

The Calvinistic Soteriology of Jonathan Dickinson

By Gary Steward

In 1868 William Sprague stated in his *Annals of the American Pulpit* that “it may be doubted whether, with the single exception of [Jonathan] Edwards, Calvinism has ever found an abler or more efficient champion in this country, than Jonathan Dickinson.”¹ Dickinson is so little known today that this statement may surprise us, and yet Sprague is not the only one to have had a high estimation of Dickinson. Presbyterian historian Leonard Trinterud has been quoted as saying of Dickinson that “as a thinker, no one in the Presbyterian Church of the colonial period, if indeed of any period could be compared to him.”² Also, in his recent monograph on Dickinson, Bryan Le Beau refers to many other admirers who have held Dickinson in high esteem, including Jonathan Edwards, John Erskine, and Ashbel Green, along with recent admirers Alan Heimert and Perry Miller.³ Heimert and Miller go so far as to elevate Dickinson above Edwards, calling him “the most powerful mind in his generation of American divines.”⁴

While it is not my purpose to debate the relative importance of Edwards and Dickinson, the great attention given to Edwards in recent days, as warranted as it may be, has allowed other important theologians in colonial America to go virtually unnoticed. Le Beau’s recent book on Dickinson is one of the few contemporary works written on him. Le Beau himself notes that only four journal articles have been published on Dickinson apart from his own, causing him to conclude that “Dickinson remains the most underrepresented intellectual and ecclesiastical leader of the eighteenth century” (Le Beau, 1).

MODERN REASSESSMENTS OF DICKINSON’S SOTERIOLOGY

Of the limited work that has been done on Dickinson, very little attention has been given to his theology. For those who have interacted with his theology, some

have called into question the veracity of his Calvinism, giving an assessment of Dickinson that is quite different from William Sprague’s given above. These modern reassessments of Dickinson see him significantly altering and accommodating his Calvinistic soteriology to fit the spirit of the times. Le Beau has made general statements regarding Dickinson’s theology overall, stating that Dickinson accepted an “enlightened rationalism” and gave “tacit endorsement of Enlightenment rationalism” (Le Beau, 88). Such rationalism is said to have affected his soteriology. Le Beau has also stated that Dickinson’s Calvinism was mediated by William Ames and William Perkins, who (in his mind) softened the hard edges of Calvinism by asserting that “the Holy Spirit would come to [all] those who entered a covenant with God and led a sanctified life” (Le Beau, 10). David Harlan has gone further than Le Beau and has specifically called Dickinson’s Calvinism into question, writing that Dickinson epitomized the men of

THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Gary Steward served as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada from 2004–2011. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Church History and Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his Th.M. in Historical Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary (PA), where his thesis focused on J. W. Alexander and his views on Christian social reform. He co-authored a curriculum for youth on biblical manhood and womanhood with Children Desiring God, entitled: *Rejoicing in God’s Good Design*, and he is the author of a forthcoming book from P&R, called *Old Princeton: A Guided Tour of Its Leading Men and Their Writings*.

1. William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 9 vols. (New York: Robert Carter, 1857–1869; repr., Arno Press, 1969), 3:16.
2. See Leigh Schmidt, “Jonathan Dickinson and the Making of the Moderate Awakening,” *American Presbyterians* 63 (1985): 341–353.
3. Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 1.
4. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxxi; quoted in Le Beau, 1.

his day who “tried to steer between the extremes of enthusiasm and formalism, between Calvinism and Arminianism.”⁵ The most strident revisionist rendering of Dickinson was offered by Keith Hardman, who stated in his 1971 doctoral dissertation that “Dickinson veered significantly away from classic Calvinism into theological innovations.”⁶ Hardman singles out Dickinson’s view of natural ability, divine illumination, and the gospel appeal as areas where Dickinson departed from traditional Calvinism (Hardman, 244–247).

The revisionist reading of Dickinson forces us to revisit the issue of his Calvinistic soteriology. In what follows we will examine Dickinson’s overall theology within the historical context of his day. We will also interact with some significant areas of his soteriology, setting it within Dickinson’s broader theological context to show what modifications, if any, Dickinson made to the confessional Calvinism of the Westminster tradition. While agreeing that Dickinson adopted certain theological features that were common in the early eighteenth century, this paper will argue that his soteriology falls well within the mainstream of confessional Westminster Calvinism and that the modern reassessments should themselves be reassessed.

5. David Harlan, “The Travail of Religious Moderation: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61 (1983): 41–42; quoted in Le Beau, 105.

6. Keith Jordan Hardman, “Jonathan Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism, 1717–1747” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 242.

7. Daryl G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country* (Philipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 39–40.

8. Le Beau, 18. See also Jonathan Dickinson, *A Brief Illustration and Confirmation of the Divine Right of Infant Baptism* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1746).

9. Le Beau, 27–44. See also Michael Bauman, “Jonathan Dickinson and the Subscription Controversy” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 455–467. Charles Hodge stated that Dickinson “belonged to that small class of persons who are opposed to all creeds of human composition” (Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* [2 vols.; Philadelphia: William Martien, 1839], 1.171; quoted in Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, 43). While Hodge goes on to state: “It is evident that his objections had not a very firm hold even of his own mind; for he joined in the adoption and imposition of the Westminster Confession [in the very year he published objections to subscription]” (Hodge, 1.171). Nevertheless, the position taken by Dickinson earned him the praise of Charles Briggs, who called Dickinson “the great representative American Presbyterian of the Colonial Period, the symbol of all that was noble and generous in the Presbyterian Church” (Charles Briggs, *American Presbyterianism* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885], 177).

10. For a complete bibliography of Dickinson’s works, see Le Beau, 226–228.

OVERVIEW OF DICKINSON’S WRITINGS, LIFE, AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Jonathan Dickinson was born in Hatfield, Massachusetts, in 1688. After graduating from Yale in 1706, he entered the ministry in 1709, serving a church in Elizabeth Town, New Jersey (Sprague, 3.14). For almost forty years, his ministry continued in this church until his death in 1747 (Le Beau, 11). In 1717, Dickinson became a member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, thus joining the infant denomination which had only organized itself in America in 1706.⁷ In 1721, Dickinson published his first theological work: a defense of infant baptism entitled *Remarks Upon Mr. Gale’s Reflections on Mr. Wall’s History of Infant Baptism*.⁸ Baptists in the Middle Colonies had organized themselves into the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707, and Dickinson was likely concerned about the spread of Baptist thought in his vicinity (Le Beau, 21–22). Issues of ecclesiology would continue to consume Dickinson’s attention, even as his own denomination became caught up in the Subscription Controversy of the 1720s. In this particular controversy, Dickinson led the anti-Subscription party, which opposed the requirement of subscription to the Westminster Confession as a prerequisite for ordination.⁹ While the Subscription Controversy was finally resolved with the Adopting Act of 1729, Dickinson continued to write primarily on matters of ecclesiology. A major task he took up in the early years of his ministry was the defense of Presbyterian church polity against a variety of Anglican opponents, particularly John Checkley, Samuel Johnson, and Edward Vaughn. According to Le Beau, “Jonathan Dickinson was the principal Dissenter in the Presbyterian-Anglican debates for over twenty years” (Le Beau, 65). Dickinson’s defense of Presbyterian government and ordination resulted in a series of books and pamphlets, including: *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination* (1724), *Remarks upon the Postscript to the Defense of a Book Lately Reprinted at Boston, Entitled, A Modest Proof of the Order* (1724), *The Scripture Bishop* (1732), *The Scripture Bishop Vindicated* (1733), *The Vanity of Human Institutions in the Worship of God* (1736), *A Brief Discourse upon the Divine Appointment of the Gospel Ministry* (1738), and *The Reasonableness of Nonconformity to the Church of England* (1738).¹⁰

The next major round of writings from Dickinson’s pen came as a response to the Great Awakening of the 1730s–1740s. Le Beau rightly refers to Dickinson as “a major player in the Great Awakening . . . a leader of the

moderate New Side.”¹¹ While aligning himself with the New Side Presbyterians and New Light Congregationalists in support of the Great Awakening, Dickinson was critical of the revival excesses and did not condemn the clergy who were not necessarily revivalists or caught up in the revival spirit.¹² In *The Danger of Schisms*, published in 1739 as a response to the divisions occurring over the revival, Dickinson asks: “Are all men of equal brightness and sagacity? Are all equally eloquent? Have all the same charming voice or winning methods of address? Are all sons of thunder? No!”¹³ While denominations were dividing over their acceptance or rejection of the revival movement, Dickinson stood as a voice for moderation and unity.

Though moderate in spirit, Dickinson was in fact a “friend of revivals” according to Archibald Alexander, and Dickinson’s writings give a defense and analysis of the Great Awakening parallel to that of Jonathan Edwards.¹⁴ In 1740, Dickinson published an expanded sermon entitled *The Witness of the Spirit*, and this publication provides what Alan Heimert and Perry Miller have called the “first sustained analysis of the psychology of conversion,” predating both Edwards’s *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and Edwards’s *Religious Affections* (1746).¹⁵ Other writings of Dickinson which analyzed the nature of conversion include: *The Nature and Necessity of Regeneration* (1743), and *Reflections upon Mr. Wetmore’s Letter in Defense of Dr. Waterland’s Discourse on Regeneration* (1744).

A particular work of Dickinson on the Great Awakening that received a great deal of attention was a work he first published anonymously, entitled *A Display of God’s Special Grace* (1742). In this work, Dickinson defended the revival preachers and their methods of preaching aimed at producing “convictions and spiritual distresses” which are “preparatory to our receiving of Christ by faith.”¹⁶ Dickinson also addressed the issues of physical agitations and public outcries at revival meetings, true and false spiritual experience, and antinomianism. This work was published with the commendation of Benjamin Colman, Joseph Sewall, Thomas Prince, John Webb, William Cooper, Thomas Foxcroft, and Joshua Gee, who proclaimed it along with Edwards’s *Discourse Concerning the Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* as “exceeding well adapted to serve the same design . . . to help people to judge of the present work, whether, and how far it is of God, and to remove those prejudices, which may keep them from owning it to the honor of God and from coming under the power of it to their own

salvation.”¹⁷ This judgment was not shared by fellow minister Andrew Crosswell, who published a sharp reply to this work entitled *Mr. Crosswell’s Reply to a Book Lately Published, Entitled A Display of God’s Special Grace*. In it, Crosswell called Dickinson’s *A Display of God’s Special Grace* “the worst Arminian performance that ever was written.”¹⁸ Dickinson responded to Crosswell in *A Defense of the Dialogue Entitled, A Display of God’s Special Grace*, and in this piece Dickinson quotes at length from Thomas Shepherd, Solomon Stoddard, Cotton Mather, and John Owen, as well as the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession to support his positions against those taken by Crosswell.¹⁹

While Dickinson’s controversial pieces often involved soteriological issues, Dickinson’s fullest expositions of his soteriology were of a more dispassionate and systematic nature. The first to appear of this type was *The True Scripture Doctrine*, wherein Dickinson laid bare a full-orbed soteriology around the five headings of election, original sin, conversion, justification by faith, and

11. Le Beau, 104. For a brief narrative of his experience of the Great Awakening, see his letter to Thomas Foxcroft in Archibald Alexander, *Biographical Sketches of the Founder and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1851), 265–270.

12. Dickinson was more moderate in his approach than Gilbert Tennent. See Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1740). Tennent later apologized for the invective contained in this sermon.

13. Jonathan Dickinson, *The Danger of Schisms* (New York: John Peter Zenger, 1739), 9–10. In quotations of primary source material I have at times slightly adjusted the capitalization and punctuation to bring it into conformity with modern usage.

14. Alexander calls Dickinson: “a man of superior abilities both as a preacher and a writer, and truly evangelical; a friend of revivals, and a zealous promoter of missions among the aborigines of this country. He deserves to stand at the foremost rank among the fathers of the Presbyterian Church in the United States” (Alexander, 83).

15. Heimert and Miller, x; quoted in Le Beau, 118.

16. Jonathan Dickinson, *A Display of God’s Special Grace* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1742), 24.

17. Dickinson, *Display of God’s Special Grace*, ii.

18. Andrew Crosswell, *Mr. Crosswell’s Reply to a Book Lately Published Entitled A Display of God’s Special Grace* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1742), 23. Crosswell’s charge may be easily dismissed, for he was known to assert that “most of his contemporary Congregational ministers had abandoned the doctrines of the Reformation and had become ‘less Orthodox than Arminius’” (Le Beau, 158). Crosswell was a close associate of the radical James Davenport and was a promoter of antinomianism, what Joseph Tracy calls “the false Calvinism of the day” (Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening* [Boston: Charles Tappan, 1845], 405). For more on Crosswell, see Tracy, 55, 349.

19. Jonathan Dickinson, *A Defense of the Dialogue Entitled, A Display of God’s Special Grace* (Boston: J. Draper, 1743), 18, 19–20, 32–33, 40–44. For more information on this interchange, see Le Beau, 158–162.

perseverance.²⁰ This work first appeared in 1741 and was to go through many editions. While he mentions “Arminians” once in this work, *The True Scripture Doctrine* is expositional and practical in its overall tone.²¹ Dickinson’s second exposition of soteriology was written in the form of eighteen popular letters to a fictional inquirer entitled, *Familiar Letters to a Gentleman*.²² The first six letters in this series seek to provide a rational defense of the Christian faith, but the remaining twelve deal primarily with soteriology, with special emphasis given to Christian experience and justification. This work also went through many reprintings.

Given the times that Dickinson found himself in, it was not possible for him to avoid soteriological polemics. By the time of the Great Awakening, the Arminian controversy had transferred itself to American soil in full force, and Dickinson was one of the earliest to write against it. Jonathan Edwards reported that in the year 1734 there “began the great noise, in this part of

the country, about Arminianism,” and Dickinson was to publish numerous polemical pieces aimed at this threat.²³ By the time Edwards was giving himself most fully to “the study of the Arminian controversy” and preparing to write his great *The Freedom of the Will*, Dickinson’s polemics were already well circulated and were read by Edwards himself.²⁴

Dickinson entered into the Arminian controversy in 1746 with the publication of a book entitled *The Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*.²⁵ This work was a response to a sermon published by John Beach entitled *A Sermon Showing that Eternal Life is God’s Free Gift*, a sermon by Henry Caner called *The True Nature of Christian Preaching*, and a pamphlet by Samuel Johnson called *A Letter from Aristocles to Authades, Concerning the Sovereignty and Promise of God*.²⁶ Indicative of the theology of these three Anglican ministers, the thrust of Beach’s sermon was to show that salvation is God’s gift “bestowed upon men according to their moral behaviour and that free grace and free will concur in the affair of man’s salvation.”²⁷ Responding to Dickinson’s *Vindication*, Beach published a book entitled *God’s Sovereignty and His Universal Love to the Souls of Men Reconciled*, and Johnson published a piece simply called *A Letter to Jonathan Dickinson*.²⁸ While preparing his response in the form of two extended letters to Beach and Johnson, Dickinson died. He had completed his reply to Beach, and Dickinson’s brother Moses Dickinson completed his reply to Johnson and had them published together posthumously under the title *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*.²⁹ The theological battle continued for another round after Dickinson’s death, with Beach writing yet another response entitled *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace Indeed* and Moses Dickinson responding with *An Inquiry into the Consequence Both of Calvinist and Arminian Principles Compared Together*.³⁰

The Arminian positions Dickinson countered in his argument against Beach and Johnson were becoming increasingly widespread among Protestants in the 1720s–1750s. During these years there was also a significant drift away from confessional Calvinism, as Enlightenment thought was gaining ground and the old theological confessions were losing their influence. Richard Muller notes that for those standing in the Reformed tradition, theology after 1725 became “less secure in its philosophical foundations” and “less bound by the confessional norms of the Reformation.”³¹ The drift away from confessionalism is evident in Dickinson’s sparring partner, Samuel Johnson. While a young man, Johnson was heavily influenced

20. Jonathan Dickinson, *The True Scripture Doctrine* (Boston: G. Rogers, 1741).

21. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 124.

22. Jonathan Dickinson, *Familiar Letters to a Gentleman* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1742).

23. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1,347.

24. See Edwards’s letter to Joseph Bellamy in John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 305. For the possible influence of Dickinson’s writings on Edwards, see Le Beau, 155. While Edwards’s *The Freedom of the Will* wasn’t published until 1754, Edwards had addressed various aspects of Arminianism in his earlier writings (e. g. Edwards’s *God Glorified in Man’s Dependence*, published in 1731).

25. Jonathan Dickinson, *The Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1746).

26. John Beach, *A Sermon Showing that Eternal Life is God’s Free Gift* (Newport: Widow Franklin, 1745) title page; Henry Caner, *The True Nature of Christian Preaching* (Newport: Widow Franklin, 1745); Samuel Johnson, *A Letter from Aristocles to Authades, Concerning the Sovereignty and Promise of God* (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1745). See also Le Beau, 15 1–152.

27. John Beach, *Eternal Life is God’s Free Gift*, title page.

28. John Beach, *God’s Sovereignty and His Universal Love to the Souls of Men Reconciled* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747); Samuel Johnson, *A Letter to Mr. Jonathan Dickinson* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747). See Le Beau, 154. For more on the theology of Johnson, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 86–92.

29. Jonathan Dickinson, *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1748).

30. John Beach, *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace Indeed* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1748); Moses Dickinson, *An Inquiry into the Consequence Both of Calvinist and Arminian Principles Compared Together* (Boston: Fowle, 1750).

31. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1,32.

by Enlightenment philosophy, declaring in 1715 that he was “wholly changed to the New Learning.”³² Johnson was fully engaged in the trans-Atlantic intellectual scene, and he became particularly influenced by the so-called Cambridge Platonists and English latitudinarians like John Tillotson and Daniel Whitby (Ellis, 62–65). Johnson defected from New England Congregationalism to Anglicanism, becoming a leading advocate of Arminian Anglicanism in America.³³ In this age of philosophical and theological upheaval, then, Dickinson’s soteriology was not only challenged by the issues raised at home by the Great Awakening and Crowell’s antinomian form of Calvinism, but also by the Arminianism and Enlightenment thought trickling in from Europe.

EVALUATING DICKINSON’S SOTERIOLOGY

Given the tumultuous historical and philosophical context of his life, did Dickinson abandon or substantially modify his Calvinistic soteriology as has been claimed by Harlan, Hardman, and Le Beau? Or did he withstand the intellectual and theological pressures that challenged traditional orthodoxy? There are four aspects of Dickinson’s soteriology which might be separately analyzed and evaluated.

The Five Points of Calvinism.

As has already been noted above, David Harlan has stated that Dickinson “tried to steer between the extremes of enthusiasm and formalism, between Calvinism and Arminianism.” Although Harlan is not the only one to understand Dickinson in this way, the writings of Dickinson simply do not support this claim. There seems to be no evidence in Dickinson’s writings of any attempt to move away from the traditional five points of Calvinism. Dickinson clearly viewed the work of salvation to be a monergistic work of effectual grace, whereby “he mortifies our corruptions, brings our sinful appetites and passions into subjection, and creates us anew in Christ Jesus ... as may very aptly be compared to a quickening, or resurrection from the dead.”³⁴ This work of grace is only wrought in the elect, whom God has chosen unconditionally before the foundation of the world by an “arbitrary and sovereign decree” (13). This eternal decree of election is the result of God’s eternal will, and God’s will flows out of his immutable nature. The decree, therefore, cannot depend upon any act of mutable man (10–11). The elect are brought into a state of justification “upon the Spirit’s first working faith in

us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling” (224). Dickinson further held that “all who are justified shall be glorified” (228). Regarding the nature of the atonement, Dickinson further sets forth in his writing what would be considered a traditional Calvinistic position. Dickinson frames the issue of particular atonement as follows:

I freely allow that Christ has died for all men, in such a sense as that every individual of the human race may by virtue of the ransom paid by him obtain eternal life upon faith in his blood. Universal redemption is never taught us in Scripture in any other sense than this.... But then the question yet remains, whether Christ has not in some special and peculiar sense died for the elect?³⁵

Dickinson goes on to answer this question and summarizes his views as follows:

... although Christ is in some sense *the Savior of all men*, so that all who enjoy the gospel have the gracious and free offer of salvation, yea, all have a full and sufficient warrant to believe in Christ, and each individual of them shall surely obtain salvation, who comply with the free and gracious offer of the gospel: Yet Christ has wrought out a *special and distinguishing* redemption for the elect, whereby they are not only put into a savable state, but shall actually be saved. He has not only purchased for them a possibility of salvation, but the actual communication of grace and glory hereafter. He has not only procured for them that they may be saved if *they will*, but that they shall assuredly have salvation begun in them here and perfected hereafter, because *God will*.³⁶

In each of the five points of Calvinism, then, Dickinson states a very traditional position.

Bryan Le Beau has tried to posit a distinction between Dickinson and Calvin along the lines of a “Calvin against the Calvinists” approach, only this time Perkins and Ames are said to have modified the theology of the reformer by softening the hard edges of Calvin’s thought with a strong emphasis on the covenant of grace. Le Beau thinks that in this softened approach, the reality

32. Joseph J. Ellis, *The New England Mind in Transition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 36.

33. Ellis, 124–126, 140–141. Johnson converted over forty Yale graduates under his influence to Anglicanism, including John Beach (Ellis, 93).

34. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 138.

35. Dickinson, *Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 2 1–22.

36. Dickinson, *Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 26–27 (emphasis his).

of an unconditional election is fundamentally modified. Says Le Beau: “the demands of the older and more rigorous doctrines of predestination had all but been rejected” (Le Beau, 10). While Perry Miller’s *Errand in the Wilderness* is referenced to support this claim, no support is given from the writings of Dickinson themselves.³⁷ Similarly, Keith Hardman sees a significant distinction between Calvin and Dickinson’s teaching on predestination. According to Hardman, Calvin taught a dual decree of predestination including both the decree of election and of reprobation, but Dickinson, on the other hand, did not espouse the doctrine of reprobation. Hardman states: “Single predestination ... was as far as he would go ... in this important instance, and in [others], Dickinson veered significantly away from classic Calvinism into theological innovations” (Hardman, 242). I would argue that the differing emphases in this regard between Calvin and Dickinson are better explained by the differing contexts and situations of the two theologians, instead of by a difference in theological substance. Dickinson was in fact following the theological trends found within classical Presbyterianism and Reformed thought elsewhere. It has been noted by James Walker in his *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland* that certain Scottish Presbyterians in the early eighteenth century no longer emphasized reprobation in the way that earlier Presbyterians did as well.³⁸ Hardman’s argument is an argument from silence, and no real difference in theological substance should necessarily be inferred.

Finally, it should be noted that Dickinson shows his affinity with confessional Calvinism in many places, most clearly in his polemical pieces. We have already noted this in his interchange with Andrew Croswell, but also, in *A Vindication of Sovereign Free Grace*, Dickinson

draws a comparison between the Arminianism of John Beach and his own doctrine—the doctrine of the Thirty-Nine Articles, as well as the Canons of Dort.³⁹ He repeats this comparison in his follow-up reply to Beach, *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, going to great lengths to expound the meaning of various Calvinistic articles contained in the Canons of Dort and the Thirty-Nine Articles, as well as in the Augsburg Confession (1530) and the Lambeth Articles (1595).⁴⁰ It is especially clear in his exchange with John Beach that Dickinson held to “the doctrines of special grace as held by the Calvinists” and saw himself as fitting into the confessional mainstream of orthodox Calvinism.⁴¹

Rationalism

Bryan Le Beau states that Dickinson was one who accepted “enlightenment rationalism” and that this “made him one of the earliest eighteenth-century evangelicals to allow that the two were not necessarily antithetical” (Le Beau, 2). Thus he attempted “to appropriate and temper Enlightenment ideas, thereby signifying his tacit endorsement of Enlightenment rationalism.”⁴² Le Beau’s analysis of Dickinson along these lines centers around Dickinson’s writings of an apologetic nature, particularly his *Familiar Letters to a Christian Gentleman* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. In this last piece, Dickinson interestingly lauds the gift of reason, stating that it is by reason alone that man is capable of coming to faith. Says Dickinson:

... He who has made us rational creatures expects from us reasonable service, and cannot be pleased with that faith, practice, or hope, that is grounded on education, or common opinion and not the result of rational reflection or inquiry. It must therefore be agreeable both to our duty and interest to inquire into the grounds of our holy religion, and reasonably to establish ourselves in those precious truths on which we build our hopes, and not take them upon trust, as I’m afraid too many do. For which cause I shall endeavor ... to offer you some rational evidences of the truth of Christianity.⁴³

Through a series of observations and inferences, Dickinson proceeds to argue for the existence and attributes of God and the reality of the fall. Dickinson uses what amounts to the cosmological argument, set within an evidentialist framework (Le Beau, 90). Using this method, he goes on to argue for the reasonableness of Scripture, the supernatural nature of prophecy, and the reality of miracles.

37. Le Beau, 193. For a critique of the “Calvin against the Calvinists” approach, see Muller, 37–46.

38. “I have been often struck with the frequency with which the subject of reprobation is introduced into our older theological works, and the almost unkind way in which reprobates are spoken of. Now the Marrow divines, as well as the divines of the second Reformation, believed in the doctrine of reprobation. But they treat it, as it were, with a holy awe, and do not care to thrust it forward. In Rutherford’s work on the Covenant, the word reprobation or reprobate occurs between eighty and ninety times; in Boston on the Covenant it occurs only thrice” (James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland* [Edinburgh: John Knox, 1982], 91–92).

39. Dickinson, *Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 6–14.

40. *Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 27–49.

41. Dickinson, *Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 48.

42. Le Beau, 88. See also Le Beau, 83–87, 140.

43. Jonathan Dickinson, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1732), 1.

However this line of argument may or may not relate to “Enlightenment rationalism,” it should first be noted that Dickinson falls in line with many Calvinistic theologians who sought to defend the truths of Christianity in a similar way against deists and skeptics in the 1700s. Jonathan Edwards’s *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1757) begins with a large section entitled “Evidences of Original Sin from Facts and Events,” and his *A Dissertation concerning the End for which God Created the World* (1765) begins with a section entitled “What Reason Dictates Concerning this Affair” (Edwards, 1.97, 146). It is clear from their writings that both Edwards and Dickinson valued the secondary role of reason and observation in defending and establishing the truth of God’s Word. Whether this in and of itself constitutes an adoption of enlightenment rationalism is a matter which is worthy of debate.⁴⁴ It is important to note for our purposes, though, that however high Dickinson elevated the role of reason, it seemed only to serve in his scheme in the understanding, reception, and vindication of God’s revelation. Further, Dickinson’s understanding of reason only seems to have affected his epistemology. It does not seem to have affected the content and structure of his theology and basic ontology. More so than Edwards, Dickinson kept speculative reason and constructive reason in check, whereas Edwards often allowed speculative reason to have a significant and constructive role in his overall ontology and anthropology.⁴⁵ Dickinson’s use of reason, then, is more like Charles Hodge and less like Jonathan Edwards. Like Hodge, Dickinson’s soteriology is in fundamental continuity with pre-Enlightenment thought and remains virtually untouched by Enlightenment thought, even though the epistemology underneath might have significantly changed.⁴⁶

Free Will and Natural Ability

Keith Hardman writes that Dickinson’s understanding of man’s natural ability is a “departure from High Calvinism,” in that it presents “the faculties of man which are not so gravely damaged that they are incapable of responsible apprehension of God’s communication” (Hardman, 243–244). Noting Dickinson’s sermon-like appeals in much of his writing, Hardman believes that Dickinson’s “appeal to man’s will to accept the atoning work of Christ” is another significant “departure ... from Calvin’s thought.” A major reason Hardman sees this difference between Dickinson and Calvin, however, is because Hardman understands Calvin and “High Calvinism” to have rejected the indiscriminate offer of the gospel. Says Hardman:

To Calvin, it would have been utterly useless to plead in this way with ‘lost sinners,’ for unless a man was elected, all the pleas in the world were unavailing. It would have been equally unnecessary to plead with one who was elected, for the ‘illumination’ must come from the Spirit, and would so come, although indeed preaching might be of some help, but in a secondary manner only (Hardman, 247–248).

Only by grossly misinterpreting Calvin and traditional Calvinism is Hardman able to see a distinction between Dickinson and Calvinistic orthodoxy. While Dickinson’s theology and evangelistic preaching may have taken a different emphasis than Calvin, there is significant evidence that Dickinson was well within the Calvinistic mainstream regarding the issues of free will and natural ability.

Regarding the inability of unregenerate man, Dickinson clearly held to the doctrine of total depravity. According to Dickinson, man has no “natural power to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” and is naturally “unable to comply with the gracious proposals of salvation by Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷ However traditional Dickinson’s view of human ability may be at its core, his understanding of human freedom does appear to have undergone some slight alterations—alterations which were subsequently made and defended by Jonathan Edwards as well.⁴⁸ Dickinson, like Edwards, finds freedom to exist not in “a power to will, or not to will, any particular object

44. For a recent book that contributes to the ongoing debate, see Paul Kjoss Helseth, *Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Philipsburg: N.J., 2010).

45. Edwards held to a notion of continual creation and was a philosophical idealist. For the influence of his philosophy on his theology, some within Reformed circles have historically criticized Edwards. See, for example, Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1871; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 100–104, 338–339.

46. Of the later Princeton theologians, Mark Noll says: “Influenced by this perspective as they were, they still retained the fidelity to Scripture and the Reformed traditions which kept them from being entirely at the mercy of their philosophy” (Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983], 33). For more examples of Reformed theologians who maintained the essence of Reformed theology in the midst of changing philosophical foundations, see Muller, 32.

47. Dickinson, *Display of God’s Special Grace*, 6–8.

48. According to Le Beau, Dickinson’s work on the issue of the human will “both preceded and influenced that of Edwards” (Le Beau, 85). Jon Pahl suggests that “by the time Edwards entered the fray, due in large part to Dickinson, the question had already been decided or at least a consensus, or ‘harmony in discord,’ had been reached” (Jon Pahl, *Paradox Lost: Free Will and Political Liberty in American Culture, 1630–1760* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992], 119; quoted in Le Beau, 85).

of choice, or a power to choose indifferently either the one or the other of two contrary objects" (Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 39). Instead, freedom exists in the "power to will what appears to us from our present view of things most fit to be chosen" (39). Dickinson goes on: "Freedom, therefore, is only opposed to co-action or constraint.... [H]e that acts voluntarily and without any compulsion or constraint, acts freely; and he that has a power so to do, is in a state of freedom and liberty; for freedom consists in nothing else."⁴⁹ Dickinson states his understanding of freedom as part of his defense of the absolute decree of election, stating: "Freedom cannot be opposed to necessity. Every free agent must necessarily will what his understanding, appetites and affections represent to him the most fit object of choice; he cannot do otherwise" (39). One can see the influence of Enlightenment thought as Dickinson says the following:

I know that it has been the common doctrine of divines, that the will of man has full freedom with respect to things natural, yet not in things spiritual; but that in these things it requires supernatural grace to move and influence it. However, I cannot but think, (with Mr. Locke) that it is a very inaccurate and obscure way of speaking to attribute freedom, or want of freedom, to the will.⁵⁰

Dickinson, like Edwards, prefers to speak only of an individual as possessing freedom, for freedom implies personality, and the human will is only "a property or faculty of the mind."⁵¹

While this modification does reflect the influence of Enlightenment thought (at least at the level of terminology), the fundamental notion of total depravity and natural inability is left intact and Dickinson's soteriology is not substantially modified. On this point, Le Beau rightly states: "... while never losing his Calvinist moorings, Dickinson did incorporate some of the ideas of the Enlightenment. He did so especially on [the notion of] free will" (Le Beau, 85). While there may be some slight differences in Dickinson's understanding of the will from the Calvinistic thought preceding him,

the differences do not substantially impact his Calvinistic soteriology.

Regeneration and Illumination

However significant the modifications made to his understanding of human freedom, Dickinson clearly believed that the regeneration of an individual was a monergistic work of sovereign grace. According to Dickinson:

While we act as rational and free agents, we must will and choose what appears to us from our present view of things most worthy our choice.... with respect to the affairs of a spiritual and moral nature ... we cannot habitually choose a gracious, spiritual, and heavenly life, until by the powerful agency of divine grace we have such an habitual impression upon our minds, as overcomes our contrary inclinations, and represents such a life most worthy of our approbation and pursuit (Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 42).

Divine grace works powerfully in an individual's life by "quicken[ing] dead sinners" and by bringing them into a state of spiritual life (139). On these points, again, there is no indication of any accommodation to Arminianism.

Dickinson's understanding of regeneration, however, has raised significant issues from within his own tradition. Regarding regeneration, Dickinson subsumes the work of regeneration underneath the category of illumination, whereby God works primarily upon the mind to enable it to receive the truth. Says Dickinson: "The principal method by which this great change [i.e. the change of regeneration] is wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit of God is his giving him a realizing view of the great truths revealed in the word of God, and enabling him to see things as they are" (139). The Spirit's work of illumination, then, is conceived as a special work whereby man's natural faculties are enabled to function properly and to perceive the true nature of reality as it really is. Dickinson explicitly denies an understanding of regeneration which says that there is an "infusion of some new faculty into the soul which it had not before" or that "the new creation implies our becoming a new sort of being, with respect to the natural powers and properties of the soul which we were not before" (139–140). Says Dickinson:

... the Spirit of God does no more in the conversion of a sinner, than bring him to the right exercise of those rational powers with which he was born, give him a

49. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 40. See also Edwards, *Works*, 1.12.

50. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 41. See also Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 164.

51. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 41. See Edwards, 1.4–12 for his great indebtedness to Locke's understanding of the will. According to Edwards, "I need say the less on this head [on the definition of liberty], Mr. Locke having set the same thing forth, with so great clearness, in his *Essay on the Human Understanding*" (Edwards, 1.12).

just view of his greatest concerns, and enable him to act worthy of a reasonable being.... the whole change is wrought in him by spiritual illumination, by impressing a right view of things upon his mind, or by enabling him to act reasonably (140).

For Dickinson the work of the Spirit in conversion is simply the giving to the natural faculties a true sense and understanding of the truth of God as it really is. He states: "... the Spirit of God works this grace [i.e. faith] in us by illuminating our minds; and giving us a right exercise of our understandings [*sic*]" (149–150). This work of illumination is also central in the subsequent work of sanctification. Dickinson states: "The Spirit of God does likewise carry on the work of grace in a believer's sanctification, by continued views of spiritual things as they are.... [W]hat way is this glorious work of grace carried on in the soul, but by the continued assistances of the blessed Spirit to act reasonably, and to maintain a lively apprehension and impression of invisible realities" (150)? He continues:

The extraordinary influences of the Spirit in his immediate communications of light and joy to the believer are but still a brighter discovery of things as they are. In a word, in whatever aspect this case is considered, what I am pleading for will, I think, appear to be truth. The whole work of sanctification is carried on by illumination, and by the soul's being brought, through the influences of God's Spirit, to the exercise of knowledge and understanding; and to this the Apostle ascribes it [in Ephesians 1:17–18] (151).

He continues: "Upon the whole, I cannot see that the Spirit of God does in any other manner work this wonderful change in the hearts of sinners, than be giving them a just view of things as they are, by bringing them to act reasonably, worthy the dignity of their rational nature, and the intellectual powers they are endued with" (151).

According to Dickinson, the work of illumination is usually brought about after a preparatory work of the Holy Spirit, and he outlines the "usual progressive steps by which a sinner is brought out of a state of carnal security, to the possession and exercise of the divine life" as follows: First, the Spirit of God brings a sinner "to realize his own miserable condition, and see it as it is" (140). Second, the Spirit works "humiliation" into the sinner's soul "by giving him a realizing sight of his unworthiness of divine mercy, of his spiritual impotency, and utter inability to help himself" (143). Third, the

sinner is brought to "a solicitous inquiry after an interest in Christ" (145). After these three preparatory works of non-salvific grace, the Holy Spirit brings about the conversion of a sinner by giving him "a realizing sight of the fullness and sufficiency that there is in Christ; and of his willingness and readiness to save him" (147). From this new vision of Christ and the gospel springs forth saving faith (148). For Dickinson, then, regeneration takes place by illumination, as the Holy Spirit enables sinners to embrace Christ "by giving them a realizing affecting sight of things as they are" (Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 152.).

It may be argued that this understanding of regeneration as illumination is a rationalistic way of understanding the Spirit's work in regeneration. Louis Berkhof, for example, calls it a "misconception" to understand regeneration as "simply a change in *one or more of the faculties* of the soul, as, for instance ... of the intellect, by illuminating the mind that is darkened by sin, as the Rationalists regard it."⁵² Similarly, Robert Dabney criticizes the view held by John Dick that "the revolution of the will ... is the natural effect of true illumination," as well as the purported view of Archibald Alexander that "faith ... is simply full conviction of the truth [and] is all we need to make the soul embrace salvation and duty."⁵³ Charles Hodge critiques a view similar to Dickinson's when he says, "The Scriptures ... do not teach that regeneration consists exclusively in illumination, or that the cognitive faculties are exclusively the subject of the renewing power of the Spirit. It is the soul as such that is spiritually dead; and it is to the soul that a new principle of life controlling all its exercises, whether of the intellect, the sensibility, the conscience, or the will is imparted."⁵⁴

Dickinson's view of regeneration by illumination does seem to put him at odds with Berkhof, Dabney, and Hodge on the issue of regeneration. There appears to

52. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 468.

53. Dabney, 573–574. Dabney also criticizes Archibald Alexander and Thomas Chalmers for holding the view that "saving faith is nothing but a simple belief of propositions" (Dabney, 603). Similarly, Berkhof critiques the view of Sandeman, Wardlaw, Alexander, and Chalmers, who held that "a mere intellectual acceptance of the truth" is "the whole of faith" (Berkhof, 503). Dickinson did not have this view of faith, for he held that faith includes "assent to the gospel," "consent to what we believe," and "an affiance in him on whom we believe" (Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 194). These aspects of faith "do mutually imply and involve each other, and all of them do always belong to the essence of a saving faith" (Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 195).

54. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1873; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3:17.

be other Calvinistic Presbyterians like Dick and Alexander, however, who would be comfortable with how Dickinson explains his understanding of regeneration. To be sure, it should be noted that Dickinson did not hold that the change brought about by illumination ends with the mind, for the “new view of things changes our wills and affections.”⁵⁵ At times he says that illumination brings a powerful application of the truth to the “mind and conscience” or that it works the truth “in the soul.”⁵⁶ Even with these concessions, Jonathan Edwards seems to be on surer footing when he distances himself from this more “intellectualistic” view of illumination when he speaks of illumination as “a divine and supernatural light” which gives a “true sense” of spiritual realities to the soul (Edwards, 2.12, 14). Edwards draws a distinction between notional knowledge exercised merely in the understanding, and a knowledge which “consists in the sense of the heart” (Edwards, 2.14). This is a distinction that Dickinson does not clearly make, and his failure to do so puts him at odds with the best of the Calvinistic tradition on this particular point.

CONCLUSION

Apart from deviating from the most commonly accepted understanding of regeneration within the Reformed tradition, Dickinson’s soteriology is certainly within the mainstream of Calvinistic theology. Keith Hardman and David Harlan are incorrect in stating that Dickinson modified Calvinistic soteriology or accommodated his soteriology to Arminianism. By insisting that “Dickinson veered significantly away from classic Calvinism into theological innovations,” Hardman advances a revisionist understanding of Dickinson that is not supported by Dickinson’s own soteriological writings when read against a traditional understanding of confessional Calvinism (Hardman, 242). Dickinson’s gospel appeals and understanding of predestination are wrongly read as departures from traditional Calvinism instead of as faithful expressions of Calvinism shaped by the historical situation. Also, when Harlan states that Dickinson “tried to steer between ... Calvinism and

Arminianism,” he wrongly places Dickinson outside of the tradition he ardently defended against Croswell, Beach, and Johnson. Harlan also fails to consider the extensive use Dickinson made of confessional documents like the Canons of Dort and the Thirty-Nine Articles to defend his position against the Arminians of his day.⁵⁷

Bryan Le Beau rightly points out how Dickinson’s theology made some accommodations to aspects of Enlightenment thought, particularly on his understanding of human freedom and the emphasis placed on reason and the intellect. But this does not, in my mind, constitute a “tacit endorsement of Enlightenment rationalism” (Le Beau, 88). Brooks Holifield is correct in his assessment when he states: “Although he remained a Calvinist, Dickinson cited the Anglican Samuel Clarke, admired John Locke, adapted Christian apologetic to the new astronomy, and treated the credibility of Christian doctrine as a matter of converging ‘probabilities.’ ... Reason could prove, by amassing probabilities, the truth of Calvinist orthodoxy” (Holifield, 94–95). As Holifield points out, Dickinson appropriated Enlightenment thought most prominently in the area of his theological apologetic while his theological system and soteriology remained largely unchanged. Perhaps Dickinson’s understanding of regeneration is the only part of his soteriology that is affected, and even on this point, Dickinson finds himself in agreement with others within the Reformed tradition.

One cannot help but notice how close Dickinson approximates what would become the theology and outlook of Old Princeton. In recent studies of the theology of Princeton Seminary in the nineteenth century, much attention has also been given to the influence of Thomas Reid and to Common Sense Realism as it came through the College of New Jersey, transmitted by its presidents John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Ashbel Green.⁵⁸ Little attention, however, has been given to its first president, Jonathan Dickinson, and the impact of his theology upon what would emerge in the theology of Princeton Seminary. Although he served as president of the College of New Jersey for only five months, Dickinson was at the forefront of a line of important Presbyterian leaders, and his stamp upon what became the theology of Old Princeton should not be dismissed out of hand.⁵⁹ More attention, especially in this area, needs to be given to this important figure in American theological history. ■

55. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 165.

56. Dickinson, *True Scripture Doctrine*, 147, 143.

57. Dickinson, *Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace*, 6–14.

58. See Noll, *Princeton Theology*, 30–33.

59. Mark Noll notes that Dickinson was the second most prolific Presbyterian during the colonial period, second only to Gilbert Tennent (Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 460). Yet, in his book on Princeton Seminary, Noll does not mention or reference Dickinson at all.