

PART TWO

LESSONS FROM EDWARDS'S  
LIFE AND THOUGHT

# THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE REVIVING OF RELIGION: A STUDY IN THE MIND OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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It is a privilege and a pleasure to bring a presentation—perhaps I ought to say, a present—to help celebrate Jonathan Edwards’s 300th birthday. Such celebration is welcome; it reflects wisdom. Though yesterday’s great Christians must not be idolized, they should be remembered, and their legacy kept in appreciative view; for God gave them their strength and insight in order to enrich not just their own generation but all who would come after. So then, I now invite attention to some aspects of Edwards’s thought that I, for one, have especially valued and that seem to me to have much to say to others of us at this time.

Let me be more specific about what I owe to Edwards. First, for almost sixty years I have been hungry for the wisdom of the Puritans, and Edwards has fed my appetite, for, to echo Perry Miller, Puritanism is what Edwards was.<sup>1</sup> Again, for almost sixty years, ever since I read Charles Finney’s very able and forceful *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*,<sup>2</sup> revival has been a heart-interest of mine, and it was Edwards’s classic writings on the Northampton visitation of 1734 and the Great Awakening of 1740-42 that brought the theme into biblical focus for me (before that, not surprisingly to anyone who knows Finney, it was somewhat skewed in my mind). Furthermore, I repeatedly urge in varied com-

<sup>1</sup> “Many definitions of Puritanism have been offered by historians. . . . I suspect that the most useful would be simply that Puritanism is what Edwards is.” Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 194.

<sup>2</sup> First published, 1835; many editions since.

pany that evangelicalism is Christianity without additions, subtractions, or dilutions—Christianity, that is, in its purest and most authentic form. And to make the point I picture historic Christianity as a broad river whose main stream flows along a central channel while eddies, stagnant pools, backwaters, and expanses of mud abound along its banks. Then I cite the teaching of such men as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Owen, and Warfield, and Edwards with them, as so many buoys marking out the central channel for all who are concerned to be found in it. Thus, under God I owe a lot to Edwards and am glad to have this opportunity of acknowledging my debt.

My aim now is to show in detail how Edwards's view of God shaped his thinking about revival. But first it will be good to make sure that we have a clear view of this remarkable man, saint, pastor, polymath, theologian, metaphysician, apologist, and educator as he was; and we may do that most vividly, I think, by setting alongside him the other evangelical leader whose 300th birthday we celebrated in 2003—John Wesley.<sup>3</sup> A glance at some of the similarities and differences between these two men will help us to see them both more clearly than otherwise we might do.

#### EDWARDS AND WESLEY

So how do they compare? They were different human types, to start with: Edwards was tall, gaunt, grave, taciturn with strangers, and always somewhat withdrawn, while Wesley was short, slight (regularly weighing 128 pounds, so he tells us), cheerful and outgoing to everyone, and a chatty conversationalist in all company. Neither seems to have had much of a sense of humor, but Wesley was a great storyteller, while Edwards was not. Their backgrounds were different. Wesley was a native Englishman, a sometime Oxford don, tirelessly traversing his homeland as a visiting fireman for God. Edwards was a settled New England colonial, serving smallish pastorates, who was caught constantly in the family rivalries and small-town politics of frontierland. Both were Bible-believing Protestants, scholarly children of the early Enlightenment, reading and thinking men with well-trained minds, wide in their interests and widely read, and masters of a fluent precision of language for preaching, teaching, and debat-

<sup>3</sup> On Wesley, I commend two recent brief books: Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003) and Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Oxford, UK: Lion/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

ing. But Wesley was an activist, while Edwards was an analyst, and Wesley's practical theology of religion—new birth, justification, and holiness, all by faith—though serviceable enough for his purposes,<sup>4</sup> is not in the same league as Edwards's exact explorations and demonstrations of the plans, works, and ways of the Triune God, according to the Scriptures and the developed Reformed faith.

Again, both were clergy, born into clergy families, who embraced the family theology; which made Wesley an eighteenth-century Anglican post-Calvinist (all his life Wesley had an anti-Calvinist obsession<sup>5</sup>), while Edwards remained a seventeenth-century Calvinistic Puritan at heart. So when Wesley came to publish Edwards's *Religious Affections* in 1773, he reduced "one of the most complete systems of what has been strikingly called 'spiritual diagnostics'" (the words are B. B. Warfield's<sup>6</sup>) to half length, declaring that in its original form it had in it "much wholesome food . . . mixed with much deadly poison." Iain Murray, who records this, notes that in Wesley's view, "Christian experience is so basically simple that it is needless to attempt distinctions between the real and the false in those who claim to be rejoicing in Christ. If a person who has assurance of salvation later loses it, and abandons the Christian practice which he once followed, he is plainly a case of a person losing his salvation. So Wesley thought. Edwards would have been almost nonplussed by such an approach. . . ." <sup>7</sup> No comment necessary, I think.

The pastoral ministries of the two men, though both centering for substance on the preaching of regeneration and sanctification in Christ, were very different in form and style. Wesley traveled constantly throughout Britain, carving out for himself the role of chief pastor—para-bishop, you might say—of the countrywide Methodist societies. By the end of Wesley's eighty-seven-year life the British societies had over

<sup>4</sup> Wesley developed a theology of religion, personal and corporate, rather than a systematic account of God. Though widely read and sharp-minded, he equivocated somewhat on the work of God in both justification and sanctification, causing great consternation thereby (see Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 76-79, chaps. 9-10). Murray is correct: "His beliefs in their totality made up a loose synthesis, an amalgam, rather than a coherent system" (76). Wesley might better be described as a highest-grade catechist than as a theologian in the full sense.

<sup>5</sup> Tutored to some extent by his mother, an ex-Puritan, ex-Calvinist, Wesley was always convinced that a consistent believer in divine sovereignty could not offer Christ to all, nor stave off Antinomianism, and he was impervious to argument on both points.

<sup>6</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (Works, vol. 9) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 524.

<sup>7</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 259-260.

70,000 members (and the American societies, led by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, had 50,000 more). In a little over fifty years Wesley had preached over 40,000 times, festooning familiar outlines with an easy extempore flow of stories, illustrations, and applications adapted to each congregation, averaging two sermons most days. "I know," he wrote, "were I myself to preach one whole year in one place, I should preach both myself and most of my congregation to sleep."<sup>8</sup>

That was the challenge facing homebody Edwards, who for twenty-four years was sole pastor of a town of some 1,200 adults and then for six years shepherded a village settlement of perhaps 100 Anglo-Saxons and 200 native Indians, and who always aimed to spend thirteen hours each weekday in his study. The 1,200 manuscript sermons that survive (one for most Sundays of his ministry) show him tackling most seriously the task of keeping everyone, including himself, spiritually awake.<sup>9</sup> In Edwards's sermons riveting expository skill combines with a wide thematic range, a wealth of evangelical thought, a pervasive awareness of eternal issues, and a compelling logical flow to make them arresting, searching, devastating, and Christ-centeredly doxological to the last degree. His preaching style, though quiet, was commanding and by all accounts was almost hypnotic in its power to fix his hearers' minds on divine things. Charles Simeon was later to say that his own sermons were planned to humble the sinner, to exalt the Savior, and to promote holiness; Edwards could have used exactly those words about his.

Two more contrasts before our profile ends. Both Edwards and Wesley were accused of being proud and stubborn. With Wesley the activist, it was because of his habit of always assuming leadership, intellectual and organizational, and never recognizing superiors or peers in any circumstance whatever. (Was this Paul-like care for the churches? Or Diotrephes-like love of preeminence? Faithful stewardship of the gospel or natural hubristic arrogance? Or a blend of both? All these views are taken, and the jury is still out.) With Edwards the analyst, however, there is no room for doubt: What gave offense was his unflinching loyalty to

<sup>8</sup> John Telford, ed., *Letters of John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1931), 3:195; cited from Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> This had a literal aspect. In a sermon weightily titled "When the Spirit of God Has Been Remarkably Poured out on a People, a Thorough Reformation of Those Things That Before Were Amisss Amongst Them Ought to Be the Effect of It," Edwards speaks against sleeping in church and urges that "persons would avoid laying down their bodies in their seats in the midst of public worship." *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Michael D. McMullen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 270.

what he took to be biblical truth, as his open-eyed courting of dismissal from Northampton by pressing the principle that the Lord's Supper is for believers only clearly showed.<sup>10</sup>

Then, too, both men had wives: But whereas Jonathan's thirty-one-year "uncommon union" with Sarah was a love match and a true partnership throughout,<sup>11</sup> John Wesley's thirty-year bond with Molly was a disaster from start to finish—a marriage of convenience that quickly became the precise opposite, a woeful tale of hurt, hostility, and separation. "I married because I needed a home in order to recover my health," Wesley wrote grimly at one stage, "and I did recover it. But I did not seek happiness thereby, and I did not find it."<sup>12</sup> Oh dear. Let us tiptoe on.

Four major things should be remembered as we round off our set of contrasts. First, whatever their frailties and conceptual differences, both of these men preached substantially the same gospel of ruin through sin, redemption through Christ, and regeneration through the Holy Spirit, laying special stress on the reality of ruined human nature because they both believed that only out of self-despair would anyone ever turn wholeheartedly to God (which is why each of them took time out to rebut John Taylor's denial of original sin, both of their books appearing in 1757).<sup>13</sup> Second, they explicitly embraced holiness both as their personal goal and as their ministry target, and both came to see and set forth holiness with increasing clarity as consisting essentially of love to God and man. Wesley's commitment here went back to his reading of Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law in 1725, thus antedating Aldersgate Street by thirteen years, and later he often declared that God had raised up Methodism precisely "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." Edwards wrote of himself as having from early on

<sup>10</sup> For the details of which, see the chapter by Mark Dever in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> On his deathbed in Princeton, Edwards said to Lucy, his youngest daughter: "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." Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 441. See Elisabeth D. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The "Uncommon Union" of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971; repr.: Laurel, Miss.: Audobon Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Full titles: John Taylor, *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination*, 1738. John Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*, in *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd ed., 1872, repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1986), 9:191-464. Jonathan Edwards, "The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:143-233.

in his adult Christian life pursued “an increase of grace and holiness, and a holy life, with much more earnestness than ever I sought grace before I had it,”<sup>14</sup> and the seventy Resolutions that he drew up for himself as early as 1722-23 would seem abundantly to bear this out.<sup>15</sup>

Third, in their pastoral ministries both saw the value of “societies” (that is, small-group fellowships, as we would call them) for fanning the flames of spiritual life, though Wesley’s developed infrastructure of “bands” and “classes” and the “select society” within each Methodist community, a setup learned largely from the Moravians, went far beyond the prayer groups and instructional get-togethers that Edwards put in place in Northampton. Fourth—and this is reflected in all that we have looked at so far, even Wesley’s unhappy marriage, which came to grief through his unwillingness to reduce his ministry just because he had a wife—they were both spiritually alive in Christ in a quite breathtaking way; they were both wonderfully single-minded, and magnificently firm and courageous in the face of criticism and opposition; and overall, according to their own lights, they both were utterly selfless in the service of their God and Savior, just as they were both truly wise in dealing with the upheavals of revival.

Our portrait of Edwards is now sufficiently drawn; so we move Wesley out of the picture and go forward ourselves to look next at the makeup of Edwards’s theology.

## THE MIND OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Let us begin at the beginning, with an *orientation* to Edwards’s overall outlook.

Edwards has been described as God-centered, God-focused, God-intoxicated, and God-entranced, and so indeed he was. There is no overstatement here. Every day, from morning till night, he sought to live in conscious communion with God, whether walking, riding, studying on his own, or relaxing in the bosom of his large and, it seems, happy and often extended family. He was not a mystic in the sense of seeking God-drenched states of soul that leave rationality behind; on the contrary, it was precisely through deep and clear thoughts that God warmed and

<sup>14</sup> Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 51. “He had pursued holiness, he subsequently reflected: ‘with far greater diligence and earnestness than ever I pursued anything in my life’” (101).

<sup>15</sup> The Resolutions are set out in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:xx-xxii.

thrilled his heart. Rationally biblical and biblically rational understanding of everything was his constant quest, and John Gerstner was right to title his three-volume exposition *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.<sup>16</sup> Edwards's basic wavelength— theological, moral, devotional, and doxological—was Puritan, as has been said, and the theology of the mid- and late seventeenth century was his anchorage. “As to my subscribing to the substance of the Westminster Confession,” he wrote in 1750, when the possibility of his moving to minister in Scotland was mooted, “there would be no difficulty.”<sup>17</sup> Convictionally and confessionally, he was a tenacious adherent of the Puritan theology that had shaped New England, and coming at a time when the fires of that heritage were burning low, he gave it a new lease of intellectual and communal life.

A man is known both by his own friends and his own books, and also by the books he recommends to others. “Take Mastricht [Peter Van Mastricht, *Theologia Theoretico-Practica*, 1699] for divinity in general, doctrine, practice, and controversy,” Edwards wrote to young Joseph Bellamy in 1747, “. . . much better than Turretin [Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, 1688]<sup>18</sup> or any other book in the world, except the Bible, in my opinion.”<sup>19</sup> Van Mastricht was Voetius's successor in the theology chair at Utrecht University. Voetius, a pillar of Holland's Second Reformation, had pioneered a solid blend of developed Calvinism with English Puritan wisdom on the Christian life, and Van Mastricht maintained this, laying out his treatment of each topic in four sections: explanatory (i.e., exegetical), doctrinal (i.e., systematic), argumentative (i.e., controversial), and practical (i.e., applicatory). His work is thus a user-friendly textbook of Reformed-Puritan-Pietist stripe for anyone who can read Latin and wants to know the full range and strength of the Puritan brand of Christianity.

<sup>16</sup> John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Powhatan, Va.: Berean/Orlando, Fla.: Ligonier, 1991-93).

<sup>17</sup> Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 346.

<sup>18</sup> Turretin's work is now available in English: trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, 3 vols., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992-97.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 282. One section of Van Mastricht's work is available in English: *A Treatise on Regeneration*, ed. Brandon Withrow (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002). “We need to recognize, as Van Mastricht recognized, that the theological task is not complete unless we have distinguished four basic elements in Christian theology: exegesis, positive doctrine, historical analysis and defense, and practice” (Richard Muller, “Giving Direction to Theology: The Scholastic Dimension,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 [1985]: 191). Van Mastricht divides up his treatment of each topic accordingly; his four divisions are rendered in Withrow's volume Explanatory, Doctrinal, Argumentative, and Practical.



From our overall orientation to Edwards's theological system we now advance to a specific *description* of it. It is a fully integrated whole that we can sketch out as follows.

Shaping everything is the view of the Triune God's plan of grace that the Westminster Standards set forth: a plan that turns upon two hinges—namely, the covenant of redemption that expresses God's appointment of his Son to save sinners, and the covenant of grace that expresses the divine commitment to all whom the Father saves through the mediation of the Son and the life-giving gift of the Holy Spirit. Within this frame are set the Son's course of past humiliation, present exaltation, and future vindication; the individual salvation of each elect and regenerate person; and the ongoing life and service of the church.

Sin-blinded humans are unacquainted with, and unclear and uncertain about, the abiding realities of which the Bible testifies and to which its inspired words point. But the "divine and supernatural light" of illumination by the Holy Spirit brings a knowledge of these things that is as immediate, sure, and indubitable as is the seeing of physical objects with our bodily eyes. From this illumination comes belief of biblical truth, and out of that grows the Christian life—the life, that is, of assured trust in Christ as one's all-sufficient Savior, of increasing insight into the actual guilt and inward corruption from which Christ brings deliverance, of disciplined labor for holiness and virtue, and of sustained joy in knowing, worshiping, and appreciating God. Without this illumination, all forms of religious observance are hollow and empty, whether one realizes this or not. To see unilluminated formalism become real religion must therefore be a pastor's constant goal.

God shows himself by word and deed in the processes and events of human history, which is thus in the most literal sense "his story." The Bible's interpretation of the histories, communal and personal, that it records is the model for interpreting our own history, from the same redemption-centered point of view, in terms of which alone will the history of any Christian person ever make real sense. As George Marsden states Edwards's position:

History, according to Edwards, was in essence the communication of God's redemptive love in Christ. The history of redemption was the very purpose of creation. Nothing in human history had significance on its own. . . . Christ's saving love was the center of all history and

defined its meaning. Human events took on significance only as they related to God's redemptive action in bringing increasing numbers of human beings into the light of that love or as they illustrated human blindness in joining Satan's warfare against all that was good.<sup>20</sup>

Following up this modern-sounding insight, Edwards hoped one day (so he told the Princeton trustees shortly before his death) to write "a body of divinity [i.e., a systematic theology] in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history."<sup>21</sup> It would not, one supposes, abandon the decretal foundation on which Reformed systematic theology had regularly been set since Theodore Beza and William Perkins, but would trace out from Scripture the progressive fulfillment of God's decretal plan. Edwards did not live to fulfill his hope, but the posthumous publication of his 1739 sermons titled *A History of the Work of Redemption* gives us some faint idea of what the proposed work would have been like,<sup>22</sup> and his evident grasp of the appropriate architectonic and hermeneutical implications of the fact that history is the Bible's backbone, God's self-revelation being essentially historical in form and substance, put him at this point ahead of all his contemporaries. Had he lived as long as Wesley did and written his proposed treatise, showing the significance of history within a Bible-believing frame long before liberal scholars started using history to support their own skepticism, the course of Protestant theology during the past two centuries might have been very different. But we cannot pursue that thought here.

Edwards saw clearly that Scripture reveals God to be a society with a unity—a triune society, eternally bonded in mutual love—and he ventured to think of our salvation as, so to speak, a welcome into the transcendent family circle. God's plan, he once wrote, is that "[Christ] and his Father and they [Christians] should be as it were one family; that his people should be in a sort admitted into the society of the three persons in the Godhead."<sup>23</sup> Within this conception Edwards's probing mind offers a variety of ideas about the sense and way in which the Son is the

<sup>20</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 488-489.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 483-486.

<sup>23</sup> "Miscellanies" no. 571, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18, *The "Miscellanies,"* 501-832, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 110.

image of the Father and the Spirit is the divine love personalized. Whether in these he went beyond Scripture is moot, but he certainly did not intend to do that. At the end of the day, so he writes, “I am far from pretending to explaining [*sic*] the Trinity so as to render it no longer a mystery [i.e., a divine fact beyond our understanding]. I think it to be the highest and deepest of all mysteries still, notwithstanding anything I have said or conceived about it. I don’t intend to explain the Trinity.”<sup>24</sup> As John Owen made so clear in his battles with Socinianism,<sup>25</sup> confessional Trinitarianism is and must be presupposed in all articulations of Reformed covenant theology or else that theology collapses. Edwards knew this, and his grasp of the reality and centrality of the mystery of the transcendent eternal Trinity was firm.

Finally, just as Edwards presented all that has been stated thus far as clearly taught in specific Scriptures, so he brought it all to bear on the never-ending task of interpreting the Bible as a whole and every part of it, and fixing the standpoint and perspective of our receiving what God has to say to us in and through it. In other words, he worked in terms of the hermeneutical principle that all Reformed exegetes since Calvin had followed—namely, the analogy of faith or of Scripture (both phrases were used). This is the principle of the internal consistency of biblical teaching, as being first to last the product of a single divine mind. So he unfolded the Bible within its own theological frame, duly detecting and displaying its biggest and most pervasive themes—the sovereignty of God in creation, providence, and grace; the love of God to sinners, supremely expressed in the mediatorial ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ; and the power of God renewing hearts, generating faith and repentance, and transforming believers’ character and conduct.

And in doing this he constantly led his hearers to the pervasive biblical injunctions to look back and around and ahead, discerning as clearly as possible what God has done, is doing, and will do, praising and adoring, trusting and obeying, and hoping and enduring accordingly. As beyond a certain distance a view of scenery may get lost in mist,

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “An Essay on the Trinity,” in *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke/Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1971), 121-122.

<sup>25</sup> See John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, *Works XII*, ed. W. Goold (London: Banner of Truth, 1966) and his running battle with Socinian exegetes in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (7 vols., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991). See also Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: The Trinitarian Theology of John Owen* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998).

so beyond a certain point our sight of God's works and our knowledge of his purposes, seen as it were through biblical field glasses that bring them up with maximum clarity, will nonetheless dissolve into mystery: The God who has told us so much about himself is still not a God about whom we do, or can, ever know everything. So here is a limit, a line to approach and walk but not to overstep. Edwards walks this line with classic skill.

Such, then, is the framework of Edwards's theology. It had to be laid out first in order to put us in a position to understand what he says about the two linked themes of our title—the glory of God and the reviving of religion. Now, however, we can move straight to them, and shall do so.

## THE GLORY OF GOD

Edwards inherited a dispute among the learned: Was God's goal in creation his own glory, as Reformed theology maintained, or man's happiness, as Arminians and Deists thought? In his *Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*, posthumously published, Edwards resolved this question with startling brilliance. As his son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., put it:

It was said that, as God is a benevolent being . . . he could not but form creatures for the purpose of making them happy. Many passages of Scripture were quoted in support of this opinion. On the other hand, numerous and very explicit declarations of Scripture were produced to prove that God made all things for his own glory. Mr. Edwards was the first, who clearly showed, that both these were the ultimate end of the creation . . . and that they are really one and the same thing.<sup>26</sup>

Edwards clinched his case on this by surveying the biblical use of the word "glory" (Hebrew, *kabod*; Greek, LXX and NT, *doxa*). Having stated correctly that etymologically *kabod* implies "weight, greatness, abundance" and in use often conveys the thought of "God in fullness," Edwards traces the term thus:

Sometimes it is used to signify what is *internal, inherent*, or in the possession of a person [i.e., glory that *belongs* to someone]: and sometimes for *emanation, exhibition, or communication* of this internal glory [i.e.,

<sup>26</sup> Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs," in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:ccxii.

glory that *appears* to someone]: and sometimes for the *knowledge*, or *sense* of these [communications], in those to whom the exhibition or communication is made [i.e., glory that is *seen*, or *discerned*, by someone]; or an *expression* of this knowledge, sense, or effect [i.e., glory that is *given* to someone, by praise and thanks in joy and love].<sup>27</sup>

And the conclusion he offers—on the basis of both biblical texts that speak of glory and of glorifying in these four distinct though connected ways and also analytical argument surrounding this exegesis—is that God’s internal and intrinsic glory consists of his knowledge (omniscience with wisdom) plus his holiness (spontaneous virtuous love, linked with hatred of sin) plus his joy (supreme endless happiness); and that his glory (wise, holy, happy love) flows out from him, like water from a fountain, in loving spontaneity (grace), first in creation and then in redemption, both of which are so set forth to us so as to prompt praise; and that in our responsive, Spirit-led glorifying of God, God glorifies and satisfies himself, achieving that which was his purpose from the start.

The chief end of man, as the famous first answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism memorably puts it, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God so made us that in praising, thanking, loving, and serving him, we find our own supreme happiness and enjoyment of God in a way that otherwise we would not and could not do. We reach our highest enjoyment of God in and by glorifying him, and we glorify him supremely in and by enjoying him. In fact, we enjoy him most when we glorify him most, and vice versa. And God’s single-yet-complex end, now in redemption as it was in creation, is his own happiness and joy in and through ours. His great goal here and now is to glorify himself through glorifying, and being glorified by, rational human beings who out of their fallenness come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Thus the *emanation* (outflow) of divine glory in the form of creative and redemptive action results in a *remanation* (returning flow) of glory to God in the form of celebratory devotion. And so God’s goal for himself (Father, Son, and Spirit, the “they” who are “he” within the Triune unity), the goal that includes his goal for all Christian humankind, is achieved by means of a singly unitary process, which itself is ongoing and unending.

The unimaginable endlessness of this reciprocal sequencing that is

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The End for Which God Created the World,” in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:116.

in truth the end for which God created the world can only be indicated formulaically and analogically (to use a couple of non-Edwardsean terms). This is done for us in a normative way in Revelation 21, and C. S. Lewis most tellingly did it at the close of his final Narnia story, *The Last Battle*, where the children have been brought through a rail crash into the real Narnia that is to be their home forever. The key sentences are these:

Then Aslan [the Christ-like lion] turned to them and said:

“You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be . . . all of you are (as you used to call it in the Shadowlands) dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.”

. . . We can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.<sup>28</sup>

This picks up exactly, in mythical-parabolic terms, the point that Edwards, in his more prosaic way, was concerned to make. Amy Plantinga Pauw capsules it as follows:

Because “heaven is a progressive state,” the heavenly joy of the saints, and even of the triune God, will forever continue to increase. . . . Saints can look forward to an unending expansion of their knowledge and love of God, as their capacities are stretched by what they receive . . . there is no intrinsic limit to their joy in heaven. . . . As the saints continue to increase in knowledge and love of God, God receives more and more glory. This heavenly reciprocity will never cease, because the glory God deserves is infinite, and the capacity of the saints to perceive God’s glory and praise him for it is ever increasing.<sup>29</sup>

Here, finally, is how Edwards himself, in his rather more severe and abstract manner, sums the matter up. (“The creature” in what follows is the believer.)

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1964), 165.

<sup>29</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, “*The Supreme Harmony of All*”: *The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 180-181.

And though the emanation of God's fulness, intended in the creation, is to the creature as its *object*; and though the creature is the *subject* of the fulness communicated, which is the creature's good; yet it does not necessarily follow that, even in doing so, God did not make *himself* his end. It comes to the same thing. God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, 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. . . . The more happiness the greater union. . . . And as the happiness will be increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more strict [i.e., closely bound] and perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father and the Son; who are so united, that their interest is perfectly one. . . .

Let the most perfect union with God be represented by something at an infinite height above us; and the eternally increasing union of the saints with God, by something that is ascending constantly towards that infinite height . . . and that is to continue thus to move to all eternity.<sup>30</sup>

The two-way street of this unceasing process, says Edwards, embodies and expresses the true end for which God created the world: namely, the endless advancement of his glory, in union with us, through the endless advancement of ours, in union with him. Those who have in any measure tasted the refreshment and joy of heart that flow from faith in, friendship with, and worship of the holy Three (or shall I say the holy One, or One-in-Three) will latch on to Edwards's thinking here as a complete answer to any who fancy that the Christian heaven would be static and dull, and will themselves look forward to the awaiting glory with ever-growing eagerness.

## THE REVIVING OF RELIGION

What Edwards has analyzed out concerning the glory of God and of the godly is no more, just as it is no less, than a dotting of the i's and a crossing of the t's in what earlier Puritan and Reformed teachers had already said. It is, however, an important ingredient in our present line of thought because of the clarity with which it focuses Edwards's God-centered concept of religion. Living as we do in a human-centered culture shaped by the Enlightenment, and surrounded as we are by

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, "The End for Which God Created the World," 120.

human-centered forms of religion in as well as outside the churches, following Edwards at this point calls us to an effort of rethinking, reimagining, re-centering our attention, reeducating our desires, and refocusing our affections that is almost beyond our strength. Evangelical and liberal theology are, to be sure, always and necessarily at loggerheads, because cognitive revelation, on which evangelicalism builds, and cognitive relativism, which is basic to liberalism, are totally antithetical.

But for two centuries now evangelical and liberal pietists have been joining hands to give personal religion, previously defined as knowledge and service of God, a subjective twist that effectively redefines it as the experience of reaching after, and trying to maintain, some knowledge and service of God amid the ups and downs and strains and pains of daily life. The reference-point has moved; the study of religion—professedly Christian religion, that is—has become a study of human feelings, attitudes, and struggles rather than of God's gifts and calling and works and ways with humans, which was Edwards's agenda. Edwards has, indeed, an unquenchable interest in Christian and pseudo-Christian religious experience, which he describes and dissects with great clinical skill; but his interest is theocentric rather than anthropocentric, intellectual rather than sentimental, theological rather than anthropological, and doxological rather than psychological. Set his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* alongside William James's justly famous Gifford lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and you see at once that a watershed has been passed. Evangelical theologian and spiritual diagnostician Edwards asks, what is of God in all this; pragmatist philosopher and amateur psychologist James simply asks what happens. And today's pietistic evangelicals and liberals both tend only to ask what is inside us that makes us feel as we do at this moment, and what has God for us here and now to make us feel better. What a downhill slide there has been!

What Edwards, standing in the Reformational mainstream, meant by religion is very clear. It is the life of regeneration, repentance, and assured faith and hope in Christ, based on knowing oneself to be a justified and adopted child of God whom the Triune Lord has loved from eternity, whom the Son has redeemed by dying on the cross, and whom the Holy Spirit, the divine change agent, now indwells. It is the life of loving both the written Word of the Lord and the living Lord of the Word. It is a life of rigorous self-watch and self-discipline, for the



deforming, distracting, desensitizing, demonic power of sin in one's spiritual system must be detected and resisted. It is a life of reckoning with our temperamental limitations, whatever mixture of sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic we find we are, and seeking to transcend those shortcomings. It is a life of prayer—praise and petition; complaint and confession; meditation and celebration. And with that it is a quest for full Christlikeness of character and action, inasmuch as Christ “exhibited to the world such an illustrious pattern of humility, divine love, discreet zeal, self-denial, obedience, patience, resignation, fortitude, meekness, forgiveness, compassion, benevolence, and universal holiness, as neither men nor angels ever saw before.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, religion honors God by goodwill and integrity in all relationships and by enterprise in seizing such opportunities for “good works” of benevolence and help as present themselves.

What then is the reviving of religion? Again the idea is very clear. It is God pouring out his Spirit, and thereby ratcheting up the power and speed of the Spirit's work in human hearts to further the many facets of supernatural spiritual life that have just been referred to. When Edwards uses the word “revival,” it is as a synonym for “reviving,” and usually he adds “of religion” to make his meaning explicit. For him, the reviving of religion is rooted in the intensified realization of divine realities through God's work of making the sense of his own reality, and of the realities of sin and salvation, so vivid as to be overwhelming and inescapable. This creates in the heart a correspondingly intense urgency to get, and stay, right with God, and an equally intense joy of assurance and exaltation in worship when one's acceptance with God is out of doubt. That joy grows into the larger enjoyment of God in his beauty and goodness that was spoken of earlier and that operates as the driving force of God-glorifying life. Whatever else occurs springs from this source.

Under the impact of such joyful excitement, persons with inner scars and weaknesses due to previous bad experiences, bad relationships, and bad habits may fall into exaggerated emotionalism, hysterical eccentricities, and what was called “enthusiasm” (we would call it fanaticism)—namely, belief in direct divine revelations to oneself. But these phenomena are no sure signs of God at work, and when God is at work

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Life and Diary of the Rev. David Brainerd,” *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:313.

there is still nothing spiritually significant about them, though pride may prompt the persons concerned to think otherwise. What Edwards, in the title of a 1741 publication, called *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*<sup>32</sup> are (1) honor to Christ, (2) opposition to sin, (3) submission to Scripture, (4) awakening to truth, (5) love to God and man. These are the true, and only true, fruits and tokens of revival.

Edwards was in the thick of the reviving work of God, first in Northampton in 1734 and then in New England's Great Awakening, 1740-42, and his revival writings have classic status.<sup>33</sup> Should we, then, call him a revivalist—as even B. B. Warfield did, introducing him in 1912 as “saint and metaphysician, revivalist and theologian,”<sup>34</sup> and so making it look as if revival involvement was the most important part of his public life? Surely the label is inappropriate. Since Charles Finney in the 1830s, *revivalist* has been used to mean a specialist in what Finney called “protracted meetings” (modern equivalents are “revivals,” “crusades,” and “renewal missions”)—that is, special series of preachments designed to invigorate Christians and convert unbelievers.<sup>35</sup> But that is not what Edwards was at all. He was a preaching pastor, the long-term servant of a regular congregation, and as such he was a meticulous textual expositor who in a broad sense was preaching the gospel in what he hoped was an awakening way all the time, as indeed his surviving sermons clearly reveal. Such special sermons as he produced during and after the revivals were, so far as we know, diagnostic and didactic rather than evangelistic.<sup>36</sup> “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which so drastically impacted the church at Enfield and has so fixed the image of Edwards in North American culture, was for him a fairly standard treatment of hell-torment, a recurring theme in his own pulpit; it was in fact a sermon he had already preached at Northampton without anyone apparently turn-

<sup>32</sup> An enlarged version of Edwards's commencement address to a turbulent Yale community in 1741: *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:257-277. See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 233-238.

<sup>33</sup> These writings are: *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, 1735; *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, 1741; *Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, 1742; *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 1746; *The Life of David Brainerd*, 1749.

<sup>34</sup> Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, in *Works*, 9:515: opening sentence of article, “Edwards and New England Theology,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 221.

<sup>35</sup> See on this Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> *Charity and Its Fruits* was a sermon series in 1738; *A History of the Work of Redemption* was a sermon series in 1739; *Religious Affections* was a sermon series in 1742-43. *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (see notes 32, 33 above) also belongs here.

ing a hair. So when scholars, even great men like Warfield, call Edwards a revivalist, I wince and wish they had not done it.

The Great Awakening was controversial in its own day, and the reviving of religion is still something of a disputed question among evangelicals.<sup>37</sup> To clear the ground for our further advance, it will be helpful at this point to offer Edwardsean comment on some current opinions.

#### CURRENT OPINIONS ON REVIVAL

*"There is no doctrine of revival in the Bible."* If the meaning here is that no Bible writer discusses the reviving of religion in the formal, intentional way in which Paul treats justification in his letter to the Romans and John projects the divine saviorhood of Jesus Christ in his Gospel and epistles, we may agree without argument. But the Edwardsean comment is that doctrine, the explanatory declaration of God's doings and man's duty, is to be drawn from the biblical history of God's words and acts set together, and that there are in the Bible many words from God, especially in the prophets, and many recorded prayers from the godly setting forth the need and hope of spiritual reviving, alongside many narratives of religion actually revived, and out of these materials a doctrine of God's way of reviving his work in this world may properly be distilled. (Edwards, a postmillennialist, expected successive waves of revival eventually to convert the world.)

*"Revival is concerned with saving souls."* If the meaning is that many are converted when revivings of religion occur, again we may agree. It happened so among respectable colonists in Northampton, and throughout New England during the Great Awakening, and among native Indians at Crossweeksung and the Forks of Delaware under the ministry of David Brainerd, whose life and papers Edwards published as a paragon example of personal godliness and missionary fruitfulness.<sup>38</sup> But the Edwardsean comment must be that since religion is centrally concerned with holiness and the glorifying and enjoying of God as a way of life, the reviving of religion must center here too, and the conversions that command so much Christian attention at revival times must be seen as the entry into what really matters to God rather than as

<sup>37</sup> See Iain H. Murray, *Pentecost Today?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998); J. I. Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings*, vol. 2, *Serving the People of God* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 57-155.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Life and Diary of the Rev. David Brainerd," in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:313-458. See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 329-334; Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 300-309.

the heart of the divine concern. Certainly, true conversion, the correlate of divine illumination of the mind and regeneration of the heart, is a great thing. Edwards rates it greater than the creation of the world and even than the resurrection of Jesus, since in new birth the rule of sin in the heart has to be overcome; but to limit one's concern in revival to conversions alone would actually be a Spirit-quenching mistake.

***“Revival is the action of God, but we can and must pray it down.”***

If this simply means that Christians should pray for the reviving of religion because the Bible tells them to and revival is something that in any case they long for, there would be no problem here. Edwards himself argues all of that in the mini-treatise he wrote to commend some Scottish ministers' proposal of an international concert of prayer each Saturday evening, each Sunday morning, and the first Tuesday each quarter for seven years, interceding for the conversion of the world. Its title page ran *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Unity of God's People Through the World, in Extraordinary Prayer, for the Revival of Religion, and the Advent of Christ's Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time*.<sup>39</sup> To get the Christian world (that is, for Edwards, the Protestant communities everywhere) praying for revival was for Edwards hugely important, as the grandiose terms of his title seem to indicate. Nor is there a problem if the thought is simply that very earnest prayer is appropriate when very great blessing is being sought, for, as Edwards knew, that indeed is so. But the Edwardsean comment must be that we cannot directly induce a reviving visitation from God by the quantity or quality of our praying, and it would be arrogant presumption for us to think we could. God always answers faithful prayers in a positive way, but not always precisely when, where, and how we were hoping. God reserves the right to give better answers in better ways than we have thought to ask for. But the one in charge is always he, never we, and Edwards strikes this note at the end of his *Humble Attempt* by reminding his readers of the biblical link between

Praying and Not Fainting. . . . It is very apparent from the word of God, that he is wont often to try the faith and patience of his people, when crying to him for some great and important mercy, by withholding the

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Humble Attempt," *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:278-312.

mercy sought, for a season; and not only so, but at first to cause an increase of dark appearances. And yet he, without fail, at last succeeds those who continue instant in prayer, with all perseverance, and “will not let him go except he blesses. . . .”<sup>40</sup>

This, Edwards urges, is a truth of which the saints must never lose sight.

*“Revival is the answer to all the church’s problems.”* To some of them, such as the problem of spiritual apathy and deadness and bickering in the congregation, yes; but a reviving visitation from God brings its own problems, problems of spiritual life overflowing in disorder and counterfeited in fanaticism, and problems of alienation, opposition, and division between those who welcome the visitation and those who do not. No one knew this better than Edwards, whose revival writings are from one standpoint a series of attempts to deal with this unhappy state of affairs.

#### ELEMENTS IN REVIVAL

What exactly happens in a reviving visitation from God, gradual or sudden, brief or prolonged, large- or small-scale, as the case may be? From Scripture, and particularly from the Acts of the Apostles, which is a narrative from the archetypal revival era, we can put together a general answer to that question, all the specifics of which can be illustrated, one way or another, from Edwards’s revival writings. To be sure, no two episodes of revival are identical, if only because the various individuals and communities to which, and the various cultural backgrounds against which, the reviving of religion takes place have their own unique features, and in every narrative of revival these should be noted. But the same generic pattern appears everywhere. Revival is God touching minds and hearts in an arresting, devastating, exalting way, to draw them to himself through working from the inside out rather than from the outside in. It is God accelerating, intensifying, and extending the work of grace that goes on in every Christian’s life, but is sometimes overshadowed and somewhat smothered by the impact of other forces. It is the near presence of God giving new power to the gospel of sin and grace. It is the Holy Spirit sensitizing souls to divine realities and so generating deep-level responses to God in the form of faith and repentance,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 312.

praise and prayer, love and joy, works of benevolence and service and initiatives of outreach and sharing. The pattern can be analyzed as follows:

1. *God comes down.* There is no clearer way to characterize the sharpened sense of God's close presence in his transcendent power, holiness, and grace than this phrase from Isaiah 64:1. God is felt to be inescapable as he searches our hearts, measures our lives, makes us know what he thinks of us, moves us to call on him for help, shows us his mercy, and fills us with joy because of it. Preoccupation with God and religion, both for sorrow and for joy, continues as long as the visitation lasts.

2. *God's Word pierces.* Late in the seventeenth century, John Howe bewailed from the pulpit the fact that Puritan preachers were no longer able to "get within" their hearers as they had been able to do a generation earlier.<sup>41</sup> Puritanism had once abounded in preachers whose gift was to "rip up" consciences, as the Puritans regularly put it, but that was no longer so. What that meant was not that veteran Puritans like Howe no longer knew how to make the searching applications that had once marked their movement, but that the Commonwealth period and the decades leading up to it had been an era of revival, which the post-Restoration period was not. In revival times, Bible teaching about God and sin, death and eternal life, spiritual lostness and divine salvation is always felt to come with the authority of God. When Paul reminded the Thessalonians that they had accepted his gospel "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13), and when he asked them to pray that in his ongoing ministry "the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you" (2 Thess. 3:1), this is what he was referring to. ("Run and be glorified" is the literal rendering of the Greek verbs used here, and "be glorified" conveys the thought of being venerated as coming from God and displaying his glory in its declaration of what he has done.) Under revival conditions the ministry of the Word of God—

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<sup>41</sup> "It is plain . . . that there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us [ministers]. We know not . . . how to get within you: our words die in our mouths . . . We speak not as persons . . . that expect to make you serious, heavenly, mindful of God, and to walk more like Christians. The methods of alluring and convincing souls, even that some of us have known, are lost from among us in a great part . . . when such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here [in the text, Ezek. 39:29] signified, they shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense [i.e., feeling], with more seriousness, with more compassion and allurements, than we now find we can." John Howe, preaching in 1678; cited from Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971), 245.

rather, the divine Word ministered, whether through preaching, reading, gossip, or however—strikes the conscience with piercing and convincing authority.

3. *Man's sin is seen.* The divinely inspired Old Testament prophets set forth the sins of God's people with all the lurid ugliness that their oriental imaginations could command, but people were unmoved; as we say today, they simply did not see it. When, however, the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost and Peter spoke to the crowd of their sin in crucifying the now risen and enthroned Christ, they were "cut to the heart" (the Greek verb is ordinarily used of sawing) and asked aloud what they should do to get rid of their guilt (Acts 2:37). At times of revival, deep conviction of personal sin, particularly of the dishonor that unlove and unbelief do to Christ, fastens upon heart and conscience as the Spirit applies the truth, thus fulfilling Jesus' own words recorded in John 16:8-11.

4. *Christ's cross is valued.* "We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24). "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). So wrote Paul, himself both a convert and a preacher under revival conditions. Discernment of the cross as an atoning sacrifice, and faith in the crucified Lord, and exultation in the forgiveness of sins are further elements in the reviving of religion, whenever and wherever it occurs. Christianity that is alive in the heart is always cross-centered.

5. *Change goes deep.* Repentance, flowing from faith, is a change of mind expressed in a changed way of life. Thinking differently, we behave differently. The essence of the change is to stop living to oneself in self-will and sin and to start living to God in obedience and holiness. At revival times the inward pressure thus to change and leave the past behind becomes very strong and may prompt dramatic and violent gestures of renunciation, like the burning of a fortune's worth of occultist literature that Luke describes in Acts 19:18-19. The best exegesis of the violence that takes the kingdom of God by force understands it as the drastic changes that true repentance requires and that true converts actually make (Matt. 11:12; cf. Luke 16:16).

6. *Love breaks out.* "The town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of *love* . . . as it was then."<sup>42</sup> Knowledge of being the object of God's saving love generates grateful love to him and joy-

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:348.

ful love to all others. The seemingly extravagant mutual love and care that the New Testament writers celebrate as fact in the first churches (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; Col. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:9; etc.) is part of the evidence of revival conditions at that time.

**7. Joy fills hearts.** Peter, writing to Jewish Christians all over Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1), many of whom he could not have known personally, nonetheless declares of them all: "Though you do not now see [Christ], you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1:8; the Greek says literally, "with glorified joy"). Thinking of today's church, we wonder how Peter could have felt entitled to generalize in this way, but the answer stares us in the face: Under first-century revival conditions, inexpressible joy in Christ was virtually a standard and universal experience among Christian believers. When God is reviving his work, intense joy, alongside generous love, becomes the norm.

**8. Each church becomes itself**—becomes, that is, the people of the divine presence in an experiential, as distinct from a merely notional, sense. God is felt to be there, present to bless, in the midst of those who are his. In 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 Paul says that if in church all speech from all parties takes the form of intelligible declaration of gospel grace (which is what "prophecy" means here), then an unbeliever, wandering in, "is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." Paul's point, that prophecy does more good than tongues in church, would gain no force from his saying this unless something of this kind had already happened in the Corinthian church, so that it made sense to expect it to happen again. Under revival conditions the sense of God's presence among his people is vivid, and such things do in fact happen.

**9. The lost are found.** The blessing overflows; the saints reach out; unconverted people seek and find Christ. Earlier the point was made that revival is about more than conversions, but that does not mean it is not about conversions at all. Revivals of religion are ordinarily times of evangelistic fruitfulness, as was the case in Jerusalem after Pentecost and in Northampton in 1734-35. The cautious Edwards writes:

I am far from pretending to be able to determine how many have lately been the subjects of . . . mercy; but if I may be allowed to declare any



thing that appears to me probable in a thing of this nature, I hope that more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ, in this town, in the space of half a year.<sup>43</sup>

Later he thought he had overestimated. But the point—that there is always an evangelistic overflow when God revives religion, as was the case in Jerusalem long ago (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7)—remains.

**10. *Satan keeps pace.*** The devil is not a creator but a destroyer. He is always busy trying to wreck the work of God. He is a cunning and resourceful adversary who at revival times, over and above his regular trapping routines, uses the false fire of fanaticism, the false zeal of errant teachers, and the false strategies of orthodox overdoers and divisive firebrands majoring in minors to discredit and demolish what God has been building up. Under revival conditions, as at other times, Christians need to take and use the complete armor of God, as described by Paul in Ephesians 6:10-20, in order to stand against him.

These, then, are the processes of revival, clinically stated. In medical studies, physiology explores the healthy working of all body parts, while pathology, applying physiological knowledge, investigates physical malfunctions and asks what can be done to put them right. Edwards was a spiritual pathologist of great clinical brilliance and thus was a shrewd guide in all aspects of communion with God, most outstandingly in the context of religious excitement as God revives religion and Satan keeps pace. Surveying his work in this field, as his own writings witness to and explicate it, we see in him three special strengths for this task.

*First strength:* a true understanding of religion. Edwards knows that *sin* is an anti-God allergy found in every human soul, the taproot of all active disobedience, all bad habits and inability to break them, all ego-centric and self-serving motivations, all desires (lusts) in which the I-want syndrome called original sin finds expression, and all the unbelief of and unresponsiveness to the Word of God that mark our lives. He knew that regeneration is the supernatural renewing of the heart in the motivational image of the Lord Jesus, so that the urge to love and honor and serve and please and exalt and glorify God the Father now dominates and becomes the mainspring of faith, of repentance, of righteousness, of real worship, prayer, joy, and neighbor-love, and of all good

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 350.

works (good inwardly, in motivation, as well as outwardly, in performance). And he knew that holiness means, negatively, renouncing and avoiding moral and spiritual evil and, in positive terms, actively loving God and man. This knowledge equips him to identify and instill truly pure religion at all times.

*Second strength:* a true understanding of the nature of revival, what God does when he revives religion. The ten-point analysis set out above mirrors Edwards's view here. This knowledge equipped him to distinguish between the authentic and the phony, that which was of the Spirit of God and that which was carnal and satanic, and to write about the difference in a way that remains standard for all time.

*Third strength:* a true understanding of God's wisdom and sovereignty in reviving religion according to the church's need and his people's prayers. Knowing that those who pray for revivings of religion are inevitably, whether they realize it or not, asking for trouble, and foreseeing what trouble will come, God yet keeps times and seasons in his own power as his own secret and does what he does in answer to those prayers according to his own discretion. Therefore we must learn to combine eagerness in prayer and boldness in diagnosing deadness and challenging sin with submission to providence and to sustain all three for as long as we have to, confident that if our stance triggers new troubles for us and our petitions are not granted in our own lifetime, an answer will be given in some form someday. Edwards's teaching on patient persistence in prayer for revival blessing that will change the world reflects abidingly valid insight at this point.

So, of all theological writers on the reviving of religion, I hail Jonathan Edwards as not only the first but also the best. Now back to his own big picture.

We should now note that such revivings of religion as we have analyzed, and as Edwards had experienced, had a key place in his understanding of God's plan for world history. What is nowadays called postmillennialism seemed to him clear in Scripture—Old Testament prophecy, including Daniel, and the book of the Revelation, interpreted in historicist terms, being the main sources. He thought the final era of history, when knowledge of God would fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, had begun. The book of Acts tells how, at the start of the new-covenant dispensation, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit produced an impetus that took the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. Edwards seems

to have thought this paradigmatic, for he taught that through such outpourings the gospel would circle the world, and the mass of humans would be converted. This would be the full realization of the kingdom of Christ, who was central in all God's purposes. The role of the church in Edwards's day and in future days, therefore, was to match the church's role in Acts—that is, to become through its ministers the instrumental means of spreading the gospel. Ecclesiology is more the frame than the focus of Edwards's thought about God's plan. Understandably, Reformers and Puritans were constantly laboring to get and keep churches in scriptural shape, whatever else claimed their attention. Edwards, however, could take the Reformed church order of New England for granted, and so, equally understandably, his point of reference when looking ahead was less the perfecting of the church than the triumph of the kingdom of Christ, of which the church was the executive agent. Edwards was not weak in his ecclesiology, as witnessed by his willingness to lose his job, as he did, for insisting on classic New England discipline at the Lord's Table. Characteristically, though, his thought about the church was an aspect of his thought about the kingdom.

Today the older churches worldwide are under threat, so it is natural for biblically informed minds within them to strategize for the renewing and reviving of churches (congregations, that is) as units and in their life together. For Edwards, however, the focus of thought was always the reviving of religion in and through the churches for the conversion of the world. What difference this makes is a matter worth discussing, but we cannot do that here.

#### WRAP-UP

The initial goal of this essay was to elucidate Edwards's understanding of revival, distinguishing it from more general ideas of renewal as the reanimating of the church's corporate life. For it is in my view important to see that what is meant when we hear of congregational renewal, biblical renewal, liturgical renewal, ecumenical renewal, lay renewal, and so on is something less than Edwards's conception of a reviving of religion—that is, a deepening and energizing of personal communion with God according to the Scriptures. Edwards, however, like Calvin, was a very organic as well as a very powerful, Bible-centered, God-focused thinker, and it soon became clear that the project required some

account to be given of how Edwards understood the fellowship with God that constitutes religion and the God with whom Christians commune; and so the essay grew into its present shape. Out of the material surveyed, the following questions for us now seem to arise:

First, do we acknowledge Edwards's God—that is, the biblical profile and lineaments of the Creator as Edwards presents them from the Scriptures? Sadly, for many in the churches today the word *God* has no clear meaning. Talking-points about God among the church's intellectuals include the anti-trinitarian monism into which Process Theology has finally mutated, the non-hierarchical social Trinity of some post-liberals, and the ultra-Arminian open theism of some evangelicals. But neither God's holiness, nor his glory, nor the punitive pain involved in being finally condemned by one's Creator receive much serious attention. Yet if Edwards is right, when God revives religion, these truths, faithfully taught, make an enormous impact; and about their prominence in the Bible there can be no question. So we do well to ask ourselves whether we have come to terms with them as of now.

Second, do we understand religion as Edwards did? Specifically, do we understand Christian existence as the joy of enjoying God in Christ, framed by the struggles of a life of repentance, self-denial, and suffering in its various forms? Much is heard today of spirituality as self-discovery and self-fulfillment in God and of a relationship with God that brings happiness, contentment, satisfaction, and inward peace. But of bearing the cross, battling wrong desires, resisting temptation, mortifying sin, and making those decisions that Jesus pictured as cutting off a limb and plucking out an eye, little or nothing gets said. Yet this is the living out of repentance, and without realistic emphasis on this more demanding side of the Christian life, a great deal of self-deceived shallowness and a great many false professions of faith from persons ignorant of the cost of discipleship are bound to appear. Now it is precisely the life of repentance, of cross-bearing, of holiness under pressure and joy within pain—the life, in other words, of following Jesus on his own stated terms—that God revives, for this is the reality of religion. Again, we do well to ask ourselves whether this is something we have come to terms with as of now.

Third, would we recognize a reviving of religion if we were part of one? I ask myself that question. For more than half a century the need of such reviving in the places where I have lived, worshiped, and worked

has weighed me down. I have read of past revivals. I have learned, through a latter-day revival convert from Wales, that there is a *tinc* in the air, a kind of moral and spiritual electricity, when God's close presence is enforcing his Word. I have sat under the electrifying ministry of the late Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who as it were brought God into the pulpit with him and let him loose on the listeners. Lloyd-Jones's ministry blessed many, but he never believed he was seeing the revival he sought. I have witnessed remarkable evangelical advances, not only academic but also pastoral, with churches growing spectacularly through the gospel on both sides of the Atlantic and believers maturing in the life of repentance as well as in the life of joy. Have I seen revival? I think not—but would I know? From a distance, the difference between the ordinary and extraordinary working of God's Spirit looks like black and white, a difference of kind; to Edwards, however, at close range, it appeared a matter of degree, as his *Narrative* and his Brainerd volume (to look no further) make clear. Some evangelicals need to be asked, Are you not expecting too little from God in the way of moral transformation? But others need to be asked, Are you not expecting too much from God in the way of situational drama? Do we always know when we are in a revival situation?

To bring Wesley back for a moment before we say good-bye: Had I been mentored through the successive levels of one of his brilliantly structured Methodist Societies, from trial band (a small group of four to ten, exploring whether I truly wanted God in my life) to class membership in the United Society and to a band of believers, and on in due course to the Select Society, a fellowship of bands seeking to live a life of holy love, would it have been clear to me at any stage that I was part of a nationwide work of God's reviving religion?<sup>44</sup> I do not know. Here is an uncertainty with which, I think, we must all learn to live. Touches of reviving, I suspect, surround us, and we are not always aware of them.

What is certain, however, is this: God calls us, and wisdom directs us, to seek for ourselves the full reality of religion as Edwards describes it, and to pray for the further reviving of religion, by God's grace and for God's glory, that all our communities have need of at this time.

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<sup>44</sup> For a fuller description of the structure of Wesley's countrywide United Societies, see Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 276-282, 318-319, and Tim Stafford and Tom Albin, "Finding God in Small Groups," *Christianity Today* 47 (August 2003): 42-44. "The whole Wesley revival is really a revival of pastoral care and spiritual guidance" (43).

PURSUING A PASSION  
FOR GOD THROUGH  
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES:  
LEARNING FROM  
JONATHAN EDWARDS

*Donald S. Whitney*

Jonathan Edwards is a spiritual hero to many Christians, and rightly so. Probably the main reason you're reading this is because he's a spiritual hero of yours. The Bible commands us to have the right kind of spiritual heroes. In Hebrews 13:7 we're told, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith."<sup>1</sup>

We acknowledge, of course, that even the holiest human heroes are inconsistent ones. All our heroes are imperfect and sinful. As the next verse in this passage reminds us, only the perfect and sinless Hero, only "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (v. 8). Nevertheless, the right kind of heroes, because they were devoted followers of Christ and people of his Word, will guide and protect us far more than they will mislead us.

Jonathan Edwards is just such a spiritual hero. Like those whom the first recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were to follow, Edwards is one "who spoke the word of God" to us through his life and works. As such, he is a hero whose life we should "remember," "consider," and "imitate" after the fashion of Hebrews 13:7. The purpose of this chapter is to help us remember, consider, and imitate Edwards's example of pursuing a passion for God through spiritual disciplines.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references in this chapter are from the NASB.

## WHAT ARE THESE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES THROUGH WHICH EDWARDS PURSUED HIS PASSION FOR GOD?

The spiritual disciplines are the practical ways whereby we obey the command of 1 Timothy 4:7: “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” The goal of every spiritual discipline is—as this verse teaches—godliness. Godliness is another way of describing holiness, sanctification, and Christlikeness. To put it in other terms, the purpose of the spiritual disciplines is intimacy with Christ and conformity (both internal and external) to Christ.

To further clarify what spiritual disciplines are, think of them as:

***Practices.*** A spiritual discipline is something you do, not something you are. Disciplines should not be confused with graces, character qualities, or the fruit of the Spirit. Prayer, for example, is a spiritual discipline, while joy, strictly speaking, is not. As practices, the spiritual disciplines are first about doing, then about being. The spiritual disciplines are right doing that leads to right being. That is, the purpose of doing the practices known as spiritual disciplines is the state of being described in 1 Timothy 4:7 as “godliness.” Thus the discipline of prayer, rightly practiced, should result in godly joy. So while they should not be separated from each other, it is important to distinguish the *practices* known as the spiritual disciplines from the *fruit* that should result from them.

***Biblical practices.*** We may not properly call just anything we do a spiritual discipline. Regardless of the benefit we may derive from a given activity, it is best to reserve the biblical term “discipline” for practices taught by precept or example in the Bible. Otherwise, anything and everything will eventually be called a spiritual discipline. Someone could claim that washing dishes—which, admittedly, ought to be done in the presence of and to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31)—is as spiritually beneficial to themselves as prayer is to others. But if we allow this, what basis for disagreement over what is and what isn’t a spiritual discipline will exist except personal experience and preference?

***Sufficient for godliness.*** Despite the spiritual help—real and perceived—that we may gain by practices not found in Scripture, the spiritual disciplines taught or modeled in the Bible are sufficient “for the purpose of godliness.” Only the spiritual disciplines found in Scripture are “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for cor-

rection, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). And “every good work” for which Scripture makes us “adequate” and “equipped” would certainly include “the purpose of godliness.”

***Means to godliness, not ends.*** A person is not automatically godly just because he or she practices the spiritual disciplines. This was the error of the Pharisees, for although they prayed, memorized Scripture, fasted, and practiced other disciplines, Jesus pointed to them as the epitome of *ungodliness*. Godliness is the result of God’s Spirit changing us into Christlikeness *through* the means of the disciplines. Apart from faith and the right motives when practicing them, the disciplines can be dead works. The purpose for practicing the spiritual disciplines is not to see how many chapters of the Bible we can read or how long we can pray, nor is it found in anything else that can be counted or measured. We’re not necessarily more godly because we engage in these biblical practices. Instead, these biblical practices should be the *means* that result in true godliness—that is, intimacy with and conformity to Christ.

***Personal and interpersonal.*** Some spiritual disciplines are practiced alone; some are practiced with others. For instance, the Bible instructs us to pray in private, but it also teaches us to pray with the church. Some disciplines, like silence and solitude, are almost exclusively practiced in isolation from people. Yet some, like fellowship and communion, cannot be experienced alone. Our individual personalities incline each of us toward the disciplines of privacy or the disciplines of society. However, both personal and interpersonal disciplines are necessary for a balanced Christlikeness, for Jesus practiced both the disciplines of withdrawal and the disciplines of engagement.

As Edwards was not only a minister himself but grew up in a minister’s home, his involvement with the interpersonal (congregational) disciplines is taken for granted. Instead of those corporate practices, this chapter is concerned with the role that the personal spiritual disciplines played in Edwards’s life.

These timeless and universal disciplines are not mere biblical responsibilities; rather they are the God-given means of experiencing God. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit within, Christians can experience God everywhere and in all circumstances. But there are certain means God has revealed in Scripture—the spiritual disciplines—that



he has ordained especially for the purpose of seeking and savoring him. And it was through these God-given means that Jonathan Edwards pursued his passion for God.

God indeed was a passion and delight for Edwards from the first daybreak of God's grace upon his soul in the spring of 1721. Years afterward he wrote about that divine daybreak, a spiritual sunrise that occurred when he was in his late teens:

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, 1 Tim. 1:17, "Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen." As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven; and be as it were swallowed up in him forever! I kept saying, and as it were singing, over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do, with a new sort of affection.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that it was through the means of Scripture reading, prayer, singing, and worship—biblical spiritual disciplines—that Edwards experienced his enjoyment of God. From the biographies, and especially the pages of his own pen, we learn more of the specific details of . . .

## HOW JONATHAN EDWARDS PURSUED A PASSION FOR GOD THROUGH THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

### *Bible Intake*

All forms of encountering Scripture are gathered under the heading of "Bible Intake." This includes hearing, reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word. Although there is evidence that Edwards engaged in each of these, I want to focus in particular on how Edwards models what is arguably the best way of experiencing the sweetness of Scripture—medita-

<sup>2</sup> Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:xiii.

tion. While there is no one ideal method of meditating on the Bible, essentially it involves thinking in a prolonged and focused way about something found in the text while hearing, reading, studying, or memorizing it.

Meditation on Scripture was Edwards's practice from his first days as a disciple of Jesus. Later, describing the time soon after his conversion, he wrote, "I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence to see the wonders contained in it, and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders."<sup>3</sup>

Edwards seemed particularly fond of meditating on Scripture while walking in solitude or while on horseback, whether riding for relaxation or on a journey. What is most important, of course, is the result of this practice. In his *Personal Narrative*, Edwards wrote of the impact of meditation on Scripture on his soul:

Sometimes, only mentioning a single word caused my heart to burn within me; or only seeing the name of Christ, or the name of some attribute of God. . . . The sweetest joys and delights I have experienced, have not been those that have arisen from a hope of my own good estate, but in a direct view of the glorious things of the gospel.

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 and 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. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him; to live upon Him; to serve and follow Him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have, several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xlvii-xlviii.

Like Edwards, we *feel* most deeply about things when we *think* most deeply about them. Why is it that we can read a passage of Scripture at home, and it may affect us very little, but then our pastor can preach on that same passage and we are deeply stirred? It's because when we read it at home, our eyes pass over the words in a few seconds, we close the Bible, and the words immediately leak out of our minds. But when we sit under a preacher who focuses our attention on that same passage for several minutes—pointing out details of the text, comparing it with other passages, illustrating and applying it—our emotions are kindled, and we begin to feel more deeply about what God says in that section of Scripture.

The tendency of most Christians in our hurried, overburdened times is to close the Bible as soon as we've read it and turn to the next thing on our to-do list. If pressed, we'd usually have to admit—immediately after closing the Bible—that we don't remember a thing we've read. Reading alone will seldom give us the encounter with God, the spiritual nourishment, that our souls need.

Reading is the exposure to Scripture—and that's the starting place—but meditation is the absorption of Scripture. And it is the absorption of Scripture that causes the water of the Word of God to percolate deeply into the parched soil of the soul and refresh it.

### *Prayer*

Edwards was so devoted to prayer that it is hard to find a daily routine for him that wasn't permeated with it. He prayed alone when he arose, then had family prayer before breakfast. Prayer was a part of each meal, and he prayed again with the family in the evening. He prayed over his studies, and he prayed as he walked in the evenings. Prayer was both a discipline and a part of his leisure.

Biographer George Marsden draws a similar portrait of Edwards's life of prayer:

He began the day with private prayers followed by family prayers, by candlelight in the winter. Each meal was accompanied by household devotions, and at the end of each day Sarah joined him in his study for prayers. Jonathan kept secret the rest of his daily devotional routine, following Jesus' command to pray in secret. Throughout the day, his goal was to remain constantly with a sense of living in the presence of

God, as difficult as that might be. Often he added secret days of fasting and additional prayers.<sup>5</sup>

Prayer, then, for Edwards was both planned and informal, scheduled and spontaneous, on a daily basis. From the time when his teenage soul first began to experience what he called “that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things,” it was as though Edwards could not think long of God without speaking or singing to him. “Prayer seemed natural to me,” he wrote of the change in his life, “as the breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent.”<sup>6</sup>

Prayer was so essential to Edwards’s Christianity that the idea of a Christian who did not pray was preposterous. Some of the most sobering words he ever spoke were directed toward those who claimed to be followers of Jesus but who never prayed in private. In his sermon on “Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer,” Edwards solemnly declared:

I would exhort those who have entertained a hope of their being true converts—and who since their supposed conversion have left off the duty of secret prayer, and ordinarily allow themselves in the omission of it—to throw away their hope. If you have left off calling upon God, it is time for you to leave off hoping and flattering yourselves with an imagination that you are children of God.<sup>7</sup>

It was inconceivable that anyone could know the God he knew and not be compelled by the sweetness, love, and satisfaction found in God to pray. It seemed contrary to Edwards’s understanding of Scripture that anyone could be indwelt by the Spirit who causes God’s children to “cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15; cf. Gal. 4:6) and yet not cry out to the Father in regular private prayer. Edwards testifies that when a person has a passion for God, he prays.

### *Private Worship*

Here I want to concentrate on Edwards’s habit of singing in his private worship of God. Just as most Christians could not imagine pub-

<sup>5</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Dwight, “Memoirs,” xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer,” in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:74.

lic worship without singing, apparently Edwards could not conceive of private worship without it. But he did not sing praises to God when alone merely because he felt obligated to do so. Rather, Edwards spoke of his private, spontaneous songs to God as that which “seemed natural” and flowed from the sweetness of his contemplations of God.

He writes of this in his *Personal Narrative* as he describes the early years of his Christian life:

I often used to sit and view the moon for a long time; and in the day, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things; in the mean time, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunderstorm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, if I may so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunderstorm; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder, which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God. While thus engaged, it always seemed natural to me to sing or chant forth my meditations; or, to speak my thoughts in soliloquies with a singing voice.<sup>8</sup>

As he matured in his relationship with God, Edwards continued singing in his frequent times of private worship. In his *Personal Narrative* he continues to describe his experience “year after year; often walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; and it was always my manner, at such times, to sing forth my contemplations.”<sup>9</sup>

Why not follow Edwards's example? Sing to God in private worship for the same reasons you sing to him in public worship. “It is good to sing praises to our God” (Ps. 147:1). Like Edwards, enjoy the goodness of singing praises to God every day, not just on Sunday.

<sup>8</sup> Dwight, “Memoirs,” xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Solitude

It is no secret that Edwards was a private man and accused of being too withdrawn from society. Some of his habits for seclusion are understandable when we realize that his study, writing, and sermon preparation had to be done in the same house with a wife, eleven children, servants, and frequent guests. But even as a single man, Jonathan Edwards sought solitude, not merely to be more productive, but in order to meet with God. During his twentieth year, when he was in New York and in his first pastoral ministry, he often abandoned the bustle of the city and the attractions it might have had for an eligible bachelor so far from home. Writing of that time, Edwards recalls, “I very frequently used to retire into a solitary place, on the banks of Hudson’s river, at some distance from the city, for contemplation on divine things and secret converse with God; and had many sweet hours there.”<sup>10</sup>

Apparently this was a discipline by which he experienced much spiritual pleasure throughout his life. It seems to have been his daily habit—weather permitting—to ride the few blocks south from his house to the primary intersection in Northampton, there turn right on Main Street, go past the meetinghouse, and ride west of town two or three miles. On his way out and back he would pray, think, and sing. Typically he found a secluded spot to walk alone with God in the woods or along hillsides. He speaks of this as his regular practice in the *Personal Narrative*, which he wrote when he was thirty-five. As he begins the description of an experience two years earlier, he writes, “I rode out into the woods for my health . . . having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer.”<sup>11</sup>

While Edwards doubtless would have acknowledged his own propensity to privacy, he maintained that true grace inclined every Christian to be much alone with God:

Some are greatly affected when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it in secret, in close meditation, prayer and conversing with God when alone, and separated from the world. A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it; but he also delights

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xlv.

at times to retire from all mankind, to converse with God in solitude. And this also has peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging his affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places for holy meditation and prayer. . . . It is the nature of true grace, however it loves Christian society in its place, in a peculiar manner to delight in retirement, and secret converse with God.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever may be said about Edwards's individual preferences for solitude, we cannot deny that Jesus himself frequently sought to be alone with the Father. Texts such as Matthew 14:23 and Luke 4:42 are similar to what we read in Mark 1:35: "In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there." Seeking God-focused solitude is a Christlike habit. Like Edwards, when we rightly practice the spiritual discipline of solitude, we not only conform to Christ's example, we encounter him.

### *Fasting*

The frequency of references to the discipline of fasting in the literature by and about Jonathan Edwards may surprise those contemporary Christians who have seldom heard fasting mentioned in their own churches. He often referred to or called for congregational fasts, and for events as varied as military campaigns,<sup>13</sup> epidemic sickness,<sup>14</sup> and revival.<sup>15</sup> Eight months before he was fired, Edwards received the cooperation of the church in Northampton when he called for a Fast Day on October 26, 1749, "to pray to God that he would have mercy on this church . . . that he would forgive the sins of both minister and people."<sup>16</sup>

But these congregational fasts had a counterpart in Edwards's private spirituality. Samuel Hopkins tells us this, writing from the perspective of one who spent eight months in the Northampton pastor's home

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:311-312.

<sup>13</sup> "Edwards' sermon notes for April 4, 1745, are marked with the words, 'Fast for success in the expedition against Cape Breton.'" Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 285.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards's notes for a sermon on Psalm 65:2 in January 1736 are marked with the words, "Fast on occasion of the sickness at the East Ward." *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 803.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 515-521.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 319.

in the early 1740s. While noting that much of Edwards's personal devotional life is shrouded in secrecy, he writes confidently that Edwards frequently fasted:

Mr. Edwards made a secret of his private devotion, and therefore it cannot be particularly known: though there is much evidence, that he was punctual, constant and frequent in secret prayer, and often kept days of fasting and prayer in secret; and set apart time for serious, devout meditations on spiritual and eternal things, as part of his religious exercise in secret.<sup>17</sup>

Edwards thought that ministers, in particular, should discipline themselves to fast. In *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*, he said, "I should think ministers, above all persons, ought to be much in secret prayer and fasting, and also much in praying and fasting with one another."<sup>18</sup> But he certainly did not think that the blessings of fasting should be enjoyed only by the clergy, as his calls for congregational fasts demonstrate. Further evidence of his view that private fasting was a discipline for all Christians is seen in his letter to eighteen-year-old Deborah Hatheway, penned on June 3, 1741, in response to her request for spiritual counsel. Edwards advised her in a way consistent with his own practice: "Under special difficulties, or when in great need of, or great longings after, any particular mercy for yourself or others, set apart a day for secret prayer and fasting for yourself alone."<sup>19</sup>

In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus taught his disciples about fasting and began the instructions with, "Whenever you fast . . ." Edwards understood these directions to apply to every Christian in every generation, including himself. His example in this discipline, like the Book upon which he based the discipline, is still valid.

### *Journal-Keeping*

The diary (a term used synonymously here with "journal") of Jonathan Edwards opens with an entry on December 18, 1722, when he was nine-

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards*, <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/text/Hopkins/Hopkins.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival," 507.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "To Deborah Hatheway," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 94.



teen. It begins so abruptly that Sereno Edwards Dwight, a descendant of Edwards who published in 1830 the first edition of his ancestor's works, conjectures that there was an earlier section that may have reached back to Jonathan's days of theological study at Yale (1720-1722).<sup>20</sup> For all practical purposes, Edwards's diary concludes with an entry on November 16, 1725. Inexplicably, there are but six brief entries made over the next ten years.

Dwight is certain that Edwards never meant for his diary to be preserved and read by others. "Had it been with him at the close of his life," Dwight suggests, "it is not unlikely it might have been destroyed."<sup>21</sup> We may be grateful to God that it was not.

The volume certainly qualifies as a spiritual journal, for it is far more than the kind of diary that is a mere record of events. Yes, "it consists of facts," observes Dwight, as a diary of details and experiences would do. But it's also comprised of

solid thought, dictated by deep religious feelings. . . . It is an exhibition of the simple thinking, feeling, and acting of a man, who is unconscious how he appears, except to himself and to God; and not the remarks of one, who is desirous of being thought humble, respecting his own humility. If we suppose a man of Christian simplicity and godly sincerity to bring all the secret movements of his own soul under the clear, strong light of heaven, and there to survey them with a piercing and an honest eye, and a contrite heart, in order to humble himself, and make himself better; it is just the account which such a man would write.<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes he'd begin an entry with a single word, and then write a paragraph explaining his spiritual condition. For example:

Wednesday, Jan. 2 [1723]. Dull.

Wednesday, Jan. 9. At night. Decayed.

Thursday, Jan. 10. About noon. Recovering.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Dwight, "Memoirs," xxiii.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

He rebuked himself. "Saturday night, March 31. This week I have been too careless about eating."<sup>24</sup>

He rejoiced. "Saturday night, April 14. I could pray more heartily this night for the forgiveness of my enemies, than ever before."<sup>25</sup>

He could be mundane. "Wednesday night, Aug. 28. Remember, as soon as I can get to a piece of slate or something, whereon I can make short memorandums while traveling."<sup>26</sup> And again, "Sabbath morning, Sept. 8. I have been much to blame, for expressing so much impatience for delays in journeys, and the like."<sup>27</sup>

He could be sublime. "Wednesday, March 6. Near sunset. Regarded the doctrines of election, free grace, our inability to do anything without the grace of God, and that holiness is entirely, throughout, the work of the Spirit of God, with greater pleasure than before."<sup>28</sup>

Although Edwards apparently left off this diary, for the most part, by age twenty-two, his entries merely changed forms, and he remained to the end of his life an example to us of the discipline of journaling. For in the same year that he started his diary, the nineteen-year-old Edwards made his initial entry into what would become his "Miscellanies." These were typically paragraph or page-long meditations on biblical and theological subjects. And while these were not the places where he expressed his feelings or spoke of experiences, these journals stretched to 1,400 entries and 1,700 hundred pages. Before the end of the following year (1723), Edwards would start three more notebooks: "Notes on the Apocalypse," "The Mind," and "Notes on Scripture." He wrote in the latter volume until the end of his life, and it would eventually contain more than five hundred entries.

Jonathan Edwards believed in the value of preserving the insights given him by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. What he learned from Scripture or about Scripture, he did not want to lose. And even with his great mind, he knew that unless he recorded his thoughts, he wasn't likely to remember many of them.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xxvii.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., xxxi.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xxvii.

*Learning*

Tracing Edwards's practice of the spiritual disciplines illustrates how it's common to engage in several of the spiritual disciplines simultaneously. Sometimes an objection to the enjoyment of the disciplines arises that there are too many for an ordinary person to practice. However, while we can isolate specific disciplines for the purpose of studying them, typically most are practiced in conjunction with other disciplines. We've already observed that almost daily Edwards withdrew to solitude where he would pray, meditate on Scripture, and sing in worship to God. In addition to these disciplines, he might be fasting all the while. So in the same experience he—and we—could be practicing no fewer than five different spiritual disciplines.

Another place where it's often difficult to separate one discipline from another in Edwards's life is his marriage of the disciplines of journaling and learning. Perhaps the majority of his pen work—sermon preparation, correspondence, and the completing of manuscripts for publication—would be termed simply “writing,” not journaling. Still, as we noted in the previous section, Edwards was constantly writing notes, observations, and meditations about things he was learning in a journal of one type or another.

The two practices of journaling and learning began to intertwine in Jonathan's earliest days. Dwight remarks:

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 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.<sup>29</sup>

As evidence of this as a lifelong habit, Hopkins tells us again that “[Edwards] would commonly, unless diverted by company, ride two or three miles after dinner, to some lonely grove, where he would dismount and walk awhile—at such times, he generally carried his pen and ink with him, to note any thought that might be suggested.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., xxxviii.

In the Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale is another fascinating pen-and-ink manifestation of Edwards's passion for God. In Folder 1251 of Edwards's manuscripts is a little notebook he called "Subjects of Enquiry." Paper was often scarce in places close to the frontier, but so zealous was Edwards to learn and retain his learning that he stitched scraps of dress patterns into a booklet no larger than a man's hand. It consists of twenty-two odd and irregularly shaped pieces folded in half to make forty-four pages. He also included what appear to be notes—perhaps in Sarah's hand—of announcements to be read in church, so he could write on the back of each small page. The first line in the volume explains that it is a place to record "Things to be particularly inquired into & written upon." Some of these were: "In reading the Old Testament observing its harmony with the new," and "Complete my enquiry about justification," and "Read Taylor on Romans," and "Compute the number of Christ's miracles."

Regarding Edwards's discipline of learning, Hopkins observed firsthand that:

[Edwards] had an uncommon thirst for knowledge, in the pursuit of which, he spared no cost nor pains. He read all the books, especially books of divinity, that he could come at, from which he could hope to get any help in his pursuit of knowledge. . . . He applied himself with all his might to find out the truth: he searched for understanding and knowledge, as for silver, and dug for it, as for his treasures. Every thought on any subject . . . he pursued, as far as he then could, with his pen in his hand.<sup>31</sup>

Jonathan Edwards was blessed with one of the most formidable intellects in American history. But he sought to use it in obedience to the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28-30), as a means of pursuing and loving God. Edwards had an insatiably hungry mind, and he enjoyed all manner of learning, but he disciplined himself to give his best thoughts to the best of subjects—the pursuit and enjoyment of God.

### *Stewardship of Time*

At the root of all discipline is the disciplined use of time. Without this one, there are no other disciplines. Edwards recognized this early on, and

<sup>31</sup> Hopkins, *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards*.

thus three of the very first of his famous Resolutions—in this case, numbers 5-7—were on the stewardship of time:

5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.<sup>32</sup>

One of Edwards's best-known and most soul-searching sermons is on this very subject. In December 1734 he preached on "The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of Redeeming It."<sup>33</sup> Taking the words "redeeming the time" from Ephesians 5:16 as his text, Edwards reminded his listeners that time is the only brief preparation we have for all eternity. This time is short, it is passing, the remaining amount of it is uncertain, and whatever time is lost can never be regained. We will give an account to God of how we use our time, Edwards noted, and our precious time is so easily lost. In the most solemn section of the sermon, Edwards called his hearers to consider how people on their deathbed, and especially those in hell, long to have the time that we have at this moment, and how we ought to use our time as they would, if they had the opportunity.

Only one illustration is necessary to show how Edwards tried to live in light of the preciousness of time. Apparently Hopkins saw this on multiple occasions, and it demonstrates the diligence Edwards applied in every situation to improve the time.

In solitary rides of considerable length, he adopted a kind of artificial memory. Having pursued a given subject of thought to its proper results, he would pin a small piece of paper on a given spot in his coat, and charge his mind to associate the subject and the piece of paper. He would then repeat the same process with a second subject of thought, fastening the token in a different place, and then a third, and a fourth, as the time might permit. From a ride of several days, he would usually bring home a considerable number of these remembrancers; and,

<sup>32</sup> Dwight, "Memoirs," xx.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, "The Preciousness of Time," in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 2:233-236.

on going to his study, would take them off, one by one, in regular order, and write down the train of thought of which each was intended to remind him.<sup>34</sup>

Although he sought to redeem every precious moment of time in ways such as this, none of Edwards's biographers ever presents him as a hurried, breathless man, crashing through the day, always behind schedule. Moreover, we know he frequently took long rides with Sarah or alone and that he spent time with his eleven children and knew how to laugh with them. He lived this way because he believed it was Christlike to do so. Jesus frequently ministered for long hours and under great demands. But he, too, would often get alone with the Father, as well as spend time developing his relationship with those closest to him. He never misused a minute. We never read of him acting rushed. Jesus lived every moment for the glory of God and in the presence of God. And though Edwards did so imperfectly, he wanted to do the same. He found God worth seeking in every possible moment of life and by every God-given means—regardless of the cost. And there is much we can learn from him about this.

#### LESSONS FROM JONATHAN EDWARDS ON PURSUING A PASSION FOR GOD THROUGH THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

First, we need a lesson *about* lessons from Jonathan Edwards. In one sense, it's foolish to try to imitate Edwards. He was a genius. Moreover, let's make it clear that there are some things about Edwards that we *shouldn't* imitate, for he was a sinner too. But even though we cannot imitate his unique, God-given gifts and intellect, we can imitate his use and development of them.

*Edwards teaches us to pursue a passion for God through the full range of the biblical spiritual disciplines.*

He wanted to experience and enjoy God through as many God-ordained channels as possible. He didn't just read a chapter or two from the Bible and whisper a brief prayer of thanks, engaging in as few of the disciplines as possible without feeling guilty. Edwards viewed all the biblical spiritual disciplines as the divinely appointed means of experiencing the holy God he found so addictive to his soul. He took advantage

<sup>34</sup> Dwight, "Memoirs," xxxviii.

of every possible way, in the words of his sermon on Song of Solomon 5:1, to lay his soul “in the way of allurements.”<sup>35</sup>

Listen to these words of Edwards from his sermon “The Christian Pilgrim” about the allurements he found in God:

The enjoyment of him is our highest happiness, and 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: better than fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of any or all earthly friends. These 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 fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean.<sup>36</sup>

All those indwelt by the Holy Spirit have desires that can be satisfied only in God himself. But how shall we satisfy these ever-thirsty longings for the ocean of God? The highways built by God to the ocean of himself are the spiritual disciplines.

If I wanted to go to the Pacific and enjoy its beauty and immerse myself in it, what should I do? I could stay in my house all my life and express my longings to experience the ocean but never feel its water on my skin. I must get on the highways that will take me to the ocean.

God has built highways by which those he has made alive can come and be satisfied with the ocean of himself. All of these highways (as I try to accommodate my imperfect analogy to perfect biblical truth) converge at Jesus Christ, the one bridge to the ocean of God the Father. These highways are the personal and interpersonal practices revealed in the Bible by which we may find and enjoy God. The highways do not exist for themselves. Our souls do not find satisfaction in the highways, but only in the ocean to which they take us.

It is God who makes us alive. It is God who has graciously built these highways to himself. It is God who gives us the ongoing thirst that this crystal-clear ocean alone can satisfy. It is God who entreats us with the invitations to come to him on these royal highways. It is God who

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Sacrament Sermon on Canticles 5:1,” sermon manuscript (1729), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Christian Pilgrim,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 437-438.

gives us a spiritual affinity and enjoyment for the highways that take us to him. But we must get on the highways.

That's what Edwards disciplined himself to do, and in doing so became an example for us in how to pursue a passion for God.

*Edwards teaches us concerning the need to pursue a passion for God through the spiritual disciplines regardless of our intellect or abilities.*

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Edwards is that he *was* disciplined. Because of his educational and intellectual advantages, he could have lowered the standards of his spiritual disciplines dramatically and still have been a capable pastor and admired spiritual leader. And no doubt this thought crossed his mind on occasion, for he had very little external accountability to maintain a spiritually disciplined life. He was by far the most brilliant and educated man at any gathering. How easy and excusable it would have been to coast intellectually and spiritually. This was especially true in those latter years in the backwoods outpost at Stockbridge. Despite all these temptations, Edwards never flagged in his discipline. In fact, he disciplined himself to do his best writing while at Stockbridge.

We've not been given Edwards's gifts. It's useless to encourage anyone to imitate Edwards's mental ability. We can, however, regardless of our intellectual capacity, imitate his discipline. We do not have to possess Edwards's intelligence to adopt his diligence. Regardless of how great or small our gifts or talents, our responsibility for 1 Timothy 4:7 remains: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." The spiritual disciplines are the means God has given to all of us as the way to pursue God and to experience the joys and pleasures of godliness.

*Edwards teaches us to pursue a passion for God equally with head and heart through the spiritual disciplines.*

If we seek for an explanation for the extraordinary blessing of God upon the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, I think we must do so in a way that shows that God was true to his own Word in 1 Timothy 4:16: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." Edwards epitomizes the pursuit of the spiritual proportionality found in this command. He always sought to "pay close attention" equally to both sides of this spiritual equation—that is, to both devotion *and* doctrine, piety *and* theology, heart *and* head, heat *and* light, spirit *and* truth. His passion for God burned with a clear flame



that was fueled by the pure truth of God. And just as God promised in this verse to bless the ministries of those who “persevere in these things,” he has remarkably blessed the life and work of Jonathan Edwards with much enduring fruit.

In contrast to Edwards’s example, most people seem to lean one way or the other, favoring devotion *or* doctrine, piety *or* theology. But strong piety will not excuse us from the study of theology, nor will a strong theology compensate for a lack of piety. Edwards models the fact that a real understanding of the truth of God will set the heart on fire, and that the heart set on fire by God will burn with a love for learning his truth. As it was with Edwards, sometimes the things of God should appear so beautiful to our minds that we can’t help but study and meditate on them and so ravish our hearts that we want to weep or sing. What in all the world should delight our minds and ignite our hearts more than the things of God?

## CONCLUSION

Historian George Marsden, in his 2003 biography, begins chapter 30 with a summary of Edwards’s pursuit of a passion for God through a spiritually disciplined life:

Edwards worked constantly to cultivate gratitude, praise, worship, and dependence on his Savior. Whatever his failings, he attempted every day to see Christ’s love in all things, to walk according to God’s precepts, and to give up attachments to worldly pleasures in anticipation of that closer spiritual union that death would bring.<sup>37</sup>

This is why Jonathan Edwards is worthy of being added to the list of spiritual heroes about whom we can say, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7).

But as Edwards himself would remind us, ultimately his example as a spiritual leader has value only to the degree that he points us to his God. Merely human heroes often fail us, but there is One who never does, for the perfect and holy “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). In him alone is endless fascination, satisfaction, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

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<sup>37</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 490.

# HOW JONATHAN EDWARDS GOT FIRED, AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR US TODAY

*Mark Dever*

Some of you, before you read the title to this chapter, or before you read the earlier chapters in this book, may not even have known that Jonathan Edwards had been fired. He was fired by a vote of his congregational church. In July 1750 the members of his own congregation voted to sever the pastoral relationship between them. Only 10 percent of the church members voted to keep Edwards as their pastor. As Edwards put it to a friend a couple of weeks later, the “generality” of the church members voted to send him away.

But before he could be voted out, he had to be voted in.

In April 1725 the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, voted to find a colleague pastor for the ailing Solomon Stoddard, the so-called “Pope of the Connecticut Valley” and Jonathan Edwards’s maternal grandfather. Edwards was first invited to preach there in August 1726. In November of that same year, Edwards was invited to settle in Northampton. He accepted the call to become the assistant and presumed successor of his Grandfather Stoddard at the church in Northampton, arguably the most important church center outside of Boston.

Stoddard was certainly one of the most celebrated ministers in New England. And it is at this point that Edwards’s biography—and that of his family—gets so intertwined with ecclesiology and the purpose of this chapter. Back in 1662 the Congregational churches in New England had struck a compromise in order to give many of the rights of membership (which included, most importantly, having their own children baptized)

to those who had made no profession of conversion. This would allow such people to enjoy all the privileges of church membership except for the Lord's Table. This was withheld from them. This became known as "the Halfway Covenant" and was bitterly opposed by Increase Mather and some others, but was finally generally accepted by the churches.

The church at Northampton had been founded by Increase Mather's brother, Eleazar Mather. It was one of the congregations that had *rejected* this Halfway Covenant. When Eleazar Mather died in 1669, he was immediately succeeded by Solomon Stoddard, who was himself a champion of the new Halfway Covenant. Stoddard took Mather's widow as his wife, and the church quickly took the new way advocated by Stoddard. Soon they had Covenant members (who gave evidence of conversion and were admitted to the Lord's Table) and non-Covenant members (who did not give evidence of conversion and were not admitted to the Lord's Table).

Within a few years something occurred that the plan's proponents had not foreseen—the non-Covenant members outnumbered the Covenant members. After some years of wrestling with this, in 1700 Stoddard suggested a fundamental change in the way that the Lord's Supper was given. He suggested that it should be expanded to include all of those members (regenerate and unregenerate) who wanted to partake, excepting only those whose lives were scandalous. "Mr. Stoddard's Way," as it was known, had been practiced for many years quietly in Northampton under his pastorate. Now he would make it known and advocate it.

Once again Increase Mather led the charge against this innovation. Stoddard published treatises in favor of his position, claiming that it might help in converting the unregenerate, and soon Stoddard's way became the practice of many, and perhaps most, of the New England churches. One can immediately grasp why it would be popular.

Now back to Edwards. In February 1727 Edwards was ordained a co-pastor of the church at Northampton, working alongside his grandfather. Two years later, on February 11, 1729, Solomon Stoddard died, and so Jonathan Edwards became the sole pastor of the most important congregation in western Massachusetts, with over 600 members. Stoddard's funeral was the very public occasion then for the beginning of Edward's solo pastorate. His first couple of years were spent quietly.

On July 8, 1731, Edwards preached a sermon in Boston entitled "God

Glorified in Man's Dependence," at the request of the Boston clergy. It was the regular Thursday lecture at First Church (largely attended by ministers), but it was special because it was also the week of commencement at Harvard College. Being invited to give this address, then, was the biggest honor of the whole series of lectures. It would be the best-attended lecture of the year. And this lecture promised to be a particularly interesting one for a number of reasons pertaining to the lecturer. First, the lectures were usually given by ministers from the Boston area; Edwards was from remote Northampton. Second, they were usually given by Harvard graduates; Edwards had not gone to Harvard, but to the new school, Yale (whose reputation was in serious question at the time). Third, Edwards was young—only twenty-eight at the time he was asked to give it. Fourth, he was the grandson of the famed Solomon Stoddard, who had often given this or some other important lecture in Boston. As Perry Miller described it, "The figure who stood before the congregation on this Thursday morning was the newly crowned successor of a rival principality, and the Boston clergy turned out to greet him as some privy council might greet the fledgling heir of a competing power."<sup>1</sup>

The lecture was deemed to be a success and was printed within a month; it was Edwards's first sermon to be printed. Its printed title was: *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It.*<sup>2</sup>

Edwards continued on in his ministry. He saw revivals in the work in Northampton during the next few years, most notably from December 1734 through the spring of 1735. The membership of the church increased by several score, and so in 1736-1737 they built a new meetinghouse to accommodate the increase. Edwards continued as pastor of this congregation for more than a decade, having an international reputation, until, in July 1750, the members of the church voted by a margin of 10 to 1 to dismiss him. Ten days later, Edwards preached his final sermon to them as their pastor.

The situations that led to his dismissal are a long story that has to do with everything from botched pastoral moves to disputes over salary, envy in the town, a perceived coolness and aloofness on the part of Mr. Edwards, and even long-standing tensions in his own extended family.

<sup>1</sup> Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 200-219.

We could go on. The answer to “why” questions is almost always beyond human capacity to answer fully. Many of the particulars would be of interest only to academic historians or would take more space than the scope of this chapter allows.

At the very heart of the controversy that led to Edwards’s being fired was church discipline and especially the question of who was to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. Jonathan Edwards had come to disagree with his venerable grandfather, and the shock to the unity of the church was enough to send Edwards tumbling out of his pulpit, twenty-three years of spectacularly faithful and fruitful ministry notwithstanding.

Edwards had seven more years to live. They would mainly be spent in Stockbridge, a mission settlement further west in Massachusetts. The last few months of his life were spent in Princeton, New Jersey.

Edwards arrived in Princeton on February 16, 1758, and was formally installed as the President of the College that same day. One week later, February 23, he was inoculated for small pox, and after one month, lacking a day, on March 22, 1758, he died from it. Jonathan Edwards lived to be only fifty-four.

But in his brief life he had had the privilege of having a ministry of tremendous importance for a number of reasons. Not least among those reasons was his strong reassertion of the visible nature of the church, particularly reflected in his understanding of the Lord’s Supper as an ordinance for believers.

## THE SETTING FOR THE CONTROVERSY

The controversy surrounding Edwards’s views on Communion had gone on for a couple of years, from 1748 until its resolution by his dismissal in 1750. The setting for the controversy was a church already frayed by tensions between the pastor and a few of the leading families. In what has been called the “Bad Book Case” in 1744—which George Marsden, in his magisterial recent biography of Edwards, has argued we should call the “young folks’ Bible” case—Edwards had alienated (probably unnecessarily) a number of families by reading publicly the names of children whom he wanted to see concerning a certain scandal, thereby leaving the public impression that all of these children had behaved scandalously. In fact, all Edwards was really doing was asking that certain of the young people come to see him so that he could get information

from them.<sup>3</sup> Pastors will understand the importance of such small miscalculations, as well as their incalculable effects. Marsden describes Edwards as one “never given to excessive tact” and as having a personality that was “brittle” and “unsociable.”<sup>4</sup>

Edwards continued to pastor the church and write prolifically, producing most notably *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in 1746, and in 1747 *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement*, and in 1749 *An Account of the Life of Rev. David Brainerd*.

But it was in 1748 that dissension really seemed to take hold in Edwards's church.

Dealing with the difficulties of pastoral ministry became even more difficult for Edwards when, in 1748, his influential and supportive uncle, Col. John Stoddard, died. Various clergy who had been disaffected with Edwards for one reason or another began to feel more free to voice their dissatisfactions. The divisions in his own congregation were encouraged. The Hawleys and the Williamses had had differences with Edwards. Some matters of church discipline, perhaps poorly handled, had caused stresses and strains.

## THE COMMUNION CONTROVERSY

It was against the backdrop of these existing tensions that the controversy over Communion broke out in earnest. In December 1748, Edwards told someone that they must profess Christianity before they could take Communion. This simple instruction reversed decades of practice. Stoddard had specifically opposed such requirements. Edwards was now quietly asserting his pastoral authority in a new direction.

The applicant talked to others about this and then refused to profess being a Christian. He was happy to profess godliness, but not being a Christian. He withdrew his request for membership in the church.

Tongues wagged, and eyebrows were raised. In February 1749 Edwards proposed that he preach about this change in the terms of admission to Communion. He proposed preaching a series of sermons to teach the congregation. The leaders preferred that Edwards make his case in print, and so he did. In the meantime, in April, Mary Hulbert

<sup>3</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 292-302.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 344, 349.

presented herself for Communion and membership, but Edwards and the Church Committee could not agree on whether she should make a profession of faith in order to do this, or whether such an action would prejudice the church. In order to break the impasse, Edwards bought time by offering to resign if the church would wait until after his defense of this change was written and published, so that they would have a chance to carefully consider his views. By a 15 to 3 vote the committee would not agree to it; so she was not allowed to join. The very fact that Edwards offered to resign signals something of how frayed the relationships had become.

In the midst of all this, it became clear that Edwards had come to disagree with the Halfway Covenant—the practice in New England churches of baptizing the infants of baptized, yet non-communicant church members. This only further alienated many of Edwards's church members, who felt that their own rights to church privileges were being threatened.

In a letter to John Erskine in Scotland, written on May 20, 1749, Edwards mentioned the controversy:

A very great difficulty has arisen between my people, relating to qualifications for communion at the Lord's table. My honoured grandfather Stoddard, my predecessor in the ministry over this church, strenuously maintained the Lord's Supper to be a converting ordinance, and urged all to come who were not of scandalous life, though they knew themselves to be unconverted. I formerly conformed to his practice but I have had difficulties with respect to it, which have been long increasing, till I dared no longer proceed in the former way, which has occasioned great uneasiness among my people, and has filled all the country with noise.<sup>5</sup>

By August 1749 his new book had arrived in Northampton: *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*.<sup>6</sup> That fall a secular meeting of citizens urged the church to separate Edwards either from his new principles or

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards to John Erskine (May 20, 1749), in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 271.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Inquiry . . ." in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:431-484.

from his congregation. In December a council of local ministers was convened to look into the case.

In February 1750 Edwards decided to lecture on his opinions on Thursday afternoons at 2 P.M. The sermons were well-attended by visitors, but not by his own people. And they were to no avail. There was a series of divisive church meetings throughout the spring, issuing in a meeting of a council of ministers from June 19-22, 1750. The council asked to know the congregation's mind on the matter, and in a specially called members' meeting, only 10 percent of the church's members voted for Edwards to remain as their pastor. The ministerial council then decided (by one vote) that the relations between Edwards and the congregation in Northampton should be dissolved. In effect, the council narrowly ratified what the congregation clearly desired.

Marsden sums the matter up this way:

Without his clumsily managed reversal of direction on [the terms of admission to the sacraments], he would have remained pastor in Northampton. True, there were pent-up resentments that came pouring out when the occasion arose. Nonetheless, the question of admission to the sacraments was in itself a momentous issue, with potential to disrupt even a harmonious relationship between a pastor and a town.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps if Edwards had introduced this more gradually, matters would have turned out differently, but we can only speculate.

On July 1, 1750, Edwards preached one of the most remarkable sermons that he—or any pastor to my knowledge—has ever preached. He preached his farewell sermon from 2 Corinthians 1:14 (KJV): “As also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> This sermon is remarkable for its gravity and tenderness, its love and certainty, and the evident deep trust in God expressed by its preacher. Strangely enough, Edwards (in what must have been a rather awkward situation) continued to live in the parsonage and to preach for them Sunday by Sunday at their request, until October 1751, fifteen months later.

The next year, 1752, from his home in Stockbridge, Edwards sent to the press the only other major work he published on this question:

<sup>7</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 370.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, “Farewell Sermon,” in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:cxcviii-ccvii.



*Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated in a Reply to the Rev. Mr. Solomon Williams's Book.*<sup>9</sup> This was his answer to Solomon Williams, Edwards's cousin, who had written defending Stoddard's practice and the decision of the Northampton church. Of course, this controversy had been settled by the dismissal of Edwards, so it was not continuing to disturb Northampton. Nevertheless, Edwards thought that he must correct certain misrepresentations.

By the end of the century Solomon Stoddard's "converting ordinances" idea—the idea that prevailed in the church at Northampton over Edwards's objections—became virtually extinct. After his death, Edwards's ideas won out.

### CONCERN FOR THE VISIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

In all of this, it is evident that Edwards's concern was a concern that had marked various parts of the Reformation and that was especially typical of the New England Puritan heritage he had received—the concern for the *visibility* of the church. By requiring those who are considered full members of the church to profess and demonstrate conversion, Edwards was hearkening back to the need for a clear distinction between the church and the world that had been so typical of the Puritan movement that had originally motivated so much of the settlement of New England. He was willing to put all of his personal convenience as a forty-six-year-old man, with a large (and therefore expensive to maintain) family on the line for what he understood to be faithfulness to Scripture on this particular matter.

As earlier separatists had maintained before him, Edwards understood that the visible church will always be mixed, and yet its purity was an asset to be cherished and improved. Its certain mixture was in no way an excuse for indifference or complacency about the moral purity of the church. In his sermons and particularly in his *Humble Inquiry*, Edwards advocated the simple idea 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>10</sup> Edwards summoned the examples of the church in the New Testament, both in

<sup>9</sup> *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:485-531.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Inquiry into the Rules . . . Concerning . . . Communion in the Visible Christian Church," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 12, *Ecclesiastical Writings*, ed. David Hall (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 182.

the Acts and in the Epistles, as supporting his case. Based on texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:28, "Let a man examine himself . . . and so eat," Edwards argued that "It is necessary, that those who partake of the Lord's Supper, should judge themselves truly and cordially to accept of Christ, as their only Savior and chief good; for this is what the actions, which communicants perform at the Lord's table, are a solemn profession of."<sup>11</sup> The argument is straightforward enough.

#### WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FOR TODAY?

What are we today to learn from Edwards's stand? Why should this be so important that Edwards would be willing to be maligned and even fired over it? The main thing that I have been challenged about as I reflect on Edwards's resolve in this matter is the clarity with which he perceived that the church is to be visible; it is to be visibly the church.

We are to remember afresh that part of what we need to do is not simply try to make the church as accessible and comfortable as possible for the nonbeliever, but we must labor to make it as pure and holy as we can for all concerned—believers and nonbelievers, ourselves and others, the church, and even for the glory of God himself.

J. H. Thornwell, the great Southern Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century, noticed the churches in his day moving in a dangerous direction, a direction that he feared might compromise the very message of the church. In a letter written in July 1846, Thornwell warned:

Our whole system of operations gives an undue influence to money. Where money is the great *want*, *numbers* must be sought; and where an ambition for numbers prevails, doctrinal purity must be sacrificed. The root of the evil is in the *secular* spirit of all our ecclesiastical institutions. What we want is a *spiritual* body; a Church whose power lies in the truth, and the presence of the Holy Ghost. To *unsecularize* the Church should be the unceasing aim of all who are anxious that the ways of Zion should flourish.<sup>12</sup>

Like the compromised church at Northampton, so too among evangelicals of our own day, somewhere along the way something has hap-

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Thornwell, in a letter dated July 24, 1846, quoted in Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), 291.

pened to our ideas of church membership. And what touches membership touches the visibility of the church, and thereby the clarity and credibility of the gospel we preach in the world. Edwards seemed to understand this, and to understand its importance.

Evangelicals today may not have self-consciously entered into a Halfway Covenant. We may not be inviting non-Christians to Communion officially as they were in Edwards's day, but can anyone deny that membership in a church—the symbolic core of which is being regularly welcomed to the Lord's Table—is less meaningful today than it was a century ago? And if that is true, what kind of progress does that evidence, or portend, in sanctification? In evangelization? In missions? In bringing glory to our great Creator and Savior?

Is this a peculiarly American phenomenon, a leftover from the cultural dominance evangelical Christianity did in the past enjoy?

I read recently that the average Baptist church in England had seventy-three members and eighty-five in attendance (according to the 1989 English Church Census). In the U.S., the average attendance on Sunday morning among Southern Baptist churches was actually somewhat smaller—seventy—but still comparable. What was way out of line was this: Instead of having a slightly smaller membership—almost all of whom would be in attendance, with some visitors added in—the average U.S. Southern Baptist church has 233 members!<sup>13</sup> Do you remember the line in the old spiritual “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel” that says, “Some go to church for to sing and shout, before six months they's all turned out”? That seems to happen, then, not just to some, but to most! And it's not just among Baptists. The statistics of denomination after denomination, local congregation after local congregation, evidence a laxness about church membership that undermines the gospel. Surely this is similar to the situation Edwards faced.

In Part 3 of Edwards's *Humble Inquiry*, Edwards asked why parents would be so concerned that their children have the signs and symbols—baptism and the Lord's Supper—and so evidently less concerned that they have the realities symbolized by them! Edwards wrote:

What is the name good for, without the thing? Can parents bear to have their children go about the world in the most odious and dangerous

<sup>13</sup> According to *SBC Research Review* 6 (Fall 1996): 1.

state of soul, in reality the children of the devil, and condemned to eternal burnings; when at the same time they can't bear to have them disgraced by going without the honor of being baptized! A high honor and privilege this is; yet how can parents be contented with the sign, exclusive of the thing signified! Why should they covet the external honor for their children, while they are so careless about the spiritual blessing!<sup>14</sup>

Edwards goes on like this for pages!

Perhaps for us today, it is not strictly that membership has become meaningless and that it doesn't matter, but that it has the wrong meaning, and that it matters wrongly. Today a high-affection, low-commitment idea of membership is common. That is, today it may mean much to "leave someone's membership" in a particular place, but such a membership in itself evidences no commitment whatever to attend the church or pray for its ministry, to give to the church or to work to forward the gospel through it. What we need is an exact reversal to take place. Ideas of membership should not be so associated with affection (I can love those who are not members of my church; I sometimes find that easier!) and linked more simply to commitment. Yes, make allowances for those who have recently moved, those who are invalids, those who are temporarily away for education or business or military service. But normalcy should be that a member of a church is in regular attendance and is evidently growing in love to God and man and in holiness of life.

Church discipline, too, should be reinvigorated to recover this winsome and hope-giving distinction that we Christians are to have from the world. Writing in the 1940s, New Testament scholar H. E. Dana said:

The abuse of discipline is reprehensible and destructive, but not more than the abandonment of discipline. Two generations ago the churches were applying discipline in a vindictive and arbitrary fashion which justly brought it into disrepute; today the pendulum has swung to the other extreme—discipline is almost wholly neglected. It is time for a new generation of pastors to restore this important function of the church to its rightful significance and place in church life.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, "Inquiry," 316.

<sup>15</sup> H. E. Dana, *Manual of Ecclesiology*, rev. ed. (Kansas City, Mo.: Central Seminary Press, 1944), 244.

Again, why is discipline important? Why is Edwards's recovery of the idea of regenerate church membership important? Because the gospel matters! And because God has elected to move in human history in a corporate way. Did he send his Son uniquely? Yes. Did he raise up individual prophets and apostles? Yes. Does he gift his church with individuals as pastors and teachers, servants and workers of mercy? Yes. Does he save us as individuals? Yes. But that is not the whole story!

By the stand that Edwards took, even to the sacrificing of his own reputation, position, and welfare, he was only reflecting God's own concern as we see it on the pages of Scripture when he desires members of the church to be those who are manifesting and displaying the glory of God. How will the satanic slander against the Creator's character be refuted? Not merely by individual conversions, but by the church, as the society of the redeemed, the company of the elect, the trophy of God's grace, showing his love and grace, his justice and holiness to each other.

#### WHY SHOULD WE EXCLUDE PEOPLE FROM COMMUNION?

Why should we act, like Edwards, to exclude certain people from the Lord's Table in our own local churches? Why should we act to discipline or exclude people from Communion? We could give many reasons, but let me just give you five.

*For the good of the individual disciplined.* (See 1 Corinthians 5:5; Galatians 6:1; 1 Timothy 1:20; Titus 1:13.) The man in 1 Corinthians 5 was lost in his sin, thinking God was fine with his having an affair with his father's wife. The people in the churches in Galatia thought it was fine that they were trusting in their own works rather than in Christ alone. Alexander and Hymenaeus thought they were fine in blaspheming God. But none of these were! So out of our love for such people, we want to see church discipline practiced. We don't want to allow them to come to the Lord's Table, to enjoy the benefits of membership in our churches. We don't want to publicly affirm to them or to the watching world that they are pictures of what it means to savingly repent and believe. We don't want our church to encourage hypocrites who are hardened and confirmed, lulled in their sins. We do not want to live that kind of life individually or as a church. We don't want to see people who

are not partakers of Christ by faith being treated as if they were! And we want this clarified for their own good!<sup>16</sup>

*For the good of the other Christians, as they see the danger of sin.* When Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:20, he said that if a leader sins, he should be rebuked publicly. That doesn't mean that anytime I, as the pastor of my church, do anything wrong, members of my church should stand up in the public service and say, "Hey, Mark, you were wrong when you did this." It means that when there is a serious sin (particularly that's not repented of), it needs to be brought up in public so that others will take warning by seeing the serious nature of sin. Even Solomon Stoddard understood that those who were "scandalous livers" were not to partake of the Lord's Table. Is there anything at your church that would inhibit the "scandalous livers" from taking the Lord's Supper?

*For the health of the church as a whole.* (See 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.) Again in 1 Corinthians 5, when Paul was pleading with them, he said that they shouldn't have boasted about having such toleration for sin in the church. He asked rhetorically, "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?" Here yeast represented the unclean and spreading nature of sin. So Paul said, "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival"—that's the Passover supper—"not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (NIV).

For the Passover meal a lamb was slaughtered, and unleavened bread was eaten. Paul here told the Corinthians that the lamb (Christ) had been slaughtered and that they (the Corinthian church) were to be the unleavened bread. They were to have no leaven of sin in them. They as a whole church were to be an acceptable sacrifice. This would seem to mean that there was to be no partaking by those who were not Christians, who had not been forgiven by Christ.

Of course, such a reason to practice discipline doesn't mean that discipline is the point of the church. Discipline is no more the point of the church than medicine is the point of life. Sometimes you are necessarily

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<sup>16</sup> Advocate this, and it will really show up whether people have only a subjective, psychologized understanding of the Christian faith or if they really understand the real danger that we are in objectively because of our sins.

consumed with it, but generally it is no more than that which allows you to get on with your main task; it is certainly not the main task itself. The main task of the church, which Jonathan Edwards well knew, is glorifying God by preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. And yet, along with that, for the health of the church as a whole, Edwards also knew that church discipline should be practiced, and only those who give evidence of conversion should be allowed to come to the Lord's Table. Only they should be members of our churches.

*We should want to see discipline practiced in a church for the corporate witness of the church.* (See 1 Corinthians 5:1; John 13:34-35; Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12.) This is a powerful tool in evangelism. People notice when our lives are different, especially when there is a whole community of people whose lives are different. The church is not a community of people whose lives are perfect, but whose lives are marked by genuinely loving God and loving one another. Conformity to the world in our churches makes our evangelistic task all the more difficult. As Nigel Lee of English Inter-Varsity once said, "We become so like the unbelievers they have no questions they want to ask us." May we so live that people are made constructively curious.

And finally, the most compelling reason we have to practice church discipline is:

*For the glory of God, as we reflect his holiness.* (See Ephesians 5:25-27; Hebrews 12:10-14; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2:9-12; 1 John 3:2-3.) That's why we're alive! We humans were made to bear God's image, to carry his character to his creation (see Gen. 1:27). So it is no surprise that throughout the Old Testament, as God fashioned a people to bear this image for himself, he instructed them in holiness so that their character might better approximate his own (Lev. 11:44a; 19:2; Prov. 24:1, 25). This was the basis for correcting and even excluding some of the people in the Old Testament, as God fashioned a people for himself.

And that was the basis for shaping the New Testament church as well (see 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; 13:2; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-5). In the passages already mentioned, we find that as Christians we are supposed to be conspicuously holy, not for our own reputation, but for God's reputation. So in Matthew 5 we see that we are to be the light of the world and that when people see our good deeds they are to glorify God (v. 16). Peter says the same thing: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see

your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). This is why God has called us and saved us and set us apart (Col. 1:21-22). What else should we look like if we bear his name? Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)*

From the very beginning, Jesus had sent his disciples out to teach people to obey all that he had taught (Matt. 28:19-20). God will have a holy people to reflect his character.

And then when you read the picture of the church at the end of the book of Revelation, you see it is this glorious bride that reflects the character of Christ himself. In chapter 21, and then in chapter 22, we read the words of Christ: “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:15).

Taking 1 Corinthians 5 as a model, churches have long recognized church discipline as one of the boundaries that make church membership mean something. The assumption is that a church member is someone who can appropriately take Communion without bringing disgrace on the church, condemnation on themselves, or dishonor to God and his gospel (see 1 Cor. 11). Edwards understood better than his grandfather that it was not only moral uprightness but true spiritual life that is to be reflected in the church. It is by the collection of such spiritually alive people coming together that God is glorified as the church is made visible. It is through the church being made visible that the gospel is displayed. And the gospel glorifies God.

What was it Jesus said? “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). It is this shining, this visibility of the light of God’s Word and of his hope for sinners that is the role of the church and that pastors should cultivate in churches—even if people resent it and mis-



understand us, gossip about us and are cruel to us and our families, even if it costs us our jobs and our reputations—as it did Jonathan Edwards. But then, Edwards didn't live to please men but to please God.

I love the statement of David Hall about Edwards's conduct during the ministerial council's investigation of him, when they delivered the news that his relation with the Northampton congregation should be dissolved. This witness of Edwards's reaction at the time recorded, "That faithful witness received the shock, unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week but he appeared like a man of God, whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies."<sup>17</sup>

This was Jonathan Edwards's vision of the visible church—visible for the glory of God. And it is a vision that we today should reaffirm. The church is to be constituted of believers, so that it will be visible for the glory of God. And that glory comes not by our exulting in our independence, but in our glorious dependence on God, and in creating distinct societies of love in a world of God-ignoring selfishness. God help us when our doctrine of the church stands to protect human pride and selfish individualism. God help us recover the true vision of the church—the vision that, by God's grace, Edwards really had—the vision of the church visibly shining and distinct from the world, radiantly distinct, visible for the glory of God!

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<sup>17</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 361.

# TRUSTING THE THEOLOGY OF A SLAVE OWNER

*Sherard Burns*

In his book *A Dream Deferred*, Shelby Steele writes that loneliness “is no doubt a risk that trails every effort to define one’s beliefs. Most people could empty half of any room simply by saying what they truly believe.”<sup>1</sup> I, like many of you, have felt this kind of “loneliness,” and, in many ways for the cause of Christ and truth, I have come to expect it. When one deals with the issue of race or race relations, past and present, one enters into a realm of discussion that is tense, filled with emotion and assumptions and all kinds of feelings that make discussion difficult. But if endured, the discussion can often be fruitful. The content of this chapter deals with such an issue—namely, Jonathan Edwards and his understanding of slavery.

Nothing has been more of a stain on our history than the institution and cruelty of slavery in America. Try as one may to undermine its unspeakable evil, the present existence of varying worlds in the United States in particular (the world of the white, black, Hispanic, etc.) finds its roots in the mentality and social ideals that promoted and perpetuated slavery—namely, European ethnocentrism. The driving principle behind this institution was not simply economic prosperity, since to enslave anyone for financial gain one must first assume a moral right to enslave, as well as suppose the lack of freedom of those they would hold in bondage. Thus what formed the very heart of slavery was the belief that some had the authority to impose their rights on others in such a way that stealing men, women, and children from their native land, tearing families apart, and systematically dehuman-

<sup>1</sup> Shelby Steele, *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 3.

izing them was condoned and rewarded. Hence merchandise was made of oppression.

One of the most troubling facts concerning slavery was its association with Christianity. Not only those who were deemed unregenerate and heathen owned slaves; those who professed to have met the true Liberator, Christ, also refused such liberty to men. This was then, and remains today, a difficult barrier for many to traverse. Yet it is our history, and if we affirm with the Scriptures that God is the Lord of history and long to honor Christ with the whole of our understanding of reality and desire to love one another as we ought, we must look through the lens of heaven if we are to make sense of it and glorify God in all things.

In preparing this chapter I wanted to understand how Edwards, with his intellect and theological understanding and love for God, could own slaves and do so till the day of his death. It was clear to me that in order for African Americans, or any other person of color, to hear and appreciate Edwards, that question had to be answered since it represents one reason for hesitation. I do not suppose that I will answer every question that will arise from the reading of this chapter. The topic is so vast and varied that it may raise additional questions that, I hope, will compel each of us to dig and find what is there to be explored and attained.

#### EDWARDS ON SLAVERY

The only known treatment by Edwards on this topic is his recently discovered "Draft Letter on Slavery."<sup>2</sup> In it we find not only his view on slavery, but also the rationale behind his condemnation of the slave trade. Its contents are not readily discernible due to the typical style employed by Edwards as he sought to get his mind around a topic or an issue. Kenneth Minkema writes:

The draft is typical of Edwards' habits of letter writing. In preparing many of his letters, particularly those of an important nature, Edwards first sketched out major points and transitions in an elliptical, stream-of-consciousness manner on a scrap of paper and then wrote the letter in full on good foolscap.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Draft Letter on Slavery," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 71-76.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (October 1997): 823.

As of today, no fuller treatment of this draft has been discovered, if indeed it ever existed.

#### THE OCCASION OF THE DRAFT

On the occasion of this draft, Edwards biographer George Marsden writes:

Some parishioners at the church in Northfield . . . had denounced their pastor Benjamin Doolittle, for owning African slaves. The accusation was only one part of larger controversy between Doolittle and part of his congregation, led by a number of older men in the town. The “disaffected brethren” accused Doolittle who had been their pastor since 1716, of making exorbitant salary demands. . . . Some of the discontent arose from suspicions that Doolittle had Arminian leanings and that he was cool toward awakenings. At the moment, however, the controversy over slaveowning had come before the Hampshire Association, and Edwards was chosen to draft a response.<sup>4</sup>

The writing of this draft reveals several things about Edwards and his view on slavery. First of all, it is interesting that Edwards would even consider writing in defense of a man who opposed him theologically and who held opposing views with regard to awakenings. Noting this oddity, Marsden comments: “That he would do so is striking because he probably shared the suspicions that Doolittle had unorthodox and Old Light leanings.”<sup>5</sup> The implication is that Edwards was engaged in theological compromise on this issue. The evidence of this is recognized when one considers the fact that “Doolittle was reputed to be an anti-Calvinist ‘Arminian,’ and in other contexts, would have been Edwards’ staunch foe.”<sup>6</sup> If what Marsden writes is accurate—namely, that Edwards knew of Doolittle’s theological persuasions and negative feelings toward awakenings—we come to see how socially ingrained and acceptable the oppression of Africans in America had become. That Edwards would defend Doolittle, a man who opposed everything he stood for theologically, on this issue of slavery betrays a more immediate concern with

<sup>4</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 256.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Stout and Kenneth Minkema, “The Edwardsean Tradition and Antebellum Slavery” ([www.law.yale.edu/outside/pdf/centers/sc/Stout\\_Minkema.pdf](http://www.law.yale.edu/outside/pdf/centers/sc/Stout_Minkema.pdf)), 2.

the existence of the institution of slavery than with theological consistency.

This compromise demonstrates the impact that a culture and its accepted norms can exert upon the church. That a man of Edwards's learning and convictions could defend Doolittle on the issue of slavery demonstrates the ongoing battle the church wages with the cultural ethics in which it exists and the ethics of the home for which it strives. "Here, as in other places, we see how experience could shape and transform theology in most scientific ways."<sup>7</sup>

R. C. Sproul has said that when he disagrees with the giants of the Christian faith, he does so with fear and trembling. I feel the same way as I write this concerning Edwards. It is a difficult thing to posit that Edwards compromised theologically when what we have known of him in virtually every other case is theological precision and conviction. Yet the facts remain. However, though such compromise happened, we must be careful to remember that, though he was a brilliant thinker, he, like all of us, still fought against the remaining effects of sin. This should not leave us thinking only of the culture's influence over Edwards but should raise in our own minds the question of whether or not some of our assumptions and perceptions are culturally driven rather than theologically driven. If a man of great learning and religion such as Jonathan Edwards could be driven by culture's influence, how much more might many in the church today, who are not given to the same biblical and theological precision as Edwards, be similarly influenced?

A second observation gleaned from Edwards's draft concerns what did *not* prompt him to write. It seems doubtful that Edwards would have *ever* written anything on the subject, since what occasioned the writing of the draft was not his own internal promptings concerning slavery and the slave trade but a controversy that had become prevalent in his day. Stout and Minkema comment:

... he threw theological differences to the side and stood shoulder to shoulder with Doolittle. ... So it was that Edwards, the Calvinist, promoter of revivalism, found himself in the ironic position of defending an Arminian, Old Light critic of the awakenings on an issue he never cared to address before.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

This being the case, what was it that compelled Edwards to defend and side with an Arminian slave owner and write about a subject that, supposedly, he never cared to discuss? The prime motivation behind Edwards's action was the reality that he himself owned slaves. It was not that he felt a great burden against the atrocities of slavery, if indeed he knew them at all, nor that there was great desire to see the institution abolished and men gain the freedom that he and others like him enjoyed as gifts from God.

By many accounts Edwards was America's greatest religious thinker and, according to Perry Miller, was "so far ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him." Unfortunately, Edwards' progressivism did not extend to the question of slavery. In fact, Edwards was a slave owner who purchased a number of slaves in the course of his lifetime . . . he bought his first slave in the auctions at Newport, Rhode Island, the major northern hub of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

Minkema writes: "[I]n 1731 they purchased three: Joseph, Lee and a woman named Venus. . . . [L]isted in the inventory of his estate in 1758, [was] a 'negro boy' named Titus."<sup>10</sup>

Whatever Edwards knew about slavery did not affect his participation in it. Stout and Minkema write:

[What] we now know of the brutalizing dehumanization of the slave market did not faze him. . . . Apparently, Edwards was so at home with the institution of slavery, and the status that it conferred on aristocratic clergymen, such as himself, that he never really questioned its central tenets. . . . That any congregation would feel justified in censoring and removing their pastor over the issue of slavery was an affront to Edwards' aristocratic sensibilities and sense of clerical status.<sup>11</sup>

While some have argued that he was ambivalent on this issue of slavery, the fact that he owned slaves until his death without any record of granting their freedom upon his death makes such an idea difficult to embrace. In his draft he "acknowledged [slavery's] inequities and dis-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 825.

<sup>11</sup> Stout and Minkema, "The Edwardsean Tradition," 2.

turbing implications,”<sup>12</sup> yet continued to endorse and sanction its legitimacy. If by *ambivalent* we refer to Edwards’s wholesale view of slavery and the slave trade, this may be true. Edwards embraced slavery along with others, but unlike most, he denounced the slave trade (as we shall see below). This position “represents a transitional stage in the development of antislavery thought among elites between complete advocacy of slavery and the immediatism of his first generation, New Divinity disciples.”<sup>13</sup>

In Edwards’s day “slave-owning was an elite practice. . . . A significant number of ministers owned slaves as a symbol of social status.”<sup>14</sup> Slavery had become so embedded in the fabric of society and so necessary for the prosperity of man and country that any confrontation to its legitimacy was to call into question an accepted way of life. So intertwined was the condoning of slavery by the church that “Edwards . . . perceived that such railings against the minister could be to the great wounding of religion.”<sup>15</sup> Driven by a dual reality—namely, that he owned slaves and knowing that a threat to the slaveholding of any one minister was a threat to the slaveholding of any minister—Edwards dismissed theological differences and defended Doolittle, the Arminian.

### EDWARDS’S DEFENSE OF SLAVERY

Edwards was a masterful logician, and this ability is seen in the manner in which he defends slavery. “In characteristic fashion, Edwards began his defense with an unrelenting offense, charging the congregation with hypocrisy and an unbecoming resistance to clerical superiority.”<sup>16</sup> Against such Edwards argued:

How ill does it suit for a man to cry out of another for taking money that is stolen, and then taking of it of him that wherein the injustice consists. If the slaves are unjustly theirs, then their slavery is unjustly theirs, and of this they are partakers of. All the difference there can be, is that they are not so immediate partakers, that it is a step farther off. . . . Their argument, if it carries anything, implies that we ought

<sup>12</sup> Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” 825.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 826.

<sup>15</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 256.

<sup>16</sup> Stout and Minkema, “The Edwardsean Tradition,” 3.

not to be partakers at all. If they don't mean so, but only mean by so many steps, they would do well to fix the number of steps. And besides, they don't know but that they are partakers as immediately as we. They may have their slaves at next step. Let them also fully and thoroughly vindicate themselves and their own practice in partaking of negroes' slavery, or confess that there is not hurt in partaking in it, or else let 'em cease to partake in it for the future, one of the three. For if they still continue to cry out against those who keep negro slaves as partakers of injustice in making them slaves, and continue still themselves notwithstanding to be partakers of their slavery, let 'em own that their objections are not conscientious, but merely to make difficulty and trouble for their neighbors.<sup>17</sup>

The argument is clear and consistent. Those who were opposing slavery were at the same time benefiting from what they opposed by continuing to profit from slave labor. "In this way they are partakers of a far more cruel slavery than that which they object against in those that have slaves."<sup>18</sup> From the quote above, Edwards conceived of three options these opposers could take.

One option would be for them to take slaves for themselves. In light of the conflict between Edwards and the opposers of slavery, this may appear to be an odd option, but in the mind of Edwards, to oppose slavery and yet to continue to benefit from and not condemn the slave trade was hypocrisy. Thus, "calling for the cessation of slaveholding while continuing to participate indirectly in the slave trade implied a never ending increase of enslaved people."<sup>19</sup> In such a case Edwards held that "They may have their slaves at next step."<sup>20</sup>

A second option would be to admit that there was nothing morally evil in slave owning. This argument is dependent on the argument of the first option. If the slave trade necessitated slave owning, those who continued to benefit from the trade did not have to take slaves themselves but should, by reason of logic, close their mouths from speaking any further opposition.

A third option would be to refuse to benefit from slave labor and slave trading altogether. This was perhaps the most consistent position

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, "Draft Letter on Slavery," 72-73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 827.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, "Draft Letter on Slavery," 72.



that the opposers could take, but at the same time it was difficult to almost impossible since “The whole economy of New England . . . depended on products produced by African slavery (a key part in New England’s trade was with the slave economies of the Caribbean).”<sup>21</sup>

What happened as a result of this draft with Doolittle and those who opposed him is not readily known. What we do know is that Edwards delivered an undeniably decisive blow to the arguments of those who opposed the institution by highlighting the contradictions inherent in their arguments. These same contradictions pointed out by Edwards, however, are evident in his own logic in denouncing the slave trade.

### DENOUNCING THE SLAVE TRADE

Edwards held that the slave trade was being continued on faulty grounds—namely, seeing God’s allowance of Israel to plunder the Egyptians before the Exodus as a parallel and justification for the slave trade.<sup>22</sup> That is, in the mind of slavery’s defenders, the Exodus formed the basis and rationale for taking slaves. For Edwards, however, to take people from their land and to hold them in bondage was an unjustifiable atrocity since it “would have a much greater tendency to sin, to have liberty to disfranchise whole nations.”<sup>23</sup> Minkema writes:

He used the word “disfranchise” to describe the practice, by which he meant depriving individuals of the freedom, rights, and privileges they enjoyed in their native country. Thus he presented the question “whether Scripture warranted the enslavement of non Christians” and answered negatively. He queried “if God’s observing & Giving Leave for a thing prove it is not unreasonable in its own nature.” Again, the implied answer was “No.” One cannot, he held, make a “special” injunction to God’s people (whether Israel of old or Christians under the New Testament) into an “Established Rule.” “A special precept for a particular act is not a Rule. . . .” For example, in Deuteronomy 15:6 God allowed Israel to plunder the Egyptians before the Exodus, but this, Edwards stated, “is quite a different thing from Establishing it as a rule that his People might borrow and not pay in all ages.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 258.

<sup>22</sup> Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” 827.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, “Draft Letter on Slavery,” 73.

<sup>24</sup> Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” 827.

Edwards also argued against the trade on the basis of what it means to love one's neighbor and examined who, in fact, "neighbor" refers to.

[Edwards] took particular exception to a narrow definition of "Neighbor" as identifying only fellow believers. If neighbors were limited to Christians, then any sort of immoral behavior toward others was permissible. "This," Edwards commented, "makes the SS. [Scriptures] Contradict it self." Such a circumscribed definition of neighbor negated the moral law, which Christians were obliged to follow regardless of where they lived.<sup>25</sup>

The slave trade, according to Edwards, was against the moral law of God since it imposed on the liberties of men in their native land and, at the root of its execution, was a belief that such persons were not neighbors and thus did not deserve the love commanded in the law of God. Those who would condone the trade were "partakers of a far more cruel slavery than that which they object against in those that have slaves."<sup>26</sup> While Edwards was right in his understanding of the cruelty of the trade, he did not carry the same logic to his understanding of slavery. The argument used to debunk the critics of slavery—namely, that to participate in the trade was to necessitate the institution—now stood in the face of Edwards. To condone slavery contradicts condemning the trade since the existence of slaves in the States is owing to rejection of the moral law and also the fact that the institution demands the trade.

The dichotomy in all of this is that Edwards would "oppose the overseas trade, even though he had hitherto purchased his slaves through it."<sup>27</sup> Thus, to condemn the trade and at the same time to participate in the selling and buying of slaves was a glaring contradiction.

An illustration of this can be seen in a man who condemns the transporting of illegal drugs by cartels all over the world into the U.S. and at the same time is an active participant in the buying and distribution of those drugs in America. No one, except other drug dealers, could ever buy such logic since the one (selling and buying drugs) necessitates the other (the transporting of drugs to the U.S.). It is on this basis that many after Edwards, including Edwards, Jr., Samuel Hopkins, and

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 828.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, "Draft Letter on Slavery," 72.

<sup>27</sup> Stout and Minkema, "The Edwardsean Tradition," 3.

Lemuel Haynes, sought the cessation of not only the institution but the trade as well.

From where we sit today, looking back at that period of history and the subsequent influence that the thought of Edwards would have on America, it seems that with one strike of a pen, perhaps, Edwards could have exerted a radical influence on the way we view and understand race in American society. But he, like many before him and after him, did not rise to the occasion on this issue.

Another noteworthy point concerning the primacy of culture in slaveholding is the view of Edwards toward African and Native Americans. Marsden writes:

Even though Edwards regarded African and Native American civilizations as vastly inferior to Christendom, especially since these heathen peoples had suffered so long under Satan's rule, he thought they were very equal to Christian nations both in their rights and potentialities. In his sermons on *The History of the Work of Redemption* . . . he assured the Northamptonians that although these peoples now lived almost like the beasts in some respects, it would not always be that way. In the millennium era . . . "[It] may be hoped that then many of the Negroes and Indians will be divines, and that excellent books will be published in Africa, in Ethiopia, in Turkey—and not only very learned men, but others that are more ordinary men, shall then be very knowing in religion."<sup>28</sup>

Edwards, Jr., son of Jonathan and a noted abolitionist, "grappling with his own family's history and slave ownership . . . sought to exonerate them," including his father, "by pleading at once their Christian sincerity and their ignorance."<sup>29</sup> Though arguments may and perhaps could abound against such reasoning, understanding Edwards's view on revelation as being progressive, this may well be true. While Edwards could very well believe something different than what is stated, we find nothing but words of equality as he understood equality in his day.

"We are made of the same human race," [Edwards] had written in a note on Job 31:15<sup>30</sup> . . . perhaps soon after he became a slave-

<sup>28</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 258.

<sup>29</sup> Stout and Minkema, "The Edwardsean Tradition," 15.

<sup>30</sup> "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?" (KJV).

owner. "In these two things," he wrote, "are contained the most forcible reasons against the master's abuse of his servant, viz. that both have one Maker and that their Maker made 'em alike with the same nature."<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly enough, the logic Edwards used to diffuse the arguments of those who condemned Doolittle and others for owning slaves was not used in the seeming contradiction of Edwards—condemning the trade and yet owning slaves, keeping the trade alive, at least in the sense that his behavior in no way was a deterrent to others who might desire to purchase slaves.

### HOW COULD HE OWN SLAVES?

In an effort to help make sense of how Edwards could own slaves, Marsden calls us to "consider Edwards' attitudes towards slavery in the context of his hierarchical assumptions . . . where it was assumed that higher orders of society would have servants to perform domestic and farm labor."<sup>32</sup> Before we can adequately move to any conclusions concerning Edwards and slavery, we must battle the natural inclination of removing Edwards from his historical-cultural context and then viewing him through our modern assumptions. Perhaps for some in the African-American community this kind of cultural imposition has hastened judgment without due consideration for that kind of cultural understanding to which Marsden calls each of us.

In coming to the aid of his fellow minister and in owning slaves himself, another question that arises is, how could such behavior be justified by a man whose vision of God was as glorious as any in America? Robert J. Cameron, in his book *The Last Pew on the Left*, comments:

The only reasonable explanation for intellectual ministers like Edwards . . . owning slaves and preaching that slaves were not to seek to be free, is the pervasive, perpetual, subtle influence of the sin nature possessed by all. . . . Could it be that these men were more interested in maintaining their lifestyles and justifying the tranquility and economic growth of the colonies . . . than they were in carrying out the Great

<sup>31</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-256.

Commission, or assisting their congregations in the transformation of their minds?<sup>33</sup>

As stated above, Jonathan Edwards was a sinner saved by the grace of God, who still battled with the remaining effects of his fallen condition. This in no way stands to exonerate him for the role he played in sustaining slavery; rather it brings into perspective the way in which sin can have effect in our lives.

In the cosmic sense of reality, owning slaves is no different from any other sin, in that all sin is against God, and all of us are capable of the greatest of evils were God to release his restraining hand for his eternal purposes. What is interesting, however, is that while we must see sin as the cause of Edwards's behavior, Edwards himself never called what he and his other colonists were doing "sin." To Edwards, slavery was a necessary evil that served some positive good in the natural order that God had decreed—a thought his disciples would take up some years following his death. Yet if Edwards was wrong, it is not his God or his theology that is to blame—only his sin.<sup>34</sup> Reformed theology did not produce a heart to own slavery.

A second way to understand how Edwards could own slaves is a matter of his own heritage. The only life that Edwards knew was one in which the enslavement of Africans was an acceptable practice. A rather lengthy quote from Minkema will demonstrate this point.

As a clergyman and a member of the social elite, Edwards was representative of the slaveowning class in New England. . . . Many of Edwards' relatives and friends owned slaves as a symbol of social status. Alternatively, they used slaves to augment their often tardy salaries by hiring them out as day laborers. Jonathan's father, Timothy, owned a slave named Ansars. His wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, sought to purchase slaves of her own. The reverend Timothy Woodbridge of Hartford, Connecticut, owned an Indian boy and African slave; Elisha Williams of Wethersfield, Connecticut, rector of Yale College from 1726 to 1739, owned an Indian woman. Both of these men were relatives of Edwards. In Massachusetts, such prominent ministers as

<sup>33</sup> Robert J. Cameron, *The Last Pew on the Left: America's Lost Potential* (Lafayette, La.: Prescott Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to John Piper for this insight.

Edward Holyoke, president of Harvard College, and Nathan Webb of Uxbridge were slave-owners.<sup>35</sup>

By no means is this to be a justification for Edwards's slaveholding, but it is an attempt to set him in his proper context. Marsden cautions us against the natural inclination to view men of history from our own contexts, stating that we should think

about Edwards as an *eighteenth-century* figure and about how that context should shape [our] understanding of him . . . it would be a failure of imagination if we were to start out by simply judging people of the past for having outlooks that are not like our own. Rather, we must first try to enter sympathetically into an earlier world and to understand its people. Once we do that we will be in a far better position both to learn from them and to evaluate their outlooks critically.<sup>36</sup>

The grounds for such cultural imposition centered around two "ethical" premises of slave owning: (1) They were to be treated humanely, and (2) they were to be Christianized.

First, Edwards held that slaves could be rightly owned *if they were treated humanely*. On the assumption of humane treatment Edwards could not be found at fault. There is in fact no record of any abuse or ill treatment by Edwards toward his slaves. "In 1740, Jonathan and Sarah cosigned to guarantee the financial support of 'Jethro Negro and his wife Ruth,' who were manumitted in the will of Sarah's step mother."<sup>37</sup>

It is true, perhaps, that the majority of northern slave owners treated their slaves with much more respect and dignity, though still not as fellow image bearers of God, than their southern counterparts did. Having said that, while humane treatment was a justification for slavery, it was not at all a valid one. Throughout history that has been the dominant cry of the white church in seeking to minimize the horrific consequences of slavery, even in our day, appealing that many were treated well. In response, listen to the words of one of Edwards's disciples to whom he was most connected (his son):

<sup>35</sup> Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 826.

<sup>36</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

Should we be willing, that the Africans or any other nation should purchase us, our wives and children, transport us into Africa and there sell us into perpetual and absolute slavery? Should we be willing that they by large bribes and offers of a gainful traffic should entice our neighbors to kidnap and sell us to them, and that they should hold, in perpetual and cruel bondage, not only ourselves, but our posterity through all generations? Yet why is it not as right for them to treat us in this manner, as it for us to treat them in the same manner? Their colour indeed is different from ours. But does this give us the right to enslave them? The nations of Germany to Guinea have complexions of every shade from the fairest white, to the jetty black: and if a black complexion subject a nation or an individual to slavery; where shall slavery begin? Or where shall it end.<sup>38</sup>

Edwards, Jr.'s statement is better grasped by an illustration to the point. Let's say that someone came to your home and took away your child. For years you searched and after much agony found her location and her captor. You then say to him that you are going to press charges against him because he kidnapped your child, broke up your family, and caused much grief and despair. To your charge he responds, "But I treated her well." It is doubtful that this would be an acceptable explanation to drop the charges and continue life, business as usual.

This is what Edwards, Jr., is asking, and the tone of his argument suggests that the slaveholders—none in that day, and for certain no right-minded person in our day—would be satisfied with the claim that their kidnapped loved one was treated humanely. The issue is not how slaves were treated, but the fact that they were slaves in the first place. While Edwards held that the slave trade was cruel and an abomination to God, those who followed him would condemn both slavery and the trade as great evils and causes of divine retribution from God upon the nation—namely, the Revolutionary War.

On a similar note, Hopkins added that if slavery was not abolished in America, the practice would "practically authorize any nation or people, who have the power to do it, to make [them] their slaves."<sup>39</sup>

Second, Edwards held that slaves could be owned *if they were*

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards [Jr.], *Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of Africans . . . A Sermon* (New Haven, Conn.: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1791). The entire text can be read online at the National Digital Library: <http://memory.loc.gov>.

<sup>39</sup> David S. Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins: Religion, Slavery, and the Revolution," *The New England Quarterly* 40 (June 1967): 235.

*Christianized*, which has been long stated as the reason God ordained slavery. To his credit, Edwards not only preached to the Africans but included them in the membership of his church.

In his own effort to convert slaves, Edwards in his regular preaching did not draw metaphysical differences between races. He exhorted both, "black and white" to "hearken to the call of Christ." Christ he declared, "Condescends to take notice of serv[an]ts & people of all nations[;] he Condescends to poor negroes."<sup>40</sup>

There were nine full communicant African-American members of his Northampton church; "[Six] of these, including the Edwardses' slave Leah, were products of the awakening . . . and became communicants in 1736. Around this time the church admitted two Indian members, Mary and Phoebe Stockbridge."<sup>41</sup>

Nothing is said of their status in the church, or whether they were allowed to sit with the whites in the congregation. On the one hand, from what we know of history, broadly speaking, we can deduce that they were excluded in many ways. Yet on the other hand, Edwards was faithful, as he saw faithfulness to this issue, to the blacks of his day by way of evangelism.<sup>42</sup> Having said that, whatever the case may be with regard to Edwards and his evangelizing of slaves, we are always brought back to the reality that is at the heart of this entire chapter: the institution of slavery and its unjustified existence as it was expressed in America.

There is an inherent contradiction in offering Christ to men and women whom you hold in bondage, against their own will, and on the basis of man-stealing. Murray J. Harris, in his book *Slaves of Christ*, states:

If we may generalize, ancient writers about slavery, assuming the inevitability and necessity of slavery for the well being of society,

<sup>40</sup> Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 829.

<sup>41</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 258.

<sup>42</sup> Note the title of a recently transcribed, previously unpublished sermon by Edwards: "All Mankind of All Nations, White and Black, Young and Old, Is Going in One or the Other of These Paths, Either in the Way That Leads to Life or the Way That Leads to Destruction," in *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Michael D. McMullen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 225-230. This sermon was given to the Indians at Stockbridge, but his concern to mention "white and black" suggests that evangelism of African-Americans was an important consideration for him.



focused their attention not on the slave's gaining or regaining of physical independence but on the need for spiritual freedom in the midst of physical servitude. Although the body may be enslaved, the spirit or the mind remains free, while the spirit of many free people is enslaved to passions. But this was not the emphasis of Christianity. For the early Christians, whether slave or free, both body and spirit belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 6:15, 17) and slavery to him constituted true freedom.<sup>43</sup>

Here I am compelled to make some comments concerning the difference between sanctioned slavery in the Bible and the institution of slavery in America. When people discuss slavery, they do so with preconceived ideas, assuming that others hold the same definitions and understandings of the words that create those ideas.

The argument that says slavery was not evil because the Bible does not say slavery is evil is not sound, since it relies upon a number of assumptions that turn out to be untrue. One is that the slavery in America modeled the sanctioned slavery in the Bible. But that is not the case. Rather than asking, "What does the Bible say with regard to rightfully owning slaves?" we should first ask, "What does the Scripture *prohibit* in the owning of slaves?" Harris helps us on this issue, stating that the Scriptures forbid "the exploitation of the slave for monetary gain" and "the kidnapping of persons for slavery and trafficking in slavery."<sup>44</sup>

Harris cites the incident in Acts 16 where Paul had cast the evil spirit out of the slave girl who mocked Paul and the gospel. Luke writes:

*As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. (Acts 16:16-19)*

<sup>43</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Harris comments:

Although Paul's action precipitated his arrest and imprisonment along with Silas (16:19-24), Luke's report of the episode does not suggest the inappropriateness of Paul's action, but rather the opposite; the abuse of the slave was repudiated. This is also clear, by implication, from those passages where slaves-owners are directed to treat their slaves justly and fairly.<sup>45</sup>

This kind of exploitation, which, by implication, is condemned in Acts 16, was a central tenet of American slavery, and the evidence for such is not scant. Yet with regard to the church, we see the same exploitation of men and women for monetary gain. When churches were unable to give full compensation to their pastors, they would often hire out their slaves in an effort to meet their financial obligations. America prospered and became what it is today in large part due to the labor of Africans, and many who prospered were professing Christians. The land of the free was built on the backs of chained and shackled Africans who, though they labored to make it what it was, enjoyed little, if any, of its fruits. The most desired of fruits was freedom.

The second aspect that Harris cites is that of man-stealing and slave trafficking. Here he makes reference to 1 Timothy 1:9-11, but focuses on the word translated "enslavers." The only use of this term is in this passage, and the word "refers to someone who sells slaves . . . and in particular to someone who kidnaps people for sale as slaves." Harris also adds the penalties for such persons stating that "Paul is alluding to the eighth commandment, 'You shall not steal' (Ex 20:15), which applies to persons as well as things. Exodus 21:16 prescribes the death penalty for the kidnapper (cf. Deut 24:2). That is, while both Testaments assume the practice of slavery, both repudiate kidnapping and dealing in slaves."<sup>46</sup>

We return to the question of what the Bible prohibits in sanctioned slavery. While we may grope to understand the practice of slavery in the Bible, it seems clear that the very actions and practices prevalent in American slavery are the same actions prohibited by the Bible. While the penalty of death sanctioned in the Old Testament for such practices may

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 54.

seemed to have passed over America, one may justifiably wonder whether the damning effects of homosexuality on the culture and its evil rise within the hallowed walls of the church and countless other catastrophic realities in our land count as evidence for the wrath of God on America because of the unspeakable evils of slavery. Much can be debated on this issue.

What these two prohibitions show is that the form of slavery in America was contradictory to the Bible and was therefore evil. While Edwards may have seen slavery as being justified on the basis of Christianization and humane treatment, some of his followers—namely, Edwards, Jr., Samuel Hopkins, and Lemuel Haynes—believed differently. Hopkins believed that “the millennium was to commence with the defeat of Satan’s followers . . . among whom Hopkins counted slave traders and slaveholders.”<sup>47</sup>

The negativity of American slavery, however, is not seen simply in its opposition to Scripture, but also in the social sins it encouraged. “Hopkins clearly defines slavery as a sexual sin, a lustful and lewd version of selfishness. ‘Lust’ was, indeed, the cause of slavery, Hopkins maintained.”<sup>48</sup> Quoting Edwards, Jr., John Saillant writes, “Slavery ‘tends towards lewdness’ since a ‘planter with his hundred wenches’ is like a Sultan in his seraglio.” The evident issue of this sexual sin, also known as amalgamation, was generations of mulattoes in America.<sup>49</sup>

Slavery was and still is a blemish upon America. Even after its abolition the residual effects are evident in the culture at large and regrettably within the church. As an African American who loves Reformed theology and Jonathan Edwards and who desires to see these truths embraced by all, especially those within the African-American context, I have to make sense of this hypocrisy. Edwards was only a small part of a much larger picture of Reformed thinkers and preachers. The theology I love so much is tainted with stains of slavery, and my heroes—one of which is Jonathan Edwards—owned my ancestors and cared not to destroy the institution of slavery.

<sup>47</sup> John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

## WHY READ EDWARDS?

The question that many have posed over the years is: Why should I read a white man's theology? Why should I care or even consider that what he says is accurate when he missed something that was seemingly obvious and evil? Why should I give my attention to the ideas and constructs of men who constructed a reality of segregation and superiority that held in check the advancement of Africans in America and treated them like brutes and beasts and less than human? Why should I care about a theology that, on the surface, seems to devalue every cultural expression of Christianity indigenous to African Americans? One of the most important answers is that Edwardsean Calvinism formed the basis of early American abolitionism.

His position [condoning slavery and condemning the slave trade] . . . represents a transitional stage in the development of antislavery thought among elites between complete advocacy of slavery and immediatism of his first-generation, New Divinity disciples.<sup>50</sup>

While the major promoter of such a transition was Samuel Hopkins, others like Edwards, Jr., and Lemuel Haynes shared in his passion to see slavery and the trade eradicated. These men took their cue from Edwards's understanding of what he called "disinterested benevolence," which to him was love toward "Being in General" or "God and his Creatures."<sup>51</sup> To Edwards, this love was the very basis of our expression of love toward our neighbor; not a love full of self-interest, but one that is inclined to the good and happiness of others.

. . . disinterested benevolence . . . meant to Hopkins an unselfish goodness not just to mankind in general or even to one's enemies, but primarily to those who needed benevolence most, that is, the oppressed of mankind. And who, of all beings, asked Hopkins, were most oppressed and most needed universal good will but the Negroes whose slavery was an offense to Christian benevolence.<sup>52</sup>

Some have written that Hopkins went dangerously beyond his mentor in extending this concept of benevolence in ways Edwards, sup-

<sup>50</sup> Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 825.

<sup>51</sup> Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins," 232.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234.

posedly, did not intend. Hopkins, wanting to give imminent expression to what appeared to be purely aesthetic, other-worldly thought, sought to flesh out the social implications of Edwards's teaching by showing its leaning toward abolitionism. Whatever one may say of Hopkins's use of Edwards on this issue, what cannot be questioned is Hopkins's unswerving commitment to the view of God's supremacy and the theology upon which it was expressed. Saillant explains how New Divinity ministers drew upon this understanding of disinterested benevolence:

[D]ivine benevolence required, Edwards reasoned, the damnation of the unregenerate, since God could not have consistently loved himself and his creation at the same time as he accepted sinners into heaven. Sin became, then, a providential means of revealing divine benevolence, since God had designed evil as the occasion of the damnation of the unregenerate and the revelation of his glory and goodness.<sup>53</sup>

Saillant, quoting Hopkins, continues: "God makes the sin . . . the occasion and Means of His own Glory.' God 'over-ruled sin' . . . in the sense that deeds that individuals intended as evil were used by God as the occasion of good."<sup>54</sup>

The framework for such a belief was justified in two biblical accounts: the story of Joseph and the crucifixion.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, rose to power and honor, and in the end held the very lives of his relatives who sold him into slavery in his hands. The grand statement of that account is Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

We see the same in the crucifixion of Christ: By his death many were made alive and brought near to God. The pleasure of God in the crushing of his Son displays the paradoxical happiness of God in that crushing, since by it he was glorified and sin defeated. He took what men intended for evil and made it, by design, for his glory and our good.

The response of many southern Presbyterians to Edwardseanism constitutes additional evidence that the seeds of abolitionism flowed through the theology of Edwards.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Due to the influence of “Edwards and his school,” its relationship to abolitionism, and its influence in the New School branch of the Presbyterian church, southern Presbyterian theologians became increasingly concerned to distance themselves from Edwards and his followers.<sup>55</sup>

Columbia Seminary, a bastion of Reformed orthodoxy, found itself embroiled in controversy, having come under much suspicion of its orthodox commitments when

many of the first students later became New School in their sympathies. . . . As one editorial writer in the Columbia newspaper questioned, “Is [Columbia Seminary] as free from all suspicions of a taint of the new divinity, and of abolitionism as a Southern school ought to be?”<sup>56</sup>

While other aspects of southern Presbyterians’ objections of Edwards lay on theological grounds (believing that Edwards was too innovative and free with theological speculation), it is not denied that another problem they held against Edwardseanism was its seeds of abolitionism.

While the New Divinity disciples were in unanimous agreement concerning the cruelty and evil of slavery, and that the theology of Edwards with its centrality of the sovereignty of God was a means to combating its survival, there was one point at which such unanimity crumbled. Saillant writes: “Members of the New Divinity school were among the first Americans to publish against the slave trade and slavery, yet were also among the first to propose expatriation of freedmen and freedwomen to Africa.”<sup>57</sup>

By the mid-1770s, two distinct approaches would emerge.

One approach emphasized the connections between blacks and whites, envisioning a day when both races would be united as equals in America. The other approach emphasized the distance between blacks

<sup>55</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, “‘He Cuts Up Edwardsism by the Roots’: Robert Lewis Dabney and the Edwardsian Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century South,” in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), 202.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>57</sup> Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 83.

and whites, envisaging the end of the slave trade and slavery yet also promoting the expatriation of blacks from North America.<sup>58</sup>

While they all shared an understanding that the immediate effects of abolitionism were the spiritual and physical freedom of the Africans, it was their understanding of the long-term solution that created separation. To Hopkins and Edwards, Jr., the long-term solution was expatriation. While they conceived of freedom for the Africans, they had not intended that such freedom be exercised in the colonies, fearing a number of things, most notably intermarrying and retribution. Haynes, on the other hand, “argued that the slave trade and slavery were designed by God to further the appreciation felt by black and white alike for liberty, education and social harmony.”<sup>59</sup>

With such a division among the sole promoters of abolitionism all claiming Edwards as their theological defense, a question that would naturally be raised is: Which strand of abolitionism would be a logical expression of Edwards? Another way to approach the subject is to ask: If Edwards were alive during the days of such events as the American Revolution, which of the New Divinity disciples best represents his thoughts consistently?

Understanding Edwards’s view of the Millennium and his subsequent understanding of the progressiveness of revelation and its effects on peoples and nations, I am persuaded that the strand of Edwardseanism that understood slavery as God’s means of displaying unity among the races is consistent Edwardseanism. While Lemuel Haynes, the African-American New Divinity disciple, did not readily agree with Hopkins and others within the New Divinity school that God used the slave trade and slavery for the Christianization of Africa,

he was unable to disagree . . . in a *theological* fashion. Haynes pointed to a vision of blacks and whites united affectionately and equally in American society—a vision that he believed God was offering to Americans through the suffering of slaves. Just as theologians . . . put the abolition of the slave trade and slavery on a par with the Reformation, Haynes put the sufferings of slaves on par with the

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 86. The nature of this chapter is not meant to explore the intricacies of these two strands of Edwardsean abolitionism, but I commend John Saillant’s scholarly work, *Black Puritan, Black Republican* (especially chapter 3), for a well-documented treatment on the subject.

Revolution as means to a further liberty and accord between the races. God was using the evil of the slave trade and slavery to emphasize the goodness and beauty of a free and benevolent society.<sup>60</sup>

I offer two reasons for the idea that that consistent Edwardseanism led to such a conclusion. The first is Edwards's feelings towards African Americans and Native Americans and his allowing them not simply to attend but also to become full members in the church. This is no small matter, certainly when you consider the history of African Americans and their experiences within white, Protestant churches. It is not recorded whether or not these persons were allowed to sit among the majority in church, but that such were able to become full communicants and treated as equals is no small thing.

A second reason for my conclusion is his ministry to Native Americans.

Though Edwards' mind never changed on slavery, it did change over another colonial shame: the treatment of Native American Indians, which included their enslavement. While serving as a missionary to the Mahican and Mohawk Indians at the Stockbridge mission in Massachusetts, Edwards had the occasion to witness the cruel exploitation of the Indians firsthand. This experience prompted him to work actively on behalf of the Indians, often in opposition to selfish Englishmen, including some direct relatives.<sup>61</sup>

What is it that makes a man once driven by cultural norms and familial dynamics to behave counterculturally and in opposition to his family? One answer is *experience*. This was a tremendous factor in Edwards's theological and social development. Because he witnessed the evils and corruption toward the Native Americans, he fought for them and against his own time. One wonders if such a shift would have occurred had he been privy to the horrors of the slave trade. Stout and Minkema comment:

That Edwards saw no contradiction between "winking" at domestic slavery but not winking at the slave trade is curious, but characteristic also of many of his clerical peers. Perhaps the explanation lies in their

<sup>60</sup> Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 103.

<sup>61</sup> Stout and Minkema, "The Edwardsean Tradition," 5.



experiences with the slaves. Having never witnessed the ultimate brutalities of the institution, and clean in their conscience that they witnessed and preached to their slaves, they were at peace with it. By accepting domestic slavery as a “necessary evil” not unlike a just war, Edwards could remain at ease with his domestic slaves as long as he tutored them in the truths of Christianity.<sup>62</sup>

In my reflection on Edwards and this thought of experience, and after reading of his subsequent change of heart and mind after witnessing the horrible treatment of the Native Americans, I am inclined to think that Edwards, had he understood the atrocities of the slave trade, would have changed his position on slavery. I realize that no one can know this for certain, but had Edwards lived to see the hypocrisy of the Revolution—men seeking to be free from the rule and dominion of the crown, yet denying Africans the same freedom for which they fought—I am inclined to believe that he would have considered such to be hypocrisy.

#### HOW DO WE LISTEN TO EDWARDS?

By asking how we give Edwards a hearing, I am thinking more of what kind of mental construct must be present in the minds of anyone who wants to understand Edwards in spite of his shortcomings. The only true answer to this question has manifold implications: *we must embrace the sovereignty of God*.

The aim of this chapter is neither to exonerate Edwards nor to condemn him. The aim is to love his God. The God whom Edwards preached was the God of the Bible; he is sovereign over all things and events in the universe, even the sin of slavery.<sup>63</sup>

The difficulty that such a belief may pose is its seeming exoneration of the perpetrators of slavery on the basis that it was God’s design. However, evil is not justified because God, in his mysterious ways, ordains for it to be. Two events in the Scriptures illustrate this point. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ was, as the Scripture declares, “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

And still, in the same voice and context, a paradox is created with

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>63</sup> This is the conclusion of Job, specifically in 1:20-22; 2:11; and 42:11, as reflection is given to the nature and cause of his suffering.

the stating of a seemingly contradictory truth, namely: “you crucified and killed [him] by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).

The death of Christ was by the hand of God, as Isaiah says in Isaiah 53:10: “Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief.” At the same time we know that it was by the hands of men that Christ suffered. The sovereign hand of God does not stand in opposition to the responsibility of men. God crushed Christ by the hands of sinful men, so that even though he is in control of all events, men are held accountable.

It is with this understanding that we can hold that while slavery falls under God’s sovereign control, the perpetrators of slavery and those who profited from the slave trade are not excused by the admission of this fact. Instead, the opposite may be the case. It is the sovereignty of God in slavery that may stand to implicate such human agents, since it is God at work even in their deeds, for the good of his name. Hopkins and others saw the horrors of the Revolutionary War as the punishment of God because of slavery. This is the context in which we must labor, as Christians, to hear and understand anything regarding slavery and draw our conclusions thereof. Embracing this reality does not call for an intellectual or emotional abandoning of history, living and behaving as if slavery never happened; rather it is an attempt to place history within its right context—namely, as subservient to the will and decrees of the Sovereign King.

What the trials of God have to teach us, with regard to slavery and racism, is not only a demonstration of the continual effects of sin, but more importantly, racism, seen by the godly through the grid of God’s sovereignty and our everlasting joy in him only, is to be a reminder to us that we are not home yet. Trials are to teach us to be looking and reaching for that eternal city, to be seeking the joy that is certain to follow such faithfully endured trials (see Jas. 1:1-2; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Perhaps, as pilgrims in this world, our history and present-day sufferings are making us uncomfortable in this world so that we might long for heaven. Perhaps a radical way to view suffering is not to grapple and argue, as many seem to do, for a piece of the American pie, but rather to see such hindrances as reminders that you—we—are not yet home. Fight for social justice? By all means! Yet fight as a citizen of heaven, not as one who thinks that this earth and America’s economy is the end-all.

This, I know, is not easy to digest, especially if you are African American and you witness, whether in others' lives or in your own, the residual effects and implications of days gone by. Though I have studied this and taught it many times, it is not easy to write, and it is difficult to communicate in some contexts. Yet we all desire to be driven and shaped by the truth and are willing, I hope, to lay everything at the foot of divine revelation and to allow such to construct a mentality that holds sway by its creeds and ethics over that of our own culture. This in no way calls anyone to deny culture, but it expresses the tension in which we live, certainly as African Americans, as we seek to make sense of our history in America in light of the Word of God.

The reality of this tension is captured in a provocative statement made by a friend of mine, Ken Jones, pastor of Greater Union Missionary Baptist Church in Compton, California. In a discussion we had regarding this issue some years ago, Pastor Jones commented that "the challenge of the African American within the Reformed context is that we are called to embrace the theology of our oppressors and to reject the theology of our liberators."<sup>64</sup> This means that the odd and ironic position of the African American who seeks to be shaped by orthodox theology must reject, in many respects, the theology of a Martin Luther King, Jr., and embrace the theology of a Jonathan Edwards or Robert Dabney. While I admire Dr. King for his work and efforts in fighting for the freedom of African Americans in this country (my freedom), I am not hesitant to note that he will not offer much help in theological precision. While, on the other hand, Edwards never held the mantle as social liberator, his theology will saturate a man in orthodoxy.

As an African American, I know daily the pressures of being in a predominantly white society. Yet how I approach that society, the grid by which I engage that society, is more telling than anything else. God cannot be sovereign over some things and yet not in control of others. This is no justification for abuse or racism, for such perpetrators will have their day of reckoning. But the eradication of racism today, as would be the case with slavery then, will not come about through programs, but by means of a God-centered and God-entranced view of reality. We must not be governed by the political persuasion of today, but

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<sup>64</sup> For a more extensive treatment on this topic see Anthony Carter's *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Experience* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003).

governed by the sovereign reign and rule of God. Whatever we may think of Edwards, one thing is for certain: He left the American church with the necessary theological truths to kill racism in our hearts and to be conquerors of it in the church.

In light of that, though we fight and should fight the residue of such hatred in our day, the reality is that the desire to be theologically orthodox today means we must add to our shelves books by dead white men who owned slaves. All of our heroes have clay feet. Jonathan Edwards was not a perfect man, and he did not get everything right, nor did he stand for all the right things. Neither do any of us. His blind spots and sins are pointers to our own blind spots and sins. To ask for grace and mercy on our own sins is, by logical implication, to be ready and willing to extend it to Edwards.