

The man we so often call our greatest American  
Divine . . . was the greatest in his regnant, permeating,  
irradiating spirituality.

JOHN DE WITT  
“Jonathan Edwards: A Study”

One of the most holy, humble and heavenly minded  
men, that the world has seen, since the apostolic age . . .

ASHBEL GREEN  
*Discourses Delivered in the College of New Jersey*

As God delights in his own beauty, he must necessarily  
delight in the creature’s holiness which is a conformity  
to and participation of it, as truly as [the] brightness of  
a jewel, held in the sun’s beams, is a participation or  
derivation of the sun’s brightness, though immensely  
less in degree.

JONATHAN EDWARDS  
*The End for Which God Created the World*

## C H A P T E R   T W O

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# JONATHAN EDWARDS, THE MAN AND HIS LIFE

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*Learning from an Unmodern<sup>1</sup> Evangelical*

### *Why Biography?*

Besides the fact that reading biography is enjoyable, what other warrant for this chapter is there? Jonathan Edwards himself gives one, and the Bible gives one. Edwards published *The Life of David Brainerd* in 1749, and explained in his preface why he did so: “There are two ways of recommending true religion and virtue in the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other by instance and example.”<sup>2</sup> What he said to justify telling Brainerd’s life justifies the telling of his own.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that Perry Miller, who is largely responsible for the revival of interest in Jonathan Edwards among scholars, said that he was “intellectually the most modern man of his age,” and that “he speaks with an insight into science and psychology so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him” (*Jonathan Edwards* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1949], p. 305, xiii). Sang Lee goes even farther and says, “My contention . . . is that Edwards was actually more radically ‘modern’ than Miller himself might have realized. . . . Edwards departed from the traditional Western metaphysics of substance and form and replaced it with a strikingly modern conception of reality as a dynamic network of dispositional forces and habits. . . . It is this dispositional ontology that provides the key to the particular character of Edwards’s modernity” (*The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988], pp. 3-4). But what I have in mind is Edwards’s utter supernaturalism and Godwardness. If anything marks the modern period, it is the marginalizing of God. That is how Edwards is gloriously unmodern. The reality and supremacy of a personal, supernatural God is the center and the ground and the goal of all his thought and action.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, ed. by Norman Pettit, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 89.

The story of a good and holy life is a strong defense and confirmation of true Christianity and the beauty of goodness. Similarly, the Bible says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7, RSV). So we are commanded to ponder the lives of faithful leaders, and trace out the issue of their lives to the end, and imitate the way faith shaped their conduct.

Edwards was a leader who spoke to us the word of God—and still speaks. What he spoke (and wrote) in *The End for Which God Created the World* would be enough to warrant the publication of this book. But his speaking and writing are what they are because of what he was. And we will be helped most if we see something of what John De Witt meant when he wrote, “[Edwards] was greatest in his attribute of regnant, permeating, irradiating spirituality.”<sup>3</sup> Behind the greatness of his thought was the greatness of his soul. And his soul was great because it was filled with the fullness of God. In our day we need to see his God and to see the soul that saw this God.

### *How Not to Imitate the Great*

Of course imitation across centuries and cultures is a delicate business. Slavish, external simulations of style or language will betray a failure to grasp what Edwards himself was pursuing in the creative adaptation of solid, ancient, Biblical truth to his own day. It takes wisdom to discern how the strengths of an old saint should appear in another time. As it is with proverbs, so it is with biography: “Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard, is a proverb in the mouth of fools” (Prov. 26:9, RSV). “Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools” (Prov. 26:7, RSV). Therefore, let us beware lest we put on Edwards’s waistcoat and wig and make ourselves fools. He has too much to give us that we desperately need.

### *Birth, Family, Youthful Intellect*

Jonathan Edwards was born October 5, 1703, in Windsor, Connecticut. He was the only son among the eleven children of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from “Jonathan Edwards: A Study,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by Members of the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1912, p. 136, in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. xvii.

Timothy Edwards, the local Congregational pastor. Tradition has it that Timothy used to say God had blessed him with sixty feet of daughters. He taught Jonathan Latin when he was six and sent him off to Yale at twelve. The school was fifteen years old at the time and struggling to stay afloat. But it became a place of explosive intellectual excitement and growth for Jonathan Edwards.

As a student there at fifteen he read what was to be a seminal influence in his thought, John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. He said later that he got more pleasure out of it "than the most greedy miser finds when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold from some newly discovered treasure."<sup>4</sup> Already at this early age he began a pattern of writing and thinking that would channel his great powers of mind and heart into extraordinary literary productivity.

Even while a boy, he began to study *with his pen in his hand*; not for the purpose of copying off the thoughts of others, but for the purpose of writing down, and preserving the thought suggested to his own mind, from the course of study that he was pursuing. This most useful practice he commenced in several branches of study very early; and he steadily pursued it in all his studies through life. His pen appears to have been in a sense always in his hand. From this practice steadily persevered in, he derived the very great advantages of thinking continually during each period of study; of thinking accurately; of thinking connectedly; of thinking habitually at all times.<sup>5</sup>

He graduated from Yale in 1720, gave the valedictory address in Latin, and then continued his studies there two more years preparing for the ministry. At nineteen he was licensed to preach and took a pastorate at the Scotch Presbyterian Church in New York for eight months from August, 1722 until April, 1723.

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<sup>4</sup> Sereno Dwight, *Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. xvii. Norman Fiering cautions us against assuming that this enthusiasm meant agreement. "It is not clear from [the above quote] what it was specifically that gave Edwards such pleasure. It was surely not Locke's empiricism or his tendencies toward skepticism and positivism, nor could it have been the materialist implications of his work. For if one thing is certain, it is that Edwards remained a philosophical rationalist, a supernaturalist, and a metaphysician all of his life." Thus "an understanding of Edwards's moral thought can be seriously skewed if the myth that Edwards began his career as a disciple of John Locke is not laid to rest" (*Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981], pp. 35-36).

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xviii.

### *The Intensity and Single-mindedness of His Inner Life*

The intensity of his inner life in these early years was extraordinary. His famous “Resolutions” capture some of the remarkable passion of this season of his life. There was a single-mindedness that governed his life and enabled him to accomplish amazing things. For example, Resolution #44 says, “Resolved, That no other end but religion shall have any influence at all in any of my actions; and that no action shall be, in the least circumstance, any otherwise than the religious end will carry it.”<sup>6</sup> And Resolution #61 says, “Resolved, That I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it.”<sup>7</sup>

This was a radical application of the Biblical dictum, “No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim. 2:4). It was precisely this single-minded focus on “religion” that yielded a lifetime of Godward study and writing. Religion, for Edwards, meant Christian living and thinking. And it was all rooted in a body of knowledge—a glorious “science” called divinity. He once preached a sermon on Hebrews 5:12 (“Ye ought to be teachers”) in which he described what he was single-minded about, namely,

God himself, the eternal Three in one, is the chief object of this science; and next Jesus Christ, as God-man and Mediator, and the glorious work of redemption, the most glorious work that ever was wrought: then the great things of the heavenly world, the glorious and eternal inheritance purchased by Christ, and promised in the gospel; the work of the Holy Spirit of God on the hearts of men; our duty to God, and the way in which we ourselves may become . . . like God himself in our measure. All these are objects of this science.<sup>8</sup>

O that this would be the central and all-pervasive focus of pastors and Christian leaders in our day! But there has been a great

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<sup>6</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxi.

<sup>7</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> “Christian Knowledge: or The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth,” in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 159.

loss of confidence that such a focus and devotion of energy will be “successful.” This is one reason why Edwards’s writings and his example is so needful in our time.

### *Falling in Love*

In the summer of 1723, between his first short pastorate and his returning to Yale, he fell in love with Sarah Pierrepont. On the front page of his Greek grammar he wrote the only kind of love song his heart was capable of:

They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is loved of that Great Being who made and rules the world and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight; and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him. . . . She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind, especially after this great God has manifested himself to her. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly, and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.<sup>9</sup>

Sarah was thirteen years old at the time! But four years later, five months after Edwards had been installed as pastor of the prestigious church of Northampton, Massachusetts, they were married on July 28, 1727. He was twenty-three and she was seventeen. In the next twenty-three years they had eleven children of their own, eight daughters and three sons.

### *Education and Settled Ministry*

In September, 1723, Edwards returned to Yale for two more years of study. He earned his M.A. degree and became a tutor. But in September, 1726, he resigned his teaching post to accept a call to be the assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who had been the pastor at the prestigious Congregational Church of Northampton, Massachusetts, since 1672. In 1707, Stoddard had

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<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxix.

introduced a view of the Lord's Supper that treated it as a "converting ordinance" and people with no claim to regeneration were encouraged to join the church. This would prove ominous for Jonathan Edwards later when he came to a very different conclusion. In the meantime, one of the effects on the congregation was to produce a very lax and degenerate people at the time of Edwards's arrival.

The young became addicted to habits of dissipation and licentiousness; family government too generally failed; the Sabbath was extensively profaned; and the decorum of the sanctuary was not infrequently disturbed. There had also long prevailed in the town a spirit of contention between two parties, into which they had for many years been divided, which kept alive a mutual jealousy and prepared them to oppose one another in all public affairs. Such were the circumstances in which Mr. Edwards entered on his ministry at Northampton.<sup>10</sup>

Stoddard died on February 22, 1729, and Edwards became the pastor of the church for the next 23 years. It was a traditional Congregational church which in 1735 had 620 communicants.<sup>11</sup> During his ministry at this church Edwards delivered the usual two two-hour messages each week, catechized the children, and counseled people in his study. He did not visit regularly from house to house, though "he used to preach frequently at private meetings, in particular neighborhoods."<sup>12</sup> This meant that he could spend thirteen or fourteen hours a day in his study.<sup>13</sup> This may not have been pastorally wise. But Edwards thought pastors should "consult their own talents and circumstances, and visit more or less, according to the degree in which they could hope thereby to promote the great ends of the ministry. . . . It appeared to him, that he could do the greatest good to the souls of men, and most promote

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<sup>10</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>13</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxix. "He commonly spent thirteen hours every day in his study; and these hours were passed, not in perusing or treasuring up the thoughts of others, but in employments far more exhausting—in the investigation of difficult subjects, in the origination and arrangement of thoughts, in the invention of arguments, and in the discovery of truths and principles."

the cause of Christ, by preaching and writing, and conversing with persons under religious impressions in his study.”<sup>14</sup>

*The Assiduous, Pastoral Student of Scripture*

Thus Edwards set for himself a course in ministry that would be preponderantly study and preaching. And most of that effort went into the direct study of the Scriptures. His great-grandson, Sereno Dwight, said that when Edwards came to the pastorate in Northampton, “he had studied theology, not chiefly in systems or commentaries, but in the Bible.”<sup>15</sup> This was consistent with Edwards’s counsel to all Christians, “Be assiduous in reading the Holy Scriptures. This is the fountain whence all knowledge in divinity must be derived. Therefore let not this treasure lie by you neglected.”<sup>16</sup>

And he set an amazing example of his own counsel to study the Bible itself. I visited Yale’s Beinecke Library where most of Edwards’s unpublished works are stored. A friend took me down to the lower level into a little room where two or three men were working on old manuscripts with microscopes and special lighting. I was allowed to see some of Edwards’s sermon manuscripts (including “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”) and his catalogue of reading, and his interleaved Bible.

The interleaved Bible he had evidently made himself. He had taken a large Bible apart page by page and inserted a blank sheet of paper between each page and then re sewn the book together. Then he drew a line down the center of each blank page in order to make two columns for notes. On page after page in even the remotest parts of Scripture there were extensive notes and reflections in his tiny, almost illegible, handwriting.

Thus there is good reason to believe that Edwards really did follow through on his 28th resolution: “Resolved: To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.”<sup>17</sup> This was Edwards’s personal application of 2 Peter 3:18, “Grow in

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<sup>14</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxix.

<sup>15</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>16</sup> “Christian Knowledge,” p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxi.



the . . . knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” He gave himself “assiduously” to study the very words of God, and would not allow them to lie by him neglected. This was the wellspring of his profoundly Biblical re-thinking of great theological questions.

### *Extraordinary Discipline for the Sake of Labor*

Edwards’s six-foot-one frame was not robust, and his health was always precarious. Nevertheless, “not at any time in his stormy career is there the slightest hint of either mental or emotional instability.”<sup>18</sup> He maintained the rigor of his study schedule only with strict attention to diet and exercise. Everything was calculated to optimize his efficiency and power in study. Dwight tells us that he “carefully observed the effects of the different sorts of food, and selected those which best suited his constitution, and rendered him most fit for mental labor.”<sup>19</sup> Thus he abstained from every quantity and kind of food that made him sick or sleepy. Edwards had set this pattern when he was 21 years old when he wrote in his diary, “By a sparingness in diet, and eating as much as may be what is light and easy of digestion, I shall doubtless be able to think more clearly, and shall gain time: 1. By lengthening out my life; 2. Shall need less time for digestion, after meals; 3. Shall be able to study more closely, without injury to my health; 4. Shall need less time for sleep; 5. Shall more seldom be troubled with the head-ache.”<sup>20</sup> Hence he was “Resolved, To maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to watching his diet so as to maximize his mental powers, he also took heed to his need for exercise. In the winter he would chop firewood a half-hour each day, and in the summer he would ride into the fields and walk alone in meditation. But there was more than mental efficiency in these trips to the woods.

### *A Lover of Nature and the God of Nature*

For all his rationalism, Edwards had a healthy dose of the romantic and mystic in him. He wrote in his diary: “Sometimes

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<sup>18</sup> Ola Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxv.

<sup>21</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxi.

on fair days I find myself more particularly disposed to regard the glories of the world than to betake myself to the study of serious religion.”<sup>22</sup> But romanticism is not at the bottom of such experiences in nature. Mark Noll comes closer to the explanation when he says, “Edwards both preached ferocious hell-fire sermons and expressed lyrical appreciation of nature because the God who created the world in all its beauty was also perfect in holiness.”<sup>23</sup> Edwards really believed that “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). He describes one of his experiences:

Once as I rode out into the woods for my health in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love and meek, gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency, great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud.<sup>24</sup>

With such words in our ears it is not as difficult to believe the words of Elisabeth Dodds when she says, “The mythic picture of him is of the stern theologian. He was in fact a tender lover and a father whose children seemed genuinely fond of him.”<sup>25</sup> It is not easy to know what his family life looked like under the kind of rigorous study schedule we have seen. We do know that he believed in filling every moment of life to the full and wasting none of them. His sixth resolution was simple and powerful: “Resolved: To live with all my might while I do live.” And the fifth was similar:

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Elisabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Noll, in a caption under Edwards’s portrait in *Christian History*, vol. 4, no. 4, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xlvii.

<sup>25</sup> *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, p. 7.

“Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.”<sup>26</sup>

### *A Family Man*

We have some reason to think that Edwards regarded his family as worthy of that kind of unwasted time. Sereno Dwight says, “In the evening, he usually allowed himself a season of relaxation, in the midst of his family.”<sup>27</sup> But in another place Edwards himself says (in 1734, when he was thirty-one years old), “I judge that it is best, when I am in a good frame for divine contemplation, or engaged in reading the Scriptures, or any study of divine subjects, that, ordinarily, I will not be interrupted by going to dinner, but will forego my dinner, rather than be broke off.”<sup>28</sup> One might think that Sarah Edwards would resent this and become disillusioned with her husband’s theology. But it was not so. Her hospitality and piety are legendary.<sup>29</sup> I think it would be fair to say that the indispensable key to raising eleven believing children<sup>30</sup> in the Edwards’s home was an “uncommon union” that Edwards enjoyed with his wife, rooted in a great theology of joy. Her great-grandson said, “Her religion had nothing gloomy or forbidding in its character. Unusual as it was in degree, it was eminently the religion of joy.”<sup>31</sup> Sarah’s story is well told in Elisabeth Dodds’s *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, and given a historical-fictional rendering by Edna Gerstner in *Jonathan and Sarah Edwards: An Uncommon Union*.<sup>32</sup>

### *A Leader in the Great Awakening*

About five years into Edwards’s ministry as the pastor at Northampton, tremors of revival were felt. They were to continue

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<sup>26</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xx.

<sup>27</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>28</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>29</sup> A short sketch of these strengths is found in the *Memoirs*, p. xlv.

<sup>30</sup> One remarkable tribute to the grace of God through the lives and family of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards is the account by A. E. Winship of what became of their heirs over the next 150 years, in comparison with another family pseudonymously called the “Jukes.” Of the Edwards came 13 college presidents, 65 professors, 100 lawyers, a dean of a law school, 30 judges, 66 physicians, 80 office holders, etc. See the whole comparison in Elisabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>31</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xlv.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man* (see footnote 22); Edna Gerstner, *Jonathan and Sarah Edwards: An Uncommon Union* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995).

on and off for about fifteen years, with the peak of the Great Awakening felt in Edwards's church in the mid-1730s and the early 1740s. Edwards was at the heart of this awakening, sparking it, defending it, analyzing it, and recounting it. He was known throughout New England as a leader in this awakening and was willing to take "missionary tours" to promote it. For example, on July 8, 1741, he preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in Enfield, Connecticut, "which was the cause of an immediate revival of religion throughout the place."<sup>33</sup>

A series of sermons that he preached in 1742 and 1743, as the last crest of intense religious fervor was subsiding in Northampton, was published in 1746 under the title *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*. This book is the mature, seasoned reflection of Edwards, and the most profound analysis of the difference between true and false Christian experience that emerged from the season of the Great Awakening. In fact, it is probably one of the most penetrating and heart-searching Biblical treatments ever written of the way God works in saving and sanctifying the human heart. I often tell people that this would be a great place to start in their wider reading of Edwards.

### *The Lasting, Worldwide Fruit of a Young Man's Life and Death*

What we owe to the unexpected and unplanned providences of life is incalculable.<sup>34</sup> In 1743, Jonathan Edwards met David Brainerd in New Haven. Brainerd was a young missionary to the Indians, whose life would have passed into the annals of heaven, but not earth, without this fortuitous encounter with Edwards. There was a bond established. In March, 1747, Brainerd was dying of tuberculosis and came to live with the Edwards family. He was cared for by Jerusha, Edwards's seventeen-year-old daughter. Brainerd died on October 9, 1747 at the age of twenty-nine. To her father's distress, Jerusha died five months later on February 14, 1748. Edwards lamented,

<sup>33</sup> *Memoirs*, p. li.

<sup>34</sup> "Providence" was Edwards's own designation of what is described here: "I have for the present, been diverted . . . by something . . . that Divine Providence unexpectedly laid in my way, and seemed to render unavoidable, viz. publishing Mr. Brainerd's Life." Quoted from a letter dated August 31, 1748, Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 3-4.

It has pleased a holy and sovereign God, to take away this my dear child by death, on the 14th of February, next following, after a short illness of five days, in the 18th year of her age. She was a person of much the same spirit with Brainerd. She had constantly taken care of and attended him in this sickness, for nineteen weeks before his death; devoting herself to it with great delight, because she looked on him as an eminent servant of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

Her father shared her estimate, so much so that he undertook to edit and publish Brainerd's journals—an act of devotion to Brainerd and to the great cause of world evangelization that his short life stood for. The reverberations for the sake of world missions in the following 250 years have been, as I said, incalculable. The book has never been out of print.

Almost immediately it challenged the spirit of God's great adventurers. Gideon Hawley, one of Edwards's missionary protégés, carried it in his saddlebag as the only other book besides his Bible, as he traveled among the Indians.<sup>36</sup> John Wesley put out a shortened version of Edwards's *Life of Brainerd* in 1768, ten years after Edwards's death. He disapproved of Edwards's and Brainerd's Calvinism,<sup>37</sup> but said that preachers of David Brainerd's spirit would be invincible.

The rise of the modern Protestant missionary movement took great inspiration from Edwards and Brainerd. For example, in the early 1800s in India, William Carey drew up a covenant for his missionary band that included the words, "Let us often look at Brainerd."<sup>38</sup> Andrew Fuller, the great "rope holder" back home in England, was dismayed several months before his death in 1815 to hear that people were belittling the influence of Jonathan Edwards on his colleague John Sutcliff and, by implication, on the

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<sup>35</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xciv.

<sup>36</sup> Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 470.

<sup>37</sup> Murray comments on this edition, "Wesley's judgment of priorities was right even if the liberties which he took in editing and abridging (with no leave from Edwards) are surprising by present-day standards. For besides popularizing Edwards, Wesley was also concerned 'to separate the rich ore of evangelical truth from the base alloy of . . . Calvinian error.'" *Jonathan Edwards, A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), pp. 456-457.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted from S. Pearce Carey's biography of William Carey in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 470.

like-minded band who had gone to India. He wrote a letter to his friend John Ryland:

We have some who have been giving out, of late, that “If Sutcliff and some other had preached more of Christ, and less of Jonathan Edwards, they would have been more useful.” If those who talked thus preached Christ half as much as Jonathan Edwards did, and were half as useful as he was, their usefulness would be double what it is. It is very singular that the mission to the East should have originated with men of these principles and, without pretending to be a prophet, I may say, If ever it falls into the hands of men who talk in this strain, it will soon come to nothing.<sup>39</sup>

The list of missionaries who testify to the inspiration of Jonathan Edwards’s influence through the labor of love he expended in writing *The Life of David Brainerd*<sup>40</sup> is longer than any of us knows: Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, William Carey, Henry Martyn, Robert Morrison, Samuel Mills, Fredrick Schwartz, Robert M’Cheyne, David Livingstone, Andrew Murray. A few days before he died, Jim Elliot, who was martyred by the Aucas in 1956, entered in his diary, “Confession of pride—suggested by David Brainerd’s *Diary* yesterday—must become an hourly thing with me.”<sup>41</sup> For 250 years Edwards has been fueling the missionary movement with his biography of David Brainerd.

This impact on the modern missionary movement was not planned by Jonathan Edwards, as most of the turns of our lives are not planned by us. Brainerd came into his life, he died in Edwards’s house, Edwards’s daughter died soon after, and then there were all these journals to deal with in heartache and in longing for some good to come of it all.

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 1 (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988, orig. 1845), p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, ed. by Norman Pettit, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7. (Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, ed., *The Journals of Jim Elliot* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1978), p. 143.

### *The Inglorious Dismissal*

Similarly Edwards did not plan the last chapter of his life in which he himself would be a missionary to the Indians, and in which he would write four of his most significant books. It all happened in a way that he would have never planned or wanted.

In 1750, Edwards was dismissed ingloriously from his pastorate after twenty-three years of ministry. Such things are always more convoluted and painful than anyone can know, but there are some reasons that we can point to. In 1744, some young people in Edwards's congregation were circulating "licentious books" and using obscene language. It came to Edwards's attention and he called a council with church approval, but then, unwisely it seems, read publicly the list of youths who were to report to his home without distinguishing in the list between the accused and the witnesses. So much resistance emerged among the people, Sereno Dwight says, that "it seemed in a great measure to put an end to his usefulness at Northampton and doubtless laid the foundation for his removal."<sup>42</sup>

But the decisive conflict emerged in the spring of 1749. It became generally known that Edwards had come to reject the former pastor's view on who should be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Solomon Stoddard had believed that the Lord's Supper could be a converting ordinance and that people could take communion in the hope of obtaining conversion by it. In August, Edwards wrote a detailed treatise to prove "that none ought to be admitted to the communion and privileges of members of the visible church of Christ in complete standing, but such as are in profession, and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment, godly or gracious persons."<sup>43</sup> The treatise was scarcely read, and there was a general outcry to have Edwards dismissed.

### *The Farewell Sermon*

After almost a year of stressful controversy, the decision for dismissal was read to the people on June 22, 1750. Nine days later

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<sup>42</sup> *Memoirs*, p. cxv.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Humble Inquiry*, in : *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 436.

on July 1, Edwards preached his famous Farewell Sermon, which is printed in the Banner of Truth edition of his *Works*.<sup>44</sup> It was a message, as were all his messages, utterly serious and without personal rancor. It closes with words of gracious yearning for the good of his people:

I now take leave of you and bid you all, farewell; wishing and praying for your best prosperity. I would now commend your immortal souls to him, who formerly committed them to me, expecting the day when I must meet you again before him, who is the Judge of quick and dead. I desire that I may never forget this people, who have been so long my special charge, and that I may never cease fervently to pray for your prosperity. May God bless you with a faithful pastor, one that is well acquainted with his mind and will, thoroughly warning sinners, wisely and skillfully searching professors and conducting you in the way to eternal blessedness. May you have truly a burning and shining light set up in this candlestick; and may you, not only for a season, but during his whole life, that a long life, be willing to rejoice in his light.

And let me be remembered in the prayers of all God's people that are of a calm spirit, and are peaceable and faithful in Israel, of whatever opinion they may be with respect to terms of church communion. And let us all remember, and never forget our future solemn meeting on that great day of the Lord; the day of infallible decision, and of the everlasting and unalterable sentence. Amen.<sup>45</sup>

Edwards was forty-six years old. He had nine children to support, the youngest, his son Pierrepont, having been born three months before his dismissal. Jerusha had died in 1747, and Sarah, the oldest, had married Elihu Parsons on June 11, just eleven days before Edwards was dismissed. We can feel some of the crisis in Edwards's own words from a letter written a week after his dismissal:

I am now separated from the people between whom and me there was once the greatest union. Remarkable is the providence of God in this matter. In this event we have a striking instance of

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<sup>44</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. cxcviii-ccvii.

<sup>45</sup> *Memoirs*, p. ccvii.



the instability and uncertainty of all things here below. The dispensation is indeed awful in many respects, calling for serious reflection and deep humiliation in me and my people. The enemy, far and near, will now triumph; but God can overrule all for his own glory. I have nothing visible to depend upon for my future usefulness, or the subsistence of my numerous family. But I hope we have an all-sufficient, faithful, covenant God, to depend upon. I desire that I may ever submit to him, walk humbly before him, and put my trust wholly in him. I desire, dear Sir, your prayers for us, under our present circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

### *The Move to Stockbridge*

The church gave him support in the immediately following months, even asking him to preach at times. In early December of 1750, the church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, about forty miles west of Northampton and very much a frontier village on the edge of settled New England, called Edwards to consider being their pastor. Simultaneously the Society in London for Propagating the Gospel in New England and the Parts Adjacent also called him to evangelize the Housatonnuck River Indians at Stockbridge. In January, 1751, Edwards went to visit Stockbridge and stayed the winter. In June he accepted the call and moved alone to the village to assume his responsibilities. His family moved to join him in August and on August 8, 1751, he was installed as the pastor of the little church made up of colonists and Indians.

In Northampton, Edwards had been financially well off, receiving (in his own words) “the largest salary of any country minister in New England.”<sup>47</sup> But in Stockbridge he was so pressed for funds before selling his home in Northampton, that he lacked the necessary paper for writing. The mission and church in Stockbridge were beset with problems that demanded Edwards’s attention. A house had to be built, sermons had to be prepared and preached (often through his Indian interpreter, John Wonwanonpequunnonnt),<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Memoirs*, p. cxxii.

<sup>47</sup> *Memoirs*, p. cxli.

<sup>48</sup> *Freedom of the Will*, p. 5.

special concerns of the Indian converts had to be addressed (e.g., the language issue and what sorts of schools to provide), parties had to be reconciled, misuse of mission funds had to be confronted. Edwards gave himself to these duties with faithfulness.

### *The Greater Purposes of God in Pain*

But the greater purposes of God in this strange and painful providence of Edwards's removal to Stockbridge, I would venture, are in the thinking and writing that Edwards did in these seven years before he was called to be the president of Princeton. Four of Edwards's weightiest, most influential, books were written in the years 1752-1757. Paul Ramsey says that they "are not wholly undeserving of such high praise as 'four of the ablest and most valuable works which the Church of Christ has in its possession.'"<sup>49</sup> I describe my own personal encounter with these books in Chapter Three (pp. 77-97). That Edwards would interact with the dominant philosophical writings of his time and write theological-philosophical books in this out-of-the-way place under these primitive conditions is a wonder.

### *The Passion for Philosophical Engagement*

There are few models for grasping the passion of Edwards to vindicate Christianity philosophically in the context of a pastoral and missionary life. Norman Fiering has argued that "his goal, if it can be put in one sentence, was to give seventeenth-century Puritan pietism a respectable philosophical structure, which would make it rationally credible and more enduring than it could be without the aid of philosophy."<sup>50</sup> A more sympathetic way of saying it would be that Edwards believed his Biblical theology was, in fact, a true rendering of reality, and therefore could stand confidently in the marketplace of philosophical ideas and give an account of itself—which in his hands it would do.

But Fiering is right that Edwards is not fully "comprehensible in terms of his New England Puritan background alone. He was

<sup>49</sup> *Freedom of the Will*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1981) p. 60.

too much of a philosopher for that context; his speculations carried him beyond the immediate concerns of the ministry to an engagement with metaphysics and ethics that was more than a collegiate exercise.”<sup>51</sup> One of the reasons this dimension of Edwards’s ministry is missed is that the middle, more well-known, part of his life was not spent mainly in philosophical pursuits but in the experience and analysis of the Great Awakening. But Fiering points out that “Edwards’s strictly philosophical interests emerged in two phases. The first began in his earliest college days, extended through his tutorship at Yale, and lasted until he assumed pastoral duties in Northampton in 1727. The second phase began about 1746 and lasted until his death in 1758. The twenty years between 1727 and 1746 were in large part absorbed in working out the questions for the religious life posed by the Great Awakening, as well as by pastoral problems and responsibilities.”<sup>52</sup>

So in this last part of Edwards’s life, spent in Stockbridge far from the academic centers of philosophical learning, Edwards’s mind turned again to the philosophical standing of his cherished Biblical vision of reality. Yet this was not a turning away from Biblical and theological foundations, as will be clear from *The End for Which God Created the World*, Part Two of this book. Fiering depicts Edwards’s “method of utilizing moral philosophy in his arguments, but ultimately relying on moral theology for his conclusions.”<sup>53</sup> Which meant, simply, for Edwards, that in the end he relied on the Bible.

As Iain Murray makes plain, even in Edwards’s more philo-

<sup>51</sup> *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p.106, note 2. One evidence for this division of Edwards’s life is the remarkable fact that the concept of “consent” to being, which Edwards evidently hit upon early in his twenties, did not appear in print until thirty years later in his treatise on *True Virtue* (*Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p. 74). (The concept of “consent” to being is roughly equivalent to benevolence toward ultimate being, that is, God, or agreement and affirmation of being—willing that ultimate being be pleased and glorified.)

<sup>53</sup> *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p. 55. Paul Ramsey is skeptical about Fiering’s depiction of Edwards’s ethics as “synthetic ethics” and “critical ethics” and warns that “to abstract moral philosophy from its theological context tends to obscure JE’s extraordinary confidence that the truths of faith and of reason are *one*” (*Ethical Writings*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], p. 6, note 5). David Brand makes the same point, perhaps even more forcefully, that “philosophy was useful to Edwards as a means of setting forth, synthesizing, and clarifying theological issues, it was subordinated to divine revelation.” *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 145.

sophical works, “The key to understanding Jonathan Edwards is that he was a man who put faithfulness to the Word of God before every other consideration.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, “Edwards belongs properly in the company of Leibniz, Malebranche, and Pascal fifty years earlier, figures who like him philosophized freely, but did so *within* a dogmatic tradition.”<sup>55</sup> Such people may have penetrated the deeper into reality because of their Biblically grounded theological insight, but they “confused and irritated opponents precisely because they loved God more than philosophy.”<sup>56</sup>

### *The Freedom of the Will*

The first of Edwards’s four great works from this Stockbridge period was *Freedom of the Will*.<sup>57</sup> The editor of this book in the Yale critical edition, Paul Ramsey, says that this work “with ample reason has been called Edwards’s greatest literary achievement.”<sup>58</sup> It is all the more remarkable because of the condition of its composition, which is probably typical of the conditions for each of the four major works:

Let it be remembered, that the Essay on the Freedom of the Will . . . was written within the space of four months and a half; and those not months of leisure, but demanding the additional duties of a parish, and of two distinct Indian missions; and presenting, also, all the cares, perplexities, and embarrassments of a furious controversy, the design of which was to deprive the author, and his family of their daily bread.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Fruit of a Lifetime of Redeeming the Time*

The book was finished by April, 1753, and was published a year later after subscriptions came in from Scotland to the Boston publisher. The practical key to composing under such imperfect cir-

<sup>54</sup> *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, p. 471.

<sup>55</sup> *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> On the main content and argument of this book see my comments in Chapter Three, pp. 86-89.

<sup>58</sup> *Freedom of the Will*, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clx.

cumstances was to redeem every moment of time, which Edwards had learned to do through years of rigorous discipline. Even in his early resolutions he had steeled himself against the depleting power of procrastination. Resolution #11 says, "Resolved: When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder."<sup>60</sup>

Add to this that Edwards for over thirty years had not been a passive reader. He read with a view to solving problems and retaining his thoughts in writing. Most people have a lamentable penchant toward passive reading. They read the way people watch television. They don't ask questions, which Mortimer Adler says is the essence of active reading.<sup>61</sup> But we have seen already<sup>62</sup> that Edwards read with riveted focus and with a view to solving theological problems, ever writing and recording his thoughts. It has been said that "perhaps no person ever lived who so habitually and carefully committed his thoughts, on almost every subject, to writing, as the elder President Edwards. His ordinary studies were pursued pen in hand, and with his notebooks before him; and he not only often stopped in his daily rides by the wayside, but frequently rose even at midnight to commit to paper any important thought that had occurred to him."<sup>63</sup>

Even without book in hand, his mind was working. Edwards's great-grandson tells us how he used the many hours that it took on horseback to get from one town to another, thinking through an issue to some conclusion, and then pinning a piece of paper on his coat and charging his mind to remember the sequence of thought when he took the paper off at home.<sup>64</sup>

He maximized the opportunity for study also by rising early. In fact, he was probably entirely serious when he wrote in his diary in 1728, "I think Christ has recommended rising early in the morn-

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<sup>60</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xx.

<sup>61</sup> "Reading a book . . . is essentially an effort on your part to ask it questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability)." Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 47.

<sup>62</sup> *Memoirs*, xviii. See above p. 51 footnote 5.

<sup>63</sup> From Tryon Edwards's Introduction to *Charity and Its Fruits, Ethical Writings*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 125.

<sup>64</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxviii.

ing, by his rising from the grave very early.”<sup>65</sup> So he rose between 4:00 and 5:00 to study, always with pen in hand, thinking out every burst of insight as far as he could and recording it in his notebooks.<sup>66</sup> After a lifetime of this discipline, it is not as though he were starting any of his four great Stockbridge works from scratch. There were thousands of notes and thirty years of reflection ready to pour into these books.

*Two More Books: What Is the End and What Is the Good?*

This is especially true of the next two works that Edwards began to write, *The End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, which Edwards intended to be published together (which we know because in *True Virtue* Edwards refers several times to *The End* as “the foregoing Treatise”). He began the composition in the spring of 1755 after the longest, most painful illness of his life. “I should have written long ago,” he writes to a friend on April 15, 1755, “had I not been prevented by the longest and most tedious sickness that ever I had in my life: It being followed with fits of ague which came upon me about the middle of last July, and were for a long time very severe, and exceedingly wasted my flesh and strength, so that I became like a skeleton.”<sup>67</sup> The *Two Dissertations* were not published until 1765, seven years after Edwards’s death. This is probably owing to the fact that, even though they were basically complete, Edwards intended some additional work on them.<sup>68</sup>

We know from Edwards’s *Miscellanies* that he had copious notes ready to pour into these works when the time came to write them. He had wrestled all his life, for example, with the issue of the end for which God created the world. Harvey Townsend lists a sampling of twenty-three entries in Edwards’s notebooks that

<sup>65</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>66</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xviii.

<sup>67</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxv.

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Hopkins, the first Editor of the *Dissertations*, wrote a Preface to go with both works in 1765 and commented that “’tis probable, that if his life had been spared, [Edwards] would have revised them and rendered them in some respects more complete. Some new sentiments, here and there, might probably have been added; and some passages brightened with farther illustrations. This may be conjectured from some brief hints or sentiments minuted down on loose papers, found in the manuscripts.” *Ethical Writings*, p. 401.

deal with this question, some of them as long as nine pages, and some dating from his twenties.<sup>69</sup> In these two *Dissertations* it is true, as Iain Murray says, that Edwards, in essence, “is saying nothing more than he taught the Indian children on ‘man’s chief end’ from the first question of the Shorter Catechism.”<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, much more than this was also going on. His mind “soars like an eagle towards the sun,”<sup>71</sup> and with a radically God-centered vision of creation and virtue “he responds to . . . the ‘new moral philosophy’ of the 18th century—that is, the sentimental ethics that was sweeping the English-speaking world in the works of the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) and Samuel Clarke (1675-1720).”<sup>72</sup>

### *The Last Work*

Edwards’s last literary labor was *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*,<sup>73</sup> which he finished in May, 1757. The book was not written in a vacuum, of course, but in direct response to a particular attack on the historic orthodox doctrine. This is evident from the rest of the title: “*Evidences of its Truth produced, and Arguments to the Contrary answered, Containing in particular, A Reply to the Objections and Arguings of Dr. John Taylor, in his Book, Intituled, ‘The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin proposed to free and candid Examination, etc’.*”

### *Another Strange and Painful Providence*

Four months after the completion of this last great work, Edwards’s son-in-law and president of Princeton College, Aaron Burr, died on September 24, 1757. Two days later, the “corporation of the college” met and “made the choice of Mr. Edwards as

<sup>69</sup> Harvey Townsend, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1955), pp. 126-153. On the dating of the Miscellanies, see Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 156.

<sup>70</sup> Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 428.

<sup>71</sup> Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 428.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Noll, “God at the Center: Jonathan Edwards on True Virtue,” *Christian Century*, September 8-15, 1993, p. 855.

<sup>73</sup> The book is 435 pages in the Yale edition, Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. by Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

his successor.”<sup>74</sup> It is a tribute to Edwards’s faith and fatherhood that his widowed daughter Esther, who had been married only five years, responded with such confidence in God’s sovereign goodness. In a letter to her mother two weeks after the death of her husband she wrote,

I would speak it to the glory of God’s name, that I think he has, in an uncommon degree, discovered himself to be an all-sufficient God, a full fountain of all good. Although all streams were cut off, yet the fountain is left full. I think I have been enabled to cast my care upon him, and have found great peace and calmness in my mind, such as this world cannot give nor take. . . . Give me leave to entreat you both, to request earnestly of the Lord, that I may never despise his chastenings, nor faint under this his severe stroke.<sup>75</sup>

### *His Futile Resistance to the Princeton Call*

Within seven months, her mother would write a similar letter to her daughter that the same “severe stroke” had struck her husband Jonathan. But none of that could be seen now, and Edwards was “not a little surprised” to receive word that he had been elected president of Princeton, if he would accept. He was not at all sure this was a wise choice. In a letter to the corporation on October 19, 1757, he outlined his hesitations. Besides having “just begun to have our affairs in a comfortable situation,” he deprecated his fitness for the role of president:

I have a constitution, in many respects, peculiarly unhappy, attended with flaccid solids, vapid, sily, and scarce fluids, and a low tide of spirits; often occasioning a kind of childish weakness and contemptibleness of speech, presence, and demeanor, with a disagreeable dullness and stiffness, much unfitting me for conversation, but more especially for the government of a college. . . . I am also deficient in some parts of learning, particularly in algebra, and the high parts of mathematics, and the Greek classics; my Greek learning having been chiefly in the New Testament.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxiii.

<sup>75</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxiii-clxxiv.

<sup>76</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxiv.



Besides this personal unfitness, as he saw it, he had writing projects in view that would consume the rest of his life and he described them in some detail in the letter. Then he said, "I think I can write better than I can speak. My heart is so much in these studies, that I cannot find it in my heart to be willing to put myself into an incapacity to pursue them any more in the future part of my life."<sup>77</sup> But he closed the letter with the promise to seek counsel and take the matter seriously.

The advisory council was held January 4, 1758, in Stockbridge and decided it was Edwards's duty to accept the call. When he was told of the decision he "fell into tears on the occasion, which was very unusual for him in the presence of others."<sup>78</sup> He remonstrated that they too easily overlooked his arguments, but in the end he acquiesced. The missionary society with whom he served gave their permission, and he left for Princeton in January, planning to move his family in the spring.

### *Great Faith Before the Fatal Defense of Life*

On February 13, 1758, one month after he had assumed the presidency of Princeton, Edwards was inoculated for smallpox. It had the opposite effect from that intended. The pustules in his throat became so large that he could take no fluids to fight the fever. When he knew that there was no doubt he was dying, he called his daughter Lucy—the only one of his family in Princeton—and gave her his last words. There was no grumbling over being taken in the prime of his life with his great writing dreams unfulfilled, but instead, with confidence in God's good sovereignty, he spoke words of consolation to his family:

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue for ever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my chil-

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<sup>77</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxv.

<sup>78</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxvii.

dren you are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all to seek a father who will never fail you.<sup>79</sup>

He died on March 22. His physician wrote the hard letter to his wife, who was still in Stockbridge. She was quite sick when the letter arrived, but the God who held her life was the God whom Jonathan Edwards preached. So on April 3 she wrote to her daughter Esther:

What shall I say: A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it, he has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left to us! We are all given to God: and there I am and love to be.

Your ever affectionate mother,

*Sarah Edwards*<sup>80</sup>

### *The Quest for Spiritual Sight*

Thus ended the earthly life of one whose passion for the supremacy of God was perhaps unsurpassed in the history of the church. The pursuit was with vehemence because he knew what was at stake, and he knew that no mere speculative or rational knowledge of God would save his soul or bless the church. All his energy was bent on serving the true end of all things, namely, the manifestation of the glory of God in a spiritual sight and enjoyment of that glory.

A true sense of the glory of God is that which can never be obtained by speculative [reasoning]; and if men convince themselves by argument that God is holy, that never will give a sense of his amiable [i.e., pleasing, admirable] and glorious holiness. If they argue that he is very merciful, that will not give a sense of his glorious grace and mercy. It must be a more immediate, sensible discovery that must give the mind a real sense of the excellency and beauty of God.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxviii.

<sup>80</sup> *Memoirs*, p. clxxxix.

<sup>81</sup> Sermon on Matthew 5:8 ("Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.") in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 906.

In other words, it is to no avail merely to believe *that* God is holy and merciful. For that belief to be of any saving value, we must “sense” God’s holiness and mercy. That is, we must have a true taste for it and delight in it for what it is in itself. Otherwise the knowledge is no different than what the devils have.

*The Aim of Life in the Labor of Thought*

Does this mean that all his rational study and thinking was in vain? No. Because he says, “The more you have of a rational knowledge of divine things, the more opportunity will there be, when the Spirit shall be breathed into your heart, to see the excellency of these things, and to taste the sweetness of them.”<sup>82</sup> But the goal of all his study was this spiritual taste, not just knowing God but delighting in him, savoring him, relishing him. And so for all his intellectual might, Edwards was the farthest thing from a cool, detached, neutral, disinterested academician.

He said in his 64th Resolution, “Resolved, When I find those ‘groanings which cannot be uttered,’ of which the apostle speaks, and those ‘breathings of soul for the longing it hath,’ of which the psalmist speaks . . . I will not be weary of earnestly endeavoring to vent my desires, nor of the repetitions of such earnestness.”<sup>83</sup>

In other words, he was as intent on cultivating his passion for God as he was of cultivating his knowledge of God. He strained forward in the harness of his flesh not only for truth, but also for more grace. The 30th Resolution says, “Resolved, To strive every week to be brought higher in religion, and to a higher exercise of grace, than I was the week before.”<sup>84</sup>

And that advancement was for Edwards intensely practical. He said to his people what he sought for himself,

Seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause,  
and to enable you to dispute with others; but seek it for the ben-

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<sup>82</sup> “Christian Knowledge,” p. 162.

<sup>83</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxii.

<sup>84</sup> *Memoirs*, p. xxi.

efit of your souls, and in order to practice. . . . Practice according to what knowledge you have. This will be the way to know more. . . . [According to Ps. 119:100] “I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts.”<sup>85</sup>

The great end of all study—all theology—is a heart for God and a life of holiness. The great goal of all Edwards’s work was the glory of God. And the greatest thing I have ever learned from Edwards, and the driving vision of this book, is that God is glorified most not merely by being known, nor by merely being dutifully obeyed, but by being enjoyed in the knowing and the obeying.

God made the world that he might communicate, and the creature receive, his glory; but that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his having an idea of God’s glory [doesn’t] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.<sup>86</sup>

And so the final and most important exhortation to us from the life and work of Jonathan Edwards is this: in all our life and all our study and all our ministry let us seek to glorify God by being satisfied in him above all things. Let us press on to know in the depth of our being that “the steadfast love of the Lord is better than life” (Ps. 63:3). And so let us find the God-exalting freedom from this world that will make us the most radical, sacrificial servants of good on earth—that men may see our good works and join us in glorifying God by enjoying him forever.

The enjoyment of [God] is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> “Christian Knowledge,” p. 162-163.

<sup>86</sup> Miscellany #448, *The “Miscellanies,”* ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 495.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Christian Pilgrim,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 244.

God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.

JONATHAN EDWARDS  
*Miscellanies*

Even while a boy, he began to study with his pen in his hand; not for the purpose of copying off the thoughts of others, but for the purpose of writing down, and preserving the thought suggested to his own mind, from the course of study which he was pursuing. This most useful practice he commenced in several branches of study very early; and he steadily pursued it in all his studies through life. His pen appears to have been in a sense always in his hand. From this practice steadily persevered in, he derived the very great advantages of thinking continually during each period of study; of thinking accurately; of thinking connectedly; of thinking habitually at all times.

Perhaps no person ever lived who so habitually and carefully committed his thoughts, on almost every subject, to writing, as the elder President Edwards. His ordinary studies were pursued pen in hand, and with his notebooks before him; and he not only often stopped in his daily rides by the wayside, but frequently rose even at midnight to commit to paper any important thought that had occurred to him.

SERENO DWIGHT  
*Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards*

## C H A P T E R   T H R E E

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### JONATHAN EDWARDS, A MIND IN LOVE WITH GOD

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*The Private Life of a Modern Evangelical*

My approach in this present chapter will be to take you on a guided tour of my own personal encounter with Edwards over the last thirty years. I hope I can introduce you to his writings and thought, as it became powerful in my own life. In this way, perhaps I can mingle enough biblical theology, biography, and autobiography so that you not only have a fresh meeting with Edwards, but also see how his life and thought have shaped one modern evangelical. The point of the title is to say that the life and thought of Jonathan Edwards is relevant for the way modern evangelicals think and feel about God in relation to our own devotion, study, and worship.

#### *The Doctrinal Weakening of Evangelicalism*

I resonate with the lament of Os Guinness and David Wells that evangelicalism today is basking briefly in the sunlight of hollow success. Evangelical industries of television and radio and publishing and music recordings, as well as hundreds of growing mega-churches and some highly visible public figures and political movements, give outward impressions of vitality and strength. But both Wells and Guinness, in their own ways, have

called attention to the hollowing out of evangelicalism from within.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the strong timber of the tree of evangelicalism has historically been the great doctrines of the Bible—God's glorious perfections, man's fallen nature, the wonders of redemptive history, the magnificent work of redemption in Christ, the saving and sanctifying work of grace in the soul, the great mission of the church in conflict with the world and the flesh and the devil, and the greatness of our hope of everlasting joy at God's right hand. These things once defined us and were the strong fiber and timber beneath the fragile leaves and fruit of our religious experiences. But this is the case less and less. And that is why the waving leaves of success and the sweet fruit of prosperity are not as auspicious to David Wells and Os Guinness as they are to many. It is a hollow triumph, and the tree is getting weaker and weaker while the branches are waving in the sun.

### *Edwards: Beware of Pragmatic Criticisms of Pragmatism*

But right at this point Jonathan Edwards comes to our aid. And the first thing he would say is this: Beware lest even in your description of the problem your diagnosis falls prey to the very categories of pragmatism that constitute the problem. In other words, don't bemoan the condition of evangelicalism because it is hollow and therefore weakening—as if the real goal is *lasting* prominence

<sup>1</sup> "In one generation the evangelical movement has experienced a sea of change: It has moved from being, in large part, confessionally defined to being a fraternity of institutions to being virtually a coalition of causes to being a movement in plain disarray. Worst of all, there is neither an agreed defining character of 'evangelical' around which reformation and regrouping can occur nor any evident leadership willing or able to assert it. . . . The truth is, for those who think, the present state of American evangelicalism is appalling. As a spiritually and theologically defined community of faith, evangelicalism is weak or next to nonexistent; as a subculture, it is stronger but often embarrassing and downright offensive" (Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994], p.15). In his recent book, *Losing Our Virtue*, David Wells continues the lament: "Twenty-five years ago, I am quite certain, I could have cheerfully used the word *theology* without having to reach for the smelling salts. . . . It was a time when evangelical beliefs were more certain than they are now, theology was a more honorable word, and there was a sense of mission that was infectious. That was the day when the trees that stood tall in this world were usually made so by their theological conviction and not simply by their money, the size of their church, or the expansiveness of their organization. . . . [To be sure there has been growth, but] along with this astounding growth—indeed, we might even say, conquest—there has nevertheless come a hollowing out of evangelical conviction, a loss of the biblical Word in its authoritative function, and an erosion of character to the point that today, no discernible ethical differences are evident in behavior when those claiming to have been reborn and secularists are compared" (*Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998], pp. 2-3).

rather than *temporary* prominence. Instead, bemoan the condition of evangelicalism because it contradicts the truth of God and belittles his worth.

What would he mean? He would mean something implied in the title of this chapter—"Jonathan Edwards, A Mind in Love with God." Here you have two words orienting on God: *Mind* and *Love*. These two words correspond to one of the deepest lessons Edwards ever taught. *Mind* (or understanding) and *love* (or affection) correspond to two great acts of the Godhead, and two ways that humans in his image reflect back to God his own glory. Here's the way he put it in his notebooks called the *Miscellanies*, many of which formed the basis of *The End for Which God Created the World* (Part Two of this book):

God is glorified within Himself these two ways: 1. By appearing . . . to Himself in His own perfect idea [of Himself], or in His Son, who is the brightness of His glory. 2. By enjoying and delighting in Himself, by flowing forth in infinite love and delight towards Himself, or in his Holy Spirit. . . . So God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.<sup>2</sup>

### *Glorifying God by Enjoying Him Forever*

This is the same vision of God that we saw in Chapter One. And as I said there, I can scarcely overstate what it has meant in my

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 495. Miscellany #448; see also #87, pp. 251-252; #332, p. 410. Emphasis added.



life and theology and preaching. Virtually everything I write is an effort to explain and illustrate that truth. In Chapter One I paraphrased Edwards with the words, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” Here my paraphrase is: “The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.” This is the essence of what I call “Christian hedonism.”<sup>3</sup> There is no final conflict between God’s passion to be glorified and man’s passion to be satisfied. Here is another way that Edwards says it:

Because [God] infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself, [that is,] complacence<sup>4</sup> and joy in himself; he therefore valued the image, communication or participation of these, in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love and complacence [i.e., satisfaction, delight]. . . . [Thus] *God’s respect to the creature’s good [that is, our passion to be satisfied], and his respect to himself [that is, his passion to be glorified], is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at, is happiness in union with himself.*<sup>5</sup>

### *You Can’t Love Your Own Happiness Too Much*

It follows from all this that it is impossible that anyone can pursue joy or satisfaction with too much passion and zeal and intensity. Edwards said, “I do not suppose it can be said of any, that their love to their own happiness . . . can be in too high a degree.”<sup>6</sup> It can be misdirected to wrong objects, but not too strong. It’s the

<sup>3</sup> The concept of Christian Hedonism and the vision of God and life behind it are unfolded in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The term “complacence” in Edwards’s writings has none of the negative connotations of indifference or apathy that we give the word. It was a positive and strong sense of satisfaction or delight or contentment in something because of its worth or beauty. He distinguished between a love of complacence (taking delight in what something is) and a love of benevolence (willing that good come to a person).

<sup>5</sup> *The End for Which God Created the World*, ¶ 278. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, in: *Ethical Writings, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, ed. by Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 255.

same thing C. S. Lewis said in that fateful passage that began to turn my world upside-down in 1968:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>7</sup>

### *Sin Is the Suicidal Abandonment of Joy*

In other words, the pursuit of our soul's satisfaction—our joy and delight and happiness—is not sin. Sin is the exact opposite: pursuing happiness where no lasting happiness can be found. “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13, RSV). Sin is trying to quench our unquenchable soul-thirst anywhere but in God. Or, more subtly, sin is pursuing satisfaction in the *right* direction, but with lukewarm, halfhearted affections (Rev. 3:16).

### *“To Live with All My Might”*

Virtue, on the other hand, is to pursue the enjoyment of God with all our might. No halfhearted, polite, dutiful religiosity here! One of Edwards's resolutions that he recorded in his notebooks early in life and seems to have kept all his days was #6: “Resolved: To live with all my might, while I do live.”<sup>8</sup> Pursuing delight in God is not something one may do halfheartedly, if he realizes who he is pursuing and what is at stake. The cultivation of spiritual appetite is a great duty for all the saints. So Edwards says in a sermon on the Song of Solomon, “Men . . . ought to indulge those

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards's “Resolution #6,” in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. I (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), p. xx.

appetites. To obtain as much of those spiritual satisfactions as lies in their power.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Doctrine to Be Seen and Glory to Be Savored*

Now connect all this with the title of this chapter and those two words that I said correspond to two great acts of the Godhead—and two ways that humans in God's image reflect back to God his own glory: “Jonathan Edwards, A Mind in Love with God.” *Mind* corresponds to the understanding of the truth of God's perfections. *Love* corresponds to the delight in the worth and beauty of those perfections. God is glorified both by being understood and by being delighted in. He is not glorified so much by one brand of evangelicals who divorce delight from understanding. And he is not glorified so much by another branch of evangelicals who divorce understanding from delight. There is truth to be known aright, and there is beauty to be cherished aright. There is doctrine to be seen, and there is glory to be savored.

### *At Stake Is the Loss of God*

What is at stake in the doctrinal hollowing out of contemporary evangelicalism is the loss of God. And with him the loss of his truth and beauty. And with the loss of divine truth and beauty, the loss of truly seeing God and savoring God. Soon we may wake up and discover the evangelical king has no clothes on. The successes are hollow. And worst of all, our very reason for being may be lost—the capacity to know and love the glory of God. And if we lose the true knowledge of God and the true love of God—the seeing and savoring of God—then we lose our ability to reflect his truth and beauty in the world. And the world loses God. That is finally what is at stake.

I turn now to the story of my personal encounter with Edwards, and the pilgrimage of the last thirty years of friendship with him. The point here is to whet your appetite for his

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<sup>9</sup> I owe this quote to Professor Don Westblade of Hillsdale College, who transcribed the unpublished sermon of Edwards (from the Jonathan Edwards Project at Yale University) on Canticles 5:1, with the doctrine stated: “That persons need not and ought not to set any bounds to their spiritual and gracious appetites.”

works—especially the one in Part Two of this book—and to supplement the account of Edwards’s life in Chapter Two by giving the gist of his main writings. My conviction is that if I can infect you with Edwards, you will have a very powerful inoculation against the hollowing disease of our times.

### *Sinking One Deep Shaft*

When I was in seminary, a wise professor told me that besides the Bible I ought to choose one great theologian and apply myself throughout life to understanding and mastering his thought, to sink at least one shaft deep into reality rather than always dabbling on the surface of things. I might in time become this man’s peer and know at least one system with which to bring other ideas into fruitful dialogue. It was good advice.

The theologian I have devoted myself to more than any other is Jonathan Edwards. All I knew of Edwards when I went to seminary was that he had preached a sermon called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he said something about hanging over hell by a slender thread.<sup>10</sup> This is typical of the caricature of Edwards portrayed in literature and history classes. Identifying Jonathan Edwards with “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is like identifying Jesus with the woes against Chorazin and Bethsaida. This is a fraction of the whole, and it is not the main achievement.

I was unaware of assessments like those of Samuel Davies (in 1759), that Edwards “was the profoundest reasoner, and the greatest divine . . . that America ever produced”; or of Ashbel Green (in

<sup>10</sup> “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours” (Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a sermon on Deuteronomy 32:35, “Their foot shall slide in due time,” in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974], p. 10). Edwards believes that the words of Scripture on hell “are exceeding terrible,” which they certainly are: “the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Rev. 19:15); “the furnace of fire . . . weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42); “this place of torment” (Luke 16:28), “their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Thus his own words are also “exceedingly terrible.” When the horror has been seen the offer of mercy comes in the sermon: “Now God stands ready to pity you; this is a day of mercy; you may cry now with some encouragement of obtaining mercy. . . . You have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling, and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners” (pp. 10-11).

1822), that “He was . . . one of the most holy, humble and heavenly minded men, that the world has seen, since the apostolic age”; or of Thomas Chalmers, that “Never was there a happier combination of great power with great piety”; or Benjamin Warfield, that “Jonathan Edwards, saint and metaphysician, revivalist and theologian, stands out as the one figure of real greatness in the intellectual life of colonial America.”<sup>11</sup> Now I know this from the inside out and don’t need witnesses anymore. But I would become a witness for others. And to that I now turn.

### *Encountering the Trinity*

My first real encounter with Edwards was in a church history course with Geoffrey Bromiley when I chose to write a paper on Edwards’s “Essay on the Trinity.” It was one of those defining moments when my view of God’s being was forever stamped. The Son of God is the eternal idea or image that God has of himself. And the image that he has of himself is so perfect and so complete and so full as to *be* the living, personal reproduction (or begetting) of God the Father. And this living, personal image or radiance or form of God *is* God, namely, God the Son. And therefore God the Son is coeternal with God the Father and equal in essence and glory.

And between the Son and the Father there arises eternally an infinitely holy personal communion of love. “The divine essence itself flows out and is, as it were, breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there proceeds the third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> He sums up his vision of the Trinity with these words:

This I suppose to be that blessed Trinity that we read of in the holy Scriptures. The Father is the deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner, or the deity in its direct existence. The Son is the deity generated by God’s understand-

<sup>11</sup> These are all quoted in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards, A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. xv-xvii.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “An Essay on the Trinity,” in *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. by Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 108.

ing, or having an idea of Himself and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Ghost is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in God's infinite love to and delight in Himself. And I believe the whole Divine essence does truly and distinctly subsist both in the Divine idea and Divine love, and that each of them are properly distinct persons.<sup>13</sup>

You can see how this understanding of the Trinity coheres with what Edwards says about the conception of God glorifying himself in two ways: by being known and being loved or enjoyed.<sup>14</sup> That corresponds to the very way the Godhead exists: the Son is the standing forth of God *knowing* himself perfectly, and the Spirit is the standing forth of God *loving* himself perfectly. You can perhaps feel the fire that began to burn in my bones as I saw a more profound unity in the nature of things than I had ever imagined.

### *The Mystery Is Greater for Knowing More*

Nevertheless Edwards was not simplistic and did not leave me with naïve notions that I now had the Trinity in my back pocket. Far from it. Those who have climbed highest see more clearly than those in the cloudy regions below how much higher the reaches of the mountains of God really are. Below we talk about mystery because we cannot see above the clouds. Above the clouds Edwards talks of mystery because the peaks of divinity stretch out into space without end. Here is the way he cautioned and sobered me.

I am far from affording this as any explication of this mystery, that unfolds and renews the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of it, for I am sensible that however by what has been said some difficulties are lessened, others that are new appear, and the number of those things that appear mysterious, wonderful and incomprehensible, is increased by it. I offer it only as a farther manifestation of what of divine truth the Word of God exhibits to the view of our minds concerning this great mystery. I think the Word of God teaches us more things concerning it to be believed by us than have been generally believed, and that it

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<sup>13</sup> "Essay on the Trinity," p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> See above, footnote 2.

exhibits many things concerning it exceeding glorious and wonderful than have been taken notice of.<sup>15</sup>

This encounter with Edwards and his vision of the Trinity happened in 1969, and I knew that the Edwards I had met in high school was a caricature.

### *The Greatest Work: Freedom of the Will*

The next work of Edwards that I read was *The Freedom of the Will*. I found it to be in harmony with my exegetical efforts in classes on Romans and Galatians, and I found it compelling philosophically. Thus Saint Paul and Jonathan Edwards conspired to demolish my previous notions about freedom. The book was a defense of Calvinistic theology, but Edwards says in the preface, "I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them, and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught."<sup>16</sup>

In a capsule, the book argues that "God's moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents, making them the objects of his commands, counsels, calls [and] warnings . . . is not inconsistent with a *determining disposal* of all events, of every kind throughout the universe, *in his providence*; either by positive efficiency or permission."<sup>17</sup> There is no such thing as freedom of the will in the Arminian sense of a will that ultimately determines itself. The will rather is determined by "that motive which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest."<sup>18</sup> But motives are given, not ultimately controllable by the will.

### *For Augustine It Is the Delight That Guides the Will*

Here Edwards found himself squarely in the great Reformed-Augustinian tradition. Augustine, the African Bishop of Hippo,

<sup>15</sup> "Essay on the Trinity," pp. 127-128.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, ed. by Paul Ramsey (Yale University Press, 1957), p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> *The Freedom of the Will*, p. 431.

<sup>18</sup> *The Freedom of the Will*, p. 141.

had analyzed his own motives down to this root: Everything springs from delight. He saw this as a universal: "Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy. There is no man who does not desire this, and each one desires it with such earnestness that he prefers it to all other things; whoever, in fact, desires other things, desires them for this end alone."<sup>19</sup> This is what guides and governs the will, namely, what we consider to be our delight. But the catch that made Pelagius, Augustine's antagonist, so angry was that it is not in our power to determine what this delight will be. Thus Augustine asks,

Who has it in his power to have such a motive present to his mind that his will shall be influenced to believe? Who can welcome in his mind something which does not give him delight? But who has it in his power to ensure that something that will delight him will turn up? Or that he will take delight in what turns up? If those things delight us which serve our advancement towards God, that is due not to our own whim or industry or meritorious works, but to the inspiration of God and to the grace which he bestows.<sup>20</sup>

So saving grace, converting grace, for Augustine is *God's giving us a sovereign joy in God* that triumphs over all other joys and therefore sways the will. The will is free to move toward whatever it delights in most fully, but it is not within the power of our will to determine what that *sovereign joy* will be.

Therefore Augustine concludes, "A man's free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God's 'love is shed abroad in our hearts' not through the free-will which arises

<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine On Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1986), p. 13 (Sermon 306). See Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 228 (x, 21): "Without exception we all long for happiness. . . . All agree that they want to be happy. . . . They may all search for it in different ways, but all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy."

<sup>20</sup> Quote from Augustine's *To Simplician* (ii, 21) in T. Kermit Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 203.



from ourselves, but 'through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us' (Romans 5:5)."<sup>21</sup>

### *An Inability That Leaves Responsibility in Place*

In this tradition, Jonathan Edwards explained that all people are enslaved, as Saint Paul says, either to sin or to righteousness (Rom. 6:16-23; see also John 8:34; 1 John 3:9); but slavery to sin, inability to love and trust God (see Rom. 8:8), does not excuse the sinner, for this inability is moral, not physical. It is not an inability that prevents a man from believing when he would like to believe; rather, it is a moral corruption of the heart that renders motives to believe ineffectual. The person thus enslaved to sin cannot believe without the miracle of regeneration, but is nevertheless accountable because of the evil of his heart, which disposes him to be unmoved by reasonable motives in the gospel.

In this way Edwards tried to show that the Arminian notion of the will's ability to determine itself is *not* a prerequisite of moral accountability. Rather, in Edwards's words, "All inability that excuses may be resolved into one thing, namely, want of natural capacity or strength; either capacity of understanding, or external strength."<sup>22</sup>

A pastor and missionary all his life, Jonathan Edwards wrote what is probably the greatest defense and explanation of the Augustinian-Reformed view of the will. It is primarily due to this book, *The Freedom of the Will*, that many subsequent scholars have called Edwards the greatest American philosopher-theologian. Paul Ramsey, who edited the book for the Yale edition of the collected works, agrees that it is "Edwards's greatest literary achievement."<sup>23</sup> Aside from its intrinsic power, the clearest witness to its merit is its enduring impact in theology and philosophy.

### *Finney's Fury*

When evangelist Charles G. Finney a hundred years later wanted to level his guns against the Calvinistic view of the will, he did not

<sup>21</sup> T. Kermit Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context*, p. 208 (*Spirit and Letter*, v).

<sup>22</sup> *The Freedom of the Will*, p. 310.

<sup>23</sup> *The Freedom of the Will*, p. 1.

see any of his own contemporaries or even Calvin himself as the chief adversary. There was one great opponent among the Calvinists that had to be defeated: Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*. Finney's assessment of the book in a word: "Ridiculous! Edwards I revere; his blunders I deplore. I speak thus of this Treatise on the Will, because while it abounds with unwarrantable assumption, distinctions without difference, and metaphysical subtleties, it has been adopted as the textbook of a multitude of what are called Calvinistic divines for scores of years."<sup>24</sup>

But for all its vehemence, Finney's shot missed the mark, and Edwards's great vision of God's sovereignty over the fallen human will endures today, relentlessly exerting its power in theology and philosophy alike. In 1949, Perry Miller would chastise academics for their prejudice against Edwards and their frequent caricatures of him as an antiquarian specimen of hell-fire preaching from the long-lost times of the Great Awakening. Miller's own assessment: "He speaks with an insight into science and psychology so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him."<sup>25</sup>

### *Cementing the Truth of God's Supremacy in All Things*

Beginning in 1957, Yale University Press began to publish a new critical edition of Edwards's works, which is scheduled for completion in 2003, the tercentennial of Edwards's birth. It is not surprising that the first work they chose to publish was *The Freedom of the Will*. It is simply without peer. We would live in a different and better world of evangelicalism if Christians would read it and embrace its truth. Nothing cements the truth of God's supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples like an unshakable Biblical confidence in the sovereignty of God over the will of man.

### *Georgia Woods and The Nature of True Virtue*

That was all of Edwards that I read in seminary. After graduation in 1971, before graduate work in Germany, my wife and I

<sup>24</sup> Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1976), p. 269.

<sup>25</sup> Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973, orig. 1949), p. xiii.

spent some restful days at her folks' place in rural Georgia. Here I had my third encounter with Edwards. Sitting on one of those old-fashioned two-seater swings in the backyard under a big hickory tree, with pen in hand, I read *The Nature of True Virtue*. This is Edwards's only purely non-polemical work. If you have ever felt a sense of aesthetic awe at beholding a pure idea given lucid expression, you may understand what I mean when I say that this book aroused in me a deeply pleasurable aesthetic experience. But more importantly it gave me a brand-new awareness that the categories of morality resolve ultimately into categories of spiritual aesthetics, and one of the last things you can say about virtue is that it is "a kind of beautiful nature, form or quality."<sup>26</sup>

Perry Miller said that "the book is not a reasoning about virtue but a beholding it." Edwards gazes on the conception of virtue "until it yields up meaning beyond meaning, and the simulacra fall away. The book approaches, as nearly as any creation in our literature, a naked idea."<sup>27</sup> I think it was perfectly in accord with Edwards's intention that when I finished that book I not only had a deep longing to be a good man, but I also wrote a poem called "Georgia Woods," because nothing looked the same when I put the book down.

### *Clothing the Naked Idea of Virtue with Love*

Noël and I left for Germany in the fall of 1971 to study at the University of Munich for three years. The field was New Testament, not systematic theology. But I would venture to say that Edwards was as inspiring and helpful in my studies as any New Testament scholar I read. During those years I read three more works by Edwards and biographies by Samuel Hopkins and Henry Pamford Parkes. For our family time in the evenings Noël and I read to each other a collection of his sermons called *Charity and Its Fruits*,<sup>28</sup> a 360-page exposition (in our old edition) of 1 Corinthians 13. We agreed that it was verbose and repetitive, but

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 619.

<sup>27</sup> *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> *Charity and Its Fruits*, in: *Ethical Writings*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 123-398.

it did help me clothe with nitty-gritty experience that “naked idea” in *The Nature of True Virtue*.

### *Is Love Allowed to “Seek Its Own” Joy?*

Perhaps the most important insight we saw related to my emerging Christian Hedonism. Is 1 Corinthians 13:5 (“Love seeks not its own”) contrary to the conviction—which I learned from Edwards—that we should glorify God by *seeking our holy joy* in all that we do? Is that pursuit of our own joy contrary to the truth, “Love seeks not its own”? Here is Edwards’s answer:

Some, although they love their own happiness, do not place that happiness in their own confined good, or in that good which is limited to themselves, but more in the common good, in that which is the good of others as well as their own, in good to be enjoyed *in* others and to be enjoyed *by* others. And man’s love of his own happiness which runs in this channel is not what is called selfishness, but is quite opposite to it. . . . This is the thing most directly intended by that self-love which the Scripture condemns. When it is said that charity seeketh not her own, we are to understand it of her own private good, good limited to herself.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, if what makes a person happy is the extension of his joy in God into the lives of others, then it is not wrong to seek that happiness, because it magnifies God and blesses people. Love is the labor of Christian Hedonism, not its opposite.<sup>30</sup>

### *Turning a German Pantry into a Vestibule of Heaven*

Just off the kitchen in our little apartment in Munich was a pantry about 8 by 5 feet, a most unlikely place to read a *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. From my perspective now, I would say that if one book captures the essence or wellspring of Edwards’s theology it is this. That is why I have

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (Yale University Press, 1989), p. 257-258.

<sup>30</sup> “The Labor of Christian Hedonism” is the name of the chapter on love in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1996) and is my fuller effort to give an account for the “true virtue” of pursuing our joy in loving others.

wanted for a long time to make the book more accessible for serious Christian readers on their own quest for more of God. You can read it for yourself in Part Two of this book.

Edwards's answer to why God created the world was that God has a disposition to emanate the fullness of his glory for his people to know, praise, and enjoy. Here is the heart of his theology in his own words:

It appears that all that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God*. . . . In the creature's knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both *exhibited* and *acknowledged*; his fullness is *received* and *returned*. Here is both an *emanation* and *remanation*. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is *of* God, and *in* God, and *to* God; and he is the beginning, and the middle, and the end.<sup>31</sup>

That is the heart and center of Jonathan Edwards and, I believe, of the Bible too. That kind of reading can turn a pantry into a vestibule of heaven. And it is the essence of what is needed today to overcome the hollowing out of evangelical life and the collapsing of our private meditations into self-centered musings.

### *Sunday Evening Fire*

The last work of Edwards's I read in Germany was his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. For several months it was the meat of my Sunday evening meditations. I can remember writing letters week after week to former teachers, to friends, and to my parents about the effect this book was having on me. Far more than *The Nature of True Virtue*, this book convicted me of sinful lukewarmness in my affections toward God and inspired in me a passion to know and love God as I ought.

The thesis of the book is very simple: "True religion, in great

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<sup>31</sup> See below, *The End for Which God Created the World*, ¶ 272.

part, consists in the Affections.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the reason the book moved me so deeply is because it was Edwards’s effort to save the best of two worlds—the very worlds in which I grew up and now live, and the two worlds implied in the title of this chapter: “A *Mind in Love* with God.”

### *Saving the Best of Two Worlds—My Worlds*

On the one hand, Edwards wanted to defend the genuine and necessary place of the affections<sup>33</sup> in religious experience. On the other hand, he was ruthlessly devoted to objective truth and wanted all emotion to be rooted in a true apprehension of reality and shaped by that reality. He had been more responsible than any man for the revival fervor that deluged New England in the fifteen years following 1734. Charles Chauncy of Boston led the opposition to this Great Awakening with its “swooning away and falling to the Ground . . . bitter Shriekings and Screamings; Convulsion-like Tremblings and Agitations, Strugglings and Tumblings.”<sup>34</sup> He charged that it was “a plain stubborn Fact that, the Passions have, generally, in these Times, been applied to as though the main Thing in Religion was to throw them into Disturbance.”<sup>35</sup> He insisted, “The plain truth is that an *enlightened Mind* and not *raised Affections* ought always to be the Guide of those who call themselves Men. . . .”<sup>36</sup>

Edwards took the other side: “I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.”<sup>37</sup> That sentence shows that Edwards did

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, ed. by John Smith, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> On the meaning of Edwards’s term “affections” see Part Two, *The End for Which God Created the World*, footnote 27.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, quoted in *Jonathan Edwards: Selections*, ed. by Clarence Faust and Thomas Johnson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. xviii.

<sup>35</sup> *Seasonable Thoughts*, p. xx.

<sup>36</sup> *Seasonable Thoughts*, p. xx.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, ed. by C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 387.

not condone the enthusiastic excesses of the Great Awakening. Yet, it took time for him to sort out the true, spiritual affections from the false, merely human ones. *The Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1746 (preached in 1742), was his mature effort to describe the signs of truly gracious and holy affections. It amounts to a Yes and a No to revivalistic religion: *yes* to the place of appropriate emotions springing from perceptions of truth, but *no* to the frenzies, private revelations, irrational swoonings, and false assurances of godliness.

Revival fervor and the reasonable apprehension of truth—these were the two worlds Edwards struggled to bring together. They are my worlds too. My father is an evangelist. He conducted evangelistic crusades for over fifty years, and I respect him very highly. I wish I had some of his gifts. I will probably never attain the fruitfulness of his soul-winning life. Rather, I am a theologically oriented pastor. I love my people and cherish our life together in worship and ministry. But I am fairly analytic and given to study. The ministry of the Word is my (protecting and guiding and encouraging) shepherd's staff. It is not surprising, then, that the *Religious Affections* should seem to me a very contemporary and helpful message. It brought together more of my personal history and personal makeup than any other of Edwards's books.

I said it was my food for many weeks. I give just one sampling that still feeds me. Edwards describes the person with truly gracious affections like this:

As he has more holy boldness, so he has less of self-confidence . . . and more modesty. As he is more sure than others of deliverance from hell, so he has more of a sense of the desert of it. He is less apt than others to be shaken in faith, but more apt than others to be moved with solemn warnings, and with God's frowns, and with the calamities of others. He has the firmest comfort, but the softest heart: richer than others, but poorest of all in spirit; the tallest and strongest saint, but the least and tenderest child among them.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Religious Affections*, p. 364.

That litany of unusual juxtapositions is what Jonathan Edwards embodied in himself. He kept together so many things that we are prone to separate. This is one of the reasons, as we saw in Chapter One, why he is so important for our day.<sup>39</sup>

### *Fifteen Minutes a Day Will Go a Long Way*

Since those heady days of discovery and profound transformation from 1968 to 1974, I have tried to stay on the quest for “all the fullness of God” both intellectually and emotionally. And over the years Edwards has remained a faithful guide. When I left Germany and took up my teaching post at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, I continued to converse with Edwards regularly. I recall resolving one year to read Edwards fifteen minutes a day. That was the way I plodded through *Humble Inquiry*<sup>40</sup> and *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*.<sup>41</sup> This latter book gives evidence of what Mark Noll, in another place, called Edwards’s “herculean intellectual labors.”<sup>42</sup>

### *One Stunning Insight on Original Sin*

One stunning insight stands out from the 335 pages of Edwards’s massive exegetical and theological effort to understand original sin. Edwards asks how one man (like me) can be morally implicated in the sin of another (like Adam). He answers by asking why the “I” that exists today is responsible for the moral acts I did or didn’t do yesterday. The answer, evidently, is that there is a union between the me of today and the me of yesterday. But why is there? he asks. He answers that “God’s upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to *an immediate production out of nothing*, at each moment, because its existence at this moment is not merely in part

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter One, footnote 2.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), pp. 431-484.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*, ed. by Clyde Holbrook, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

<sup>42</sup> *Christian History*, vol. 4, No. 4, p. 3.



from God, but wholly from him; and not in any part, or degree, from its antecedent existence.”<sup>43</sup>

This implies, then, that the all-important union between the me of today and the me of yesterday is wholly dependent on God’s “arbitrary constitution.” “There is no identity or oneness . . . but what depends on the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he treats them as one, by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances.”<sup>44</sup> This means that ultimately the reason the me of today is morally responsible for the actions of the me of yesterday is that God has arbitrarily willed that it be so.

#### *A Divine Constitution Makes Truth in Affairs of This Nature*

Now you can see where Edwards is going with this in relation to original sin. Why are Adam’s posterity so responsible for Adam’s sin that they die as part of Adam’s condemnation (Rom. 5:18)? How can there be a true union between us and Adam such that we are implicated in Adam’s sin? Edwards’s answer is that, just as God arbitrarily establishes a union between the moral consciousness of a person from one day to the next, so he can and does establish a union between Adam and his posterity on the analogy of the oneness of a tree including its root and branch. To the objection that this is not consistent with truth, he answers, “The objection we are upon, made against a supposed divine constitution, whereby Adam and his posterity are viewed and treated as one, in the manner and for the purposes supposed, as if it were not consistent with truth, because no constitution can make those to be one, which are not one, I say, it appears that this objection is built on a false hypothesis: for it appears, that a *divine constitution* is the thing which *makes truth*, in affairs of this nature.”<sup>45</sup>

Whether or not this helps you to grasp the reality of original sin, which Saint Paul teaches in Romans 5:12-21, it certainly helped me, not by making it all simple and clear, but by showing me that there are possibilities of conceptuality and reality that I have not yet begun

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, p. 402.

<sup>44</sup> *Original Sin*, p. 403.

<sup>45</sup> *Original Sin*, p. 404.

to think of. Which means it behooves me to keep my mouth shut rather than question a hard Biblical teaching. That is a humbling work, which Edwards has performed for me more than once.

*Love for Truth and Love for God Are Inseparable*

I could go on and tell of my encounters with the *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, the *Treatise On Grace*, the unfinished *History of Redemption*, *The Memoirs of David Brainerd*, *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*, *Qualification for Communion*, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People*, dozens of sermons, and two more biographies. But the point here is not to be exhaustive. The point is to introduce you to the work of Jonathan Edwards and illustrate his personal impact on one “modern evangelical”—an impact that I believe has been for the good, and for which I am profoundly thankful to God.

My own judgment is that, from generation to generation, giants like Edwards are needed to inspire us to think about our faith, and to guard us from settling superficially on small ideas about a small God. We need Edwards to waken us from our pragmatic stupor of indifference to doctrine in worship and prayer and evangelism and missions and church planting and social action. We need Edwards to show us again the beauty and the power of truth. Edwards does this so well because he is relentlessly God-besotted and God-exalting. He helps us recover truth because he never loses sight of the unspeakable reality of God, where truth originates, and whom it exists to serve.

Edwards has taught me—as one modern evangelical—that our concern with truth is an inevitable expression of our concern with God. If God exists, then he is the measure of all things, and what he thinks about all things is the measure of what we should think. Not to care about truth is not to care about God. To love God passionately is to love truth passionately. Being God-centered in life means being truth-driven in ministry. What is not true is not of God. What is false is anti-God. Indifference to the truth is indifference to the mind of God. Pretense is rebellion against reality, and what makes reality reality is God. Our concern with truth is simply an echo of our concern with God. And all this is rooted in God's concern with God, or God's passion for the glory of God.