnson been convinced of the worthiness of his own works, he would have every reason to be comforted in the prospect

²³Schaff, *op. cit.*, 98, 99.

²⁴The Thirty-Nine Articles do not specifically address the issue of assurance of salvation.

²⁵Donald Greene, *Samuel Johnson*, 36.

of his impending death. Since the application of Christ's merits is promised to the obedient and repentant, had Johnson fulfilled the terms of the bilateral covenant he could expect eternal life: "[E]very sin, and much more any habit or course of sin long continued, is, according to the different degrees of guilt, an apostacy or defection from our Saviour; as it is a breach of those conditions upon which we became his followers; and he that breaks the condition of a covenant, dissolves it on his side. Having therefore broken the covenant between us and our Redeemer, we lose the benefits of his death; nor can we have any hopes of obtaining them, while we remain in this state of separation from him."²⁶ The rub, however, is that Johnson anxiously fears he did not fulfill those salvific terms.²⁷

Chadwick provides a key to understanding the intensity of Johnson's spiritual anxiety: "To put it paradoxically, he developed a Calvinistic sense of the load of original sin without any Calvinistic sensation of the omnipotence of God in lifting the load from the person's back."²⁸ Likewise, Hagstrum argues that since, on the one hand, Johnson's Anglicanism represents a creedal rejection of Romanism, and, on the other hand, his abhorrence of predestination represents a practical rejection of Calvinism, he cannot not permit himself the consolation of either.²⁹ Hagstrum's point is that, while the former denies, as we have seen, the possibility of absolute assurance, its sacerdotalism and mystery furnish a sense of confidence to those exercising simple faith. Johnson's rational approach to religion, though, will not permit this simple faith. On the other hand, his denial of the Calvinistic tenets of predestination and election isolate him from the assurance these doctrines afford. Hagstrum attributes this quandary to the simultaneous affirmation of Enlightenment and orthodoxy, though it in no way suggests a lax commitment to the latter.

²⁶Johnson, *op cit.* [Sermon 9], 100.

²⁷Humphreys, *loc. cit.*

²⁸Chadwick, "The Religion of Samuel Johnson," 130.

²⁹Hagstrum, *op. cit.*, 309-314.

The necessity of the "temper of the cloister" the Christian must possess,³⁰ when coupled with the strict requirement of obedience, conduces potentially to serious religious vexation. This vexation is compounded in the case of Johnson by his persuasion with Law that innate sinfulness is no excuse for spiritual failure. Pierce notes:

Such conviction [of the divine standard for devotion] was impressive in itself but became even more compelling when Law expressed complete faith in man's ability to attain this ideal. Law believed that the only hindrance to this realization was not man's innate sinfulness but his lack of desire and of proper discipline.³¹

The moralistic influence of the Restorationist divines contributed to an exaggerated estimate of the power of the will: "Anglican divines of the Restoration insisted on equating justification by faith with antinomianism" and "consistently instructed that an individual who had been truly converted to the Christian faith would be free from the practice of all deliberate sins."³² By the sheer force of will, man may avoid deliberate sin.

Quinlan properly observes:

... Law had a dual influence on Johnson. In the first place, *A Serious Call* awakened in him a lively and lasting sense of the importance of religion. In the second place, the acknowledged hortatory message of this work compelled him thereafter to engage in frequent comparisons between the high ideal that Law had set before him and his own shortcomings. The inevitable result was an intensification of his native fears and scruples.³³

In addition, Johnson's anthropology which insists on the freedom of the will and his Tridentine idea of justification which prohibits forensic righteousness imputed to the sinner on account of Christ's work afford little comfort. Man has a high standard of spiritual perfection; he is able and required to achieve it.

³⁰Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 3], 33

³¹Pierce, *op. cit.*, 67.

³²Hudson, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 196.

³³Quinlan, *Layman's Religion*, 13.

Greene argues that one reason Johnson's "late conversion" is not incompatible with the Methodist understanding of conversion is that, contrary to popular opinion, Wesleyans did not hold that assurance of salvation can be absolute in this life.³⁴ Hence, since Johnson never claimed absolute assurance, his conversion could very well have been evangelical, which in fact is no different from any other. As noted in the chapter on conversion, however, Johnson's concept could not have paralleled that of the evangelicals, no matter if his view of assurance may have coincided with Wesley's.

Johnson, in fact, like Trent, warns against assurance:

Those who contented themselves with believing, and professing Christianity, without obeying its precepts; those who while they call the great Authour of our faith, the Lord, their Master, and their God, and yet neglect his precept and work iniquity, will be rejected by him at the last day, as those whom he has never known; those to whom his regard never was extended; and, notwithstanding the confidence with which they may claim his intercession, will not be distinguished by any favour from other sinners.³⁵

Sincerity, moreover, is no criterion of assurance of God's favour or eternal salvation. It is "not barely a full persuasion of the truth of our assertions, a persuasion too often grounded upon a high opinion of our own sagacity, and confirmed perhaps by frequent triumphs over weak opponents, continually gaining new strength by a neglect of re-examination... . Sincerity is not a heat of the heart kept up by eager contentions or warm professions, nor a tranquility produced by confidence, and continued by indolence. [If we do not assiduously practice virtue], let us not presume to put any trust in our sincerity."³⁶

Johnson believes that apart from a supernatural insinuation, we cannot be certain of our salvation inasmuch as we cannot be certain we have fulfilled the conditions of salvation. Though Johnson's soteriology is not

³⁴Greene, "Dr. Johnson's 'Late Conversion': A Reconsideration," 89.

³⁵Johnson, *op. cit.* [Sermon 14], 156.

³⁶*ibid.* [Sermon 7], 80.

oriented to Arminianism, his emphasis on the efficacy of the will mirrors that of Arminians; hence the words of Chadwick succinctly summarize the relation between Johnson's soteriology and his anxieties:

The question of confidence or overconfidence was the keenest of debating questions between Calvinist and Arminian. The Calvinist had and has a doctrine of assurance. God is almighty, He will never let you go; through faith you are assured of heaven. It was and is a powerful way of faith (which helped to make New England). That sort of assurance was not open to an Arminian.³⁷

³⁷Chadwick, "The Religion of Samuel Johnson," 134.

**CONCLUSION:
The Need For Meaning**

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

William Cowper
from "Light Shining Out of Darkness," 1773

Johnson is concerned with the impact of religion on the experience of one's life. This concern leads him often to embrace Tridentine conclusions; at other times it provokes an affinity with latitudinarian moralism; occasionally it appears distinctly Arminian. In nearly every instance, however, Johnson eschews what is today referred to pejoratively as "ivory-tower theology"; and more importantly, he understands salvation experientially and anthropocentrically rather than judicially and abstractly.

Johnson formally embraces the doctrine of original sin as an *a posteriori* explanation of the moral predicament of mankind, but he seems not to permit his understanding of original sin to influence directly his conception of salvation. He believes men possess the inherent capacity to repent, believe, and convert, although he holds that communion and other rites and requirements engender grace of which Christians must avail themselves. He denies any sort of understanding of the imputation of sin that renders Adam's posterity guilty due to his breach of the primordial covenant: men are sinners because they sin; they do not sin because they are sinners. In fact, Johnson declares great confidence in human potential, convinced that the amelioration of social ills will result

from commitment to moral virtue on the part of many citizens. He strongly affirms free will and denies, or seriously questions, the orthodox doctrines of divine prescience and predestination inasmuch as they may lead one to a diffidence toward moral virtue. He patently affirms conditional salvation, an explicit denial of the Augustinian, Reformation, and Arminian idea of justification by faith alone. Further, he holds the dictum of justification by faith to be deleterious to Christian experience inasmuch as it may lead to an uninspired approach to morality. Johnson believes the application of Christ's merits to one's account is contingent on faith, obedience, and repentance. He asserts that men maintain a covenantal relation with God, bilateral in the sense that God is under compulsion to provide eternal life only to those who fulfill the conditions He has established. The Protestant concept of a unilateral covenant in which God promises eternal life to the elect on the grounds of Christ's fully propitiatory and substitutionary death is not a feature of Johnson's soteriology. He sees Christ's death primarily as a demonstration of God's just government of the universe, and only secondarily as a payment for man's sins. Man's conversion is comprehended not in the evangelical sense as a result of a discontinuous, supernatural regeneration but as the improvement of his inherent moral qualities and employment of the divine means of salvation. Johnson's controversial "late conversion" is in no material sense evangelical: Johnson, in fact, affirms in the final prayer in which the conversion is mentioned the concept of conditional and moralistic salvation he embraced throughout his adult life. There is no material distinction in Johnson's soteriology between justification and sanctification; God declares man righteous and fit for eternal life if he conforms to the will of God by his obedience and repentance. Conformity to this divine will includes principally the responsibility of charity, the necessity of the fear of God, the avoidance of pride, the necessity of internal—as opposed to mere external—faith, and the indispensability of communion. For Johnson, however, God does not demand absolute perfection of mankind, but adjusts his requirements to man's capabilities and often accepts righteous intentions in lieu of righteous actions. Because one can never be certain he has fulfilled all the requirements of salvation, he can never be certain he is truly in a state of grace, apart from supernatural intimation. Johnson considers absolute assurance not merely

impossible but also undesirable, in that it may lull one into a state of apathy about his soul.

His conception of original sin is somewhat Tridentine inasmuch as he holds that mankind possess the propensity to sin. In no way does Johnson deny or rationalize the patent sinfulness of mankind, but he deems its source the refusal of individuals to exert their free will in the task of obedience and not specifically the imputation of Adam's corrupt nature and its resultant guilt. He questions determinism, predestination, and even prescience, not because he is convinced they are theologically or philosophically untenable but because they tend to weaken the imperative to live out faith in a useful community.

This practical mollification of original sin has serious implications for Johnson's doctrine of atonement. Johnson's view mirrors that of the latitudinarians: Christ's death is designed to compensate for our sins and render our good works acceptable to God. Had Johnson held the strong Reformation view of original sin, this view of atonement would be logically impossible, for according to the Reformation idea, man is so utterly sinful that no amount of good works can contribute to his salvation. Therefore, Christ bore for the sake of mankind the actual or equivalent penalty of the violation of God's law. God then credits the impeccable righteousness of Christ's life and the payment of the penalty of the violation of His law to the sinner's account on the condition of faith. Johnson dissents therefore from the Reformation doctrine of vicarious atonement, first, because given his view of original sin it is unnecessary, and second, because it may tend to mollify the necessity of an active faith.

Further, Johnson cannot consistently embrace the Reformation understanding of conversion, because he denies that depravity of the will is one effect of sin. The Reformers dissented from the Roman Catholic conviction that man may prepare himself for justification and thus convert himself. The Romanists have a somewhat higher estimate of human ability and that "nature" can accomplish a great deal before "grace" is necessary. Johnson comes down squarely, though implicitly, on the side of Rome in giving no place to a particular, supernatural regeneration by

which individuals are converted and in positively asseverating that man must prepare himself for justification.

Naturally, Johnson agrees with Rome that, apart from supernatural revelation, concrete assurance of salvation is impossible. If faith, obedience, and repentance are the conditions of the application of Christ's merits, it is rare indeed for a conscientious Christian to gain impervious certainty that he has fulfilled the conditions. Johnson's denial of the possibility of absolute assurance apart from immediate divine intimation is the most patent Tridentine feature of his soteriology.

While the Reformers can affirm that God requires absolute perfection of mankind as a condition of salvation inasmuch as they recognize Christ's active obedience in life and his atonement as an actual or equivalent substitute for the elect who so miserably fail to meet God's standard, Johnson adjusts God's standard of absolute perfection to account for human frailty and limitations since Christ's atonement is not seen as fully substitutionary.

It would be most surprising if this soteriology did not conduce to anxiety in a sincere and intelligent believer like Johnson, just as it did in Martin Luther. Johnson can expect anxiety because his salvation rests from the human standpoint not upon the propitiatory work of Christ but on his own merit. The human will is not fully depraved and hence God expects individuals to apply themselves with rigor to their own salvation apart from any special divine grace. Moreover, while Christ died for the sins of humanity of the cross, he did not substitute for it in such a way as to render meritorious works unnecessary; rather, he died to compensate for human failure. Men are expected to obey and exercise faith, and when they repent, Christ's atonement will compensate for their failure. They can never be certain, however, that they have exerted sufficient faith, obedience, or repentance.

This anxiety is precisely what the consistent application of Reformation soteriology cures. Reformation soteriology asserts that when our parents fell, they acted federally, on the behalf of their posterity. Both the

corruption and guilt of sin accrued to all mankind. Therefore man, including his will, is utterly depraved. He needs God to save him; he does not need God to help him save himself. God's Son, Jesus Christ, conformed flawlessly to God's law and suffered voluntarily and vicariously on the cross the exact or equivalent penalty of the violation of God's law. He thus fulfilled the law for a depraved race, and bore the divine penalty violation of God's law incurs. Since man is impotent to save himself, God sovereignly elects some among mankind to be the recipients of his gratuitous salvation on the condition of faith, a virtue He provides. He regenerates and converts them, unites them judicially with Christ, and by virtue of that union credits them with Christ's righteousness and thus renders them innocent of wrongdoing. His elective grace and special work of regeneration secure their progressive, but never, in this life, perfect, sanctification. The key operative feature of the Reformation scheme is judicial: the judicial declaration of the guilt of mankind by virtue of their union with their disobedient federal head, Adam; the judicial treatment of Christ as sinner by virtue of his union with disobedient mankind; and the judicial declaration of the righteousness of the elect by virtue of their union with their impeccably righteous Head, Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that it is this essential judicialism Johnson finds so objectionable in Reformation theology. He believes affirmation of a judicial view of original sin discourages morality, and that a judicial view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner seems to trivialize it. The solution to this seeming problem in Reformation faith is the understanding that sanctification, no less than justification, is a benefit of union with Christ and, therefore, all those truly justified will inevitably work out their salvation.

Had Johnson affirmed full Reformation soteriology, he could have avoided, or at least mollified, much of the anxiety his soteriology could not but engender. He could have been certain of his acceptance before God, not because of his own merits, which in any case are inconsistent, but because of the impeccable merits of Christ. Conversely, he would not lapse into antinomianism, knowing that the Holy Spirit provides the

supernatural strength to practice spirituality and virtue and that God promises to sanctify all whom He justifies.

While I dissent from Johnson's experientialist soteriology, I in no case diminish his religious commitment or its potential contribution to modernity. Johnson's religious views are not merely of historical moment. They hark back to a period in some ways superior to our own and from which we can learn a great deal. The superiority in large part derives from the intensity of religious conviction, intensity Johnson aptly illustrates. Much contemporary opinion deems this intensity one of the chief culprits of historical failures modern progressive attitudes are calculated to expunge. The supposed peaceable relativism of modernity has jettisoned the "sturdy prejudice"¹ of Johnson. As Allan Bloom has adduced in his insightful volume *The Closing of the American Mind*, however, relativism has not made good on its claims of peaceableness, for the repudiation of "sturdy prejudice" has unleashed a hydra of competing "interests," all contributing to the erosion of the Western commonweal, maintained in the past by a common commitment to ideals based largely on religion.

In my opinion Johnson's "sturdy prejudice," so stodgy and intolerant to progressives, is a principal solution to a number of the peculiar difficulties of modern Western society. The intolerant attitude typified in Johnson in defending Christianity against the claims of Enlightenment rationalism did engender religious strife and division. But perhaps with historical hindsight we may consider this ferocity of conviction preferable to much of modern innocuous religion which has made its peace with Enlightenment, a religion impotent to compel loyalty because of its refusal to assert truth claims boldly, repugnant to the masses because of its facile sentimentality. When contrasted with the re-casting of orthodox Christianity in the mold of modern psychology and creedless sentiment, Johnson's irascible orthodoxy becomes less objectionable. Johnson and the orthodoxy he represents may have erred in defining truth too absolutely; much modern Christianity, slavishly following a secular

¹Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 7.

culture, finds it difficult to affirm the existence or intelligibility of truth at all.

In Johnson we have an example of a Christian who takes his Christianity seriously. It is not the seriousness of modern Western man, the seriousness of "value-positing." Johnson does not insist, as do many modern believers, that Christianity is all right for *him*, but that he will refrain from imposing it on others. Intrinsic to Johnson's religion are truth claims, a fact that explains his vigorous commitment to apologetics: truth is entitled to defence: "values" are not so serious.

Beyond the facade of the glittering materialism of modern secular man often lies a spiritual vacuum amply attested by the proliferation of alienation, and psychology as the new religion to replace the orthodox Christianity designed to cope with it. The Marxist, and ironically enough, capitalistic, thesis that this alienation is fundamentally economic seems declining in influence as wealth is found impotent to quench the ultimate longings of the soul.

Johnson's grave approach to these longings is intensely religious; and while he does not in religion discover their cure, his approach and effort serve as a stellar model to the secularist moderns for whom life is, ironically, void of meaning while jaded with superficiality, and for whom historic Christianity is generally regarded an outmoded superstition that can never speak to contemporary life but who are willing in desperation to reconsider it as a life system that Johnson and so many others historically found the anchor of their souls.

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