# Theology Matters

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# Jonathan Edwards in 2003

## By Stephen D. Crocco

Scholars widely acknowledge Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) to be the greatest thinker in the American colonial period. They spend massive amounts of time editing his works and preparing countless papers, books, articles, and dissertations about him. Christians around the world continue to publish reprints of Edwards's works, post them to web sites, and read them for edification and instruction. There is more interest in Edwards today than there ever has been! Regrettably, even today, the one thing most people know about Edwards is that he was the author of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," a sermon included in nearly all anthologies of American literature. Edwards was a Reformed pastor and thinker whose commitments and assumptions about the Christian faith grew out of the Bible and the Augustinian tradition via the English Puritans and the Protestant Scholastics, more than from the writings of John Calvin. He spent most of his life as a pastor in Congregational churches, though his first charge, in a Presbyterian church in New York City, and his last charge, as President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) link him forever to the Presbyterian world. On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of his birth, it is fitting to devote an issue of *Theology Matters* to a pastor and theologian of Edwards's stature.

Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, on October 5, 1703. He attended Yale College where he received an M.A. in 1722. For the next year he was a minister in a Presbyterian church in New York City. From 1724 to 1726, he was back at Yale as a tutor. During these years he began his extensive notebooks and personal writings. In 1726, he moved to Massachusetts to serve in the Northampton Church where his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was the pastor. Edwards married Sarah Pierpont in 1727. When Stoddard died in 1729, Edwards became the pastor, a position he held until he was dismissed from the church in 1750. Edwards became something of a celebrity in the 1730s and 1740s when his accounts of local revivals were published in the colonies and abroad. Edwards defended the revivals against critics who were unnerved by excess displays of emotion and he chastised revivalists who embraced emotional states as sure evidence of grace or who were eager to decry ministers as unconverted. Edwards saw the revivals as evidence of God's activity in the world. He believed that history could be told from the perspective of what God had done, was doing, and would do. A change in behavior—becoming more like Christ—was the surest sign of God's saving activity in the heart of an individual or a community.

During his long pastorate in Northampton, Edwards came into conflict with families in his congregation who gradually rejected his authority. When he tried to stiffen the requirements for full church membership and

*Stephen D. Crocco, Ph.D., is James Lenox Librarian, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ.*

Table of Contents

privileges, the congregation voted him out. Although he had offers from other churches, including one in Scotland, Edwards chose to move to Stockbridge, a small town and Indian mission on the western frontier of Massachusetts. During his years there, Edwards was the pastor to the settlers and Indians, a role he took with great seriousness. In 1757, Edwards was called to the presidency of the College of New Jersey in Princeton. Although he did not want to leave his great writing projects and pastoral work behind, he accepted the call as God's will and moved to New Jersey in January 1758. Shortly after he arrived, he was inoculated for smallpox. Complications set in and, in one of the great mysteries of divine providence, he died a few weeks later on March 22. Jonathan and Sarah Edwards are buried in the Princeton Cemetery.

Edwards was hardly at Princeton long enough to establish any sort of intellectual program along the lines of his biblical, Reformed and theocentric vision. When John Witherspoon assumed the presidency of the College in 1768, he uprooted any vestiges of Edwards's philosophical theology and established Scottish Realism as the dominant intellectual force of the school.

By the early twentieth century, Edwards was not completely ignored, but he was not associated with any major theological or philosophical movement. Following a flurry of activity around the bicentennial of his birth in 1903, interest in Edwards quickly declined and he was once again relegated to the margins of American cultural life. In a surprising turn, Edwards was read and appreciated by mainstream thinkers in the 1930s. His views of divine sovereignty, human sin, and justification by Christ alone, made sense to a generation of theologians who had grown weary of pat answers, futile hopes, and endless talk of love. This prompted something of a revival of interest in his thought and led to Harvard's Perry Miller taking a special interest in Edwards and his unpublished manuscripts. Miller's biography (*Jonathan Edwards*, 1949) created a hunger for Edwards that his book could not satisfy. Edwards needed his own voice and Miller coaxed Yale University Press into getting excited about its most famous son. Miller was the first General Editor of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* and the first volume published was *Freedom of the Will* in 1957. Forty-five years and twenty-two volumes later, the Yale edition continues to republish Edwards's most famous works in critical formats, along with sermons and notebooks that have never been published before. With the completion of the Yale edition over the next few years, Edwards will finally have the monument he has deserved for so long and the church will have at its disposal all of the major writings of one of its greatest thinkers.

# Edwards's Lessons On The Revival Of The Church

## By Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe

Pastors and church leaders praying for spiritual renewal in the twenty-first century can turn for guidance to Jonathan Edwards, the 300th anniversary of whose birth we have just observed. Edwards carried out his ministry from the 1720s through the 1750s. Living during a transitional age, he embraced his vocation of interpreting God's eternal gospel during the century of Enlightenment rationalism and the rise of "modernity." He mediated the classical Reformed theology and seventeenth-century Puritanism of previous generations for his own time. In the process, Edwards helped forge the modern evangelicalism that became so influential in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. We live in transitional days too, and the need for spiritual renewal in the church has never been greater.

Edwards was both a major practitioner of evangelistic preaching during the Great Awakening—alongside "the grand itinerant" George Whitefield and Presbyterian revivalist Gilbert Tennent—and the most astute theological and psychological analyst of religious experience ever to write in this country. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* are available today in a definitive edition of more than twenty volumes, thanks to the fifty-year publishing project at Yale University. Two excellent paperback collections based on the Yale edition now make essential sources accessible to general readers: *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, edited by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995) and *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Wilson Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999). Christians today can go straight to Edwards more readily than ever before.

*Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Ph.D., is the Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA. He has published several books on New England Puritanism.*

## Lesson 1: Persistence

Fifteen years after he witnessed the 1734-1735 "Surprising work of God in the conversion of many Hundred Souls" in and around his Northampton, Massachusetts parish—and a full decade after delivering Great Awakening sermons like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) and "The Reality of Conversion" (1740)—Jonathan Edwards was still preaching for the salvation of souls and godly reform of life in society. It was not any easier in his culture than it is today.

Edwards had to come to grips with serious backsliding after both periods of revival, a disastrous conflict with his congregation in the late-1740s, and ejection in 1750 from his prestigious Northampton pulpit. Now, as a missionary to the Mahicans and Mohawks, he served the mixed-race congregation at Stockbridge in western Massachusetts. Just as he had contextualized his presentation of the gospel for the lives of veteran churchgoers of the Connecticut Valley, on the frontier he presented Jesus Christ through natural and biblical images appropriate to the experience of his Indian congregation. The straightforward conclusion to one of these Stockbridge sermons ("He That Believeth Shall Be Saved," 1751) is no mere distillation of sermons in previous settings. With great power in the directness of its language, it also reads like the prototype of evangelistic appeals by countless preachers as yet unborn.

> You may have Christ for your Savior and may have all heaven, only if you will give Christ your hearts.
>
> Christ stands at the door and knocks. If you will open the door, he will come in and he will give himself to you, and all that he has.
>
> Now is your opportunity, while life lasts. Christ never will invite you and offer himself to you anymore after you are dead….
>
> Christ this day calls and invites you. I am his servant, and I invite you to come to him. (*Sermons of JE*, 120)

Through every phase of his career in ministry, no matter what the disappointments, setbacks, and failures, Edwards persisted with the essential message of salvation, working and praying for the revival of religion and the spiritual renewal of the church. We, too, know that the spiritual renewal of persons and congregations does not advance in a straight unbroken line.

## Lesson 2: Humility

When Edwards assumed the solo pastorate at Northampton after the death of Solomon Stoddard, he was keenly aware that his grandfather's nearly sixty years of distinguished ministry in the town had been punctuated with five "harvests" when "the ingathering of souls" had soared. Growing up in East Windsor, Connecticut as the son of pastor Timothy Edwards, reading his grandfather Stoddard's published works, he was ever conscious of living by a high standard. While he was brilliant at Yale, however, little in his experience as a young pastor in New York City suggested a future as a dynamic preacher. Some conversions occurred two years before Stoddard's death (while Edwards was his associate), but after Stoddard's passing "it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion" and "licentiousness…among the youth of the town." It came as a delightful surprise to Edwards toward the end of 1733 when young people began to show some interest in church. About a year later "the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us," and finally "I hope that more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ in this town in the space of half a year." His *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737) emphasized both the "surprising" element and that God "so ordered the manner of the work" that "the glory of it" belonged "wholly to his almighty power and sovereign grace," not to human agency (*JE Reader*, 57-59, 61-62, 65, 87).

Some of his writings—and some of his behavior as a pastor—reveal Jonathan Edwards as possessing anything but a humble personality. He did have a very high view of his place, not only in New England society but as an instrument of God in the history of redemption. Nevertheless, by the time he wrote *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), he had been disappointed by the after-effects of two periods of awakening. Some converts in "the heat of their zeal" fell into error, while "the high affections of many seem to be so soon come to nothing," and others who had supposedly repented from sin and reformed their lives "seem to have returned like the dog to his vomit." A chastened Edwards was left to work out a sober answer to the question, "What is the nature of true religion?" He did so knowing that— "in the midst of the dust and smoke of such a state of controversy, as this land is now in" –some people would be "hurt in their spirits" while others would viciously attack him for trying to show both what was "glorious" and "pernicious" in the revivals (*JE Reader*, 137-138, 147). *Religious Affections* is remarkable for the humble tone in which it is written.

Following his dismissal by his church Edwards had the opportunity to move to Scotland where he would have been welcomed as an evangelistic hero and theological genius. Instead, he moved his family to a mission outpost where he took seriously his work with the native population, devoted himself to theological writing, and coped daily with the same political enemies that had dogged him in Northampton. When he was offered the presidency of the College of New Jersey, his self-effacing initial response reveals a naturally proud man who has learned the discipline of humility.

## Lesson 3: Piety

Jonathan Edwards enjoyed an intense personal relationship with Jesus Christ and desired nothing less than that everyone to whom he preached might also know Christ's gracious love. As a young pastor in New York City, on

Saturday morning January 12, 1723, Edwards engaged in a special devotional exercise to renew his "baptismal covenant and self-dedication" as a Christian. "I have been before God," he wrote in his diary, "and have given myself, all that I am and have to God, so that I am not in any respect my own." He confessed to God that he "did believe in Jesus Christ, and receive him as a prince and a Savior" and "did receive the blessed Spirit as my teacher, sanctifier and only comforter; and cherish all his motions to enlighten, purify, confirm, comfort, and assist me. This I have done." Although bouts with spiritual dullness recurred, in his 1739 "Personal Narrative" Edwards described experiencing "a new sort of affection …an inward sweet sense" of God's promises and times of "sweetly conversing with Christ," of being "wrapped and swallowed up in God" with an inexpressible "sweet burning in my heart." This palpable sense of "the sweet glory of God" overwhelmed him during devotional exercises as he would "sing or chant forth my meditations …in soliloquies, and speak with a singing voice" to God. While he loved to pray in nature, his meditations were always scriptural and Christ-centered. Such personal spiritual experience fueled Edward's evangelistic preaching (*JE Reader*, 268, 284-285).

In his sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light" (1733; published in 1734), Edwards told his people that "common grace" would only get them so far in life. True, God's Spirit operates generally at the human level to "assist the faculties of the soul to do that more fully, which they do by nature," but this has nothing to do with salvation. What God offers in Jesus Christ is of another magnitude altogether. "In the renewing and sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost, those things are wrought in the soul that are above nature, and of which there is nothing of the like kind in the soul by nature." Through a person's faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit "unites himself with the mind of a saint, takes him for his temple, and influences him as a new, supernatural principle of life and action." The Holy Spirit works in believers' lives by "uniting himself to them, and living in them, and exerting his own nature in the exercise of their faculties" (*Sermons of JE*, 124-125). Spirituality is thus intensely personal but never private; it is essentially connected with outward behavior. It is about the renewal of the church and Christ's mission in the world. As Edwards stated (over-optimistically, it turned out) after the 1734-1735 conversions, "we still remain a reformed people, and God has evidently made us a new people" (*JE Reader*, 86).

Revival depends on personal spiritual experience, starting with the pastor. As Edwards often said, it is not enough to know that honey is sweet or to be able to describe its physical properties. You must actually taste it for yourself to have "a sense of its sweetness" (*Sermons of JE*, 127). When we taste it personally we are suddenly eager and able to tell others about the sweetness. Edwards's preaching exploded from within his personal experience. He simply wanted for his people the sweetness that he and others had already tasted.

## Lesson 4: Theology matters

On the eve of the Great Awakening, Edwards explained "The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth" (1739). Contrary to the notion that theology is "needless speculation," he argued (based on his theory of psychology) that, while faith necessarily operates in the heart or will, the truth of the gospel is first perceived by the understanding. "There is no other way by which any means of grace whatsoever can be of any benefit, but by knowledge" (*Sermons of JE*, 31, 37). The homiletic shape of Edwards's sermons—movement from exposition of text and elaboration of doctrine to application—embodies his psychological and theological assumptions.

During the 1734-1735 awakening Jonathan Edwards was already aware that evangelical theology both sparks and guides spiritual renewal. His sermons from the early 1730s show how an explanation of Christian doctrine—especially the Reformed emphasis on God's sovereignty, utter human sinfulness, and the work of Christ in salvation—set the stage for revival. "God Glorified in the Work of Redemption, by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It" (1731), for example, is a powerful rendering of the salvation narrative where each person of the Trinity plays a necessary role. "The redeemed of Jesus Christ depend on God" completely for salvation from the "emptiness and misery" of sin, for "all is *of* the Father, all *through* the Son, and all *in* the Holy Ghost." Edwards made sure that his people understood exactly how the gospel works: We are without hope, but "God not only gives us the mediator, and accepts his mediation, and of his power and grace bestows the things purchased by the mediator, but he is the mediator…. Yea, God is both the purchaser and the price; for Christ, who is God, purchased these blessings for us, by offering up himself as the price of our salvation" (*Sermons of JE*, 68, 73, 79).

Scoffers who dismiss Edwards's best-known sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), as a low attempt to scare people into repentance, miss the crucial moment when he makes the invitation: "And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands at the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners." That great evangelistic sermon was preached in the week-by-week context of many others that presented the positive way to glory. Quite simply, as Edwards said in "The Reality of Conversion" (1740), God wants us to "be happy and blessed forever" (*Sermons of JE*, 63, 104). Everyone in town had heard many times that there is a Savior; what they needed to hear was that unless they turned to that Savior—again or for the first time—they were lost. In the sermons of Jonathan Edwards the whole storyline of Christian doctrine unfolds, sometimes one element in the spotlight and sometimes another, creating altogether a spiritual setting in which the revival of religion could ignite.

Theology also matters because, when revival happens, spirituality can easily burn out of control. This actually occurred in New England, most notably in the vituperative preaching and eccentric antics of evangelist James Davenport in 1741-1742. When Edwards preached concerning the "Divine and Supernatural Light" that God "imparts this knowledge immediately, not making use of any intermediate natural causes," he knew how explosive this message could be in the church. He immediately stipulated that "this spiritual light is not the suggesting of any new truths, or propositions not contained in the Word of God." While "some enthusiasts pretend" to possess secret knowledge, setting themselves up as a kind of Gnostic elite, the "spiritual light" imparted by the Holy Spirit "reveals no new doctrine…no new thing of God, or Christ, or another world, not taught in the Bible; but only gives a due apprehension of those things that are taught in the Word of God" (*Sermons of JE*, 122, 125-126). After his doctrinally grounded sermons sparked revival, when the Awakening threatened to become a destructive wildfire, Edwards struggled to control the blaze. His writings from the mid-1740s through the 1750s argue that sound doctrine grounds and channels experience, corrects error, prevents "enthusiasm" (unbridled emotionalism), and guards against arrogance among the spiritually awakened.

## Lesson 5: Renewal is about holiness

During periods of revival—as Edwards stated in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" — "many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God…with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them…and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God" (*Sermons of JE*, 63). It is natural during such times for believers to identify true religion with heightened spiritual experiences, visions, feelings, or physical manifestations. Jonathan Edwards used the term "holy affections" to describe these "more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul" (*JE Reader*, 141).

Emotions and extraordinary experiences loomed so large among the awakened in 1740-1741 that reaction set in. Not only rationalist opponents of the revivals but tradition-minded orthodox believers put off by extremism began to affirm a more socially oriented form of church life. *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) is Edwards's response to this challenge. He denied that "religious" feelings or "bodily sensations" are necessarily spiritual, because in themselves they are nothing more than "the motion of the blood and animal spirits." Rather, "it is not the body, but the mind [i.e. heart, will] only, that is the proper seat of the affections." Spiritual affections will always to some degree produce sensations, because body and soul are united, but "religious" sensations can be caused by other stimuli than the Holy Spirit and by themselves they tell us nothing about the workings of God in the soul. Still, contrary to those who held that reason and morality defined true religion, Edwards placed "fervent, vigorous engagedness of the heart" at the center of Christian faith and life. "The right way," he insisted, "is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all; but to distinguish between affections" according to biblical standards (*JE Reader*, 141-142, 149).

Edwards explores twelve notions commonly identified as evidence of godliness, rejecting them all as "no sign one way or the other" that God is at work. These have to do with levels of emotion, bodily effects, fluency of speaking, feeling God-controlled, having Bible verses come suddenly to mind, feelings of love or confidence, inclination to spend time on religious activities, and so forth (*JE Reader*, 149-153). His twelve "Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections" also come with two warnings: Zealous Christians should not use this or any list of signs to judge who is saved and who is not; and lazy nominal Christians should not use it to assure themselves their souls are safe. The first eleven of Edwards's positive signs culminate in the twelfth, decisive sign of God's activity in the soul. For example, truly gracious affections arise from "influences and operations on the heart, which are *spiritual, supernatural* and *divine*." That is, holy affections come not from some physical cause or self-interest but from "the Spirit of God…as an indwelling principle" and pure love for the excellence and beauty of God. Further, "holy affections are not heat without light" but "arise from the mind's being enlightened, rightly and spiritually to understand and apprehend divine things." Every positive sign of spiritual affections includes personal humility, abhorrence of sin, and utter reliance on the sufficiency of God in all things (*JE Reader*, 153-157, 164).

*Religious Affections* presents a Trinitarian theology of holiness, with the Holy Spirit actually and personally living within each believer. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit "exerts and communicates himself in his own proper nature" in our souls. Since "holiness is the nature of the Spirit of God," it follows that "his sweet and divine nature, mak[es] the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ, in his having the communion or participation of the Holy Ghost." As already noted, such personal fellowship with the Trinity is supernatural but never just otherworldly. "The Spirit operates in the saints, as dwelling in them, as an abiding principle of action" in human society (*JE Reader*, 158).

On this basis Edwards presents his ultimate sign of God's activity in the soul: "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice." By "Christian practice," he means the believer's life will be so ordered that every aspect of behavior in every area of life will be transformed by the holiness of God. Such holiness of life will be evident to others, for, as Jesus said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). And he argues that holiness, the process of sanctification worked by God in us over years of faithful living, is a more reliable source of comfort to us even than remembering our first conversion. When a person "is at liberty whether

to walk or sit still, the proper proof of his having an heart to walk, is his walking. Godliness consists not in an heart to intend to do the will of God, but in an heart to do it" (*JE Reader*, 164-169).

Spiritual renewal occurs among our people and revival comes to our churches and communities when Christians begin actually to walk the walk of faith. As God's Holy Spirit works in our lives, as sinners repent and come to Christ, as commitments are made and renewed, Christian practice—holiness—will be the "sign of signs" of God's gracious activity. Certainly, holy living is the sign that is most persuasive in an unbelieving world. It is the sign that draws sinners to the Redeemer of whom we speak and skeptics to the God we worship.

Jonathan Edwards lived during the century that defined what it meant to be "modern," the age of Enlightenment when truth was assumed to be reasonable and self-evident. Our vocation is to witness faithfully in a world that has become "postmodern," an age of relativism in which the supernatural has reappeared but any truth will do. We may live 300 years later, but the human problem and the eternal gospel remain. Lessons from the theology and ministry of Jonathan Edwards should guide our witness today—p*ersistence, humility, piety, theology, and holiness.*

# Jonathan Edwards on the Experience of Beauty

## By Louis J. Mitchell

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It appears in the vision of a multi-hued sunset, or in the raptures of a Beethoven symphony, or in the quiet contemplation of a flower. In such moments we are aware that we are in the presence of beauty. In each of us there is a longing for such a presence. C. S. Lewis describes this longing as a bittersweet aching sensation not just to appreciate beauty but actually to experience it: "We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though God knows that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it."[1] For Lewis, God is the fulfillment of that longing. It is however, in the works of another Christian writer, who wrote a couple of hundred years before Lewis, that God as the fulfillment of our longing for beauty is portrayed in a breathtaking vision of religious experience. That writer is Jonathan Edwards, noted eighteenth century preacher and philosopher-theologian. For Jonathan Edwards the experience of God's saving presence is an aesthetic experience of the deepest kind. For Edwards, to experience God's Holy Spirit is to

experience Beauty, itself; and all worldly beauties, as rapturous as they may be, are but inferior shadows of that Beauty.

### Beauty Defined

"Wherein is one thing excellent and another evil, one beautiful and another deformed?"[2] Edwards posed that question in the first entry of a private notebook entitled "The Mind." There he set forth his understanding of the nature of beauty. Edwards defined beauty in a very traditional way in terms of certain relations such as equality, symmetry and proportionality. Something was said to be beautiful if it could be related to something else. The sides of an equilateral triangle or two circles of identical radii were beautiful in their relations of equality. More complex beauty became manifested when the relations became more sophisticated. The various shapes within the human face, although not equal in size and length, were nonetheless proportionately related, forming an integrated whole.

Music provides a helpful illustration of what Edwards means. Voices singing in unison portray a simple beauty of equality, each individual voice singing the same notes. However, a choir singing in four-part harmony evidences a more sophisticated beauty. Although the various voices are not singing the same notes, the notes are proportionately related through harmony. The more sophisticated the relations, the more intensified the beauty becomes. Thus the music produced by a large choir, accompanied by a full orchestra, performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, may be said to be intensely beautiful.

In a charming essay entitled "Beauty of the World," Edwards describes all natural beauties (those perceived by ear and eye) as consisting in these various relations:

> 'Tis very probable that that wonderful suitableness of green for the grass and plants, the blue of the sky, the white of the clouds, the colors of flowers, consists in a complicated proportion that these colors make one with another, either in the magnitude of the rays, the number of vibrations that are caused in the optic nerve, or some

other way. So there is a great suitableness between the objects of different senses, as between sounds, colors, and smells—as between the colors of the woods and flowers, and the smell and the singing of birds—which 'tis probable consist in a certain proportion of the vibrations that are made in the different organs…. [W]hat an infinite number of such-like beauties is there in that one thing, the light; and how complicated an harmony and proportion is it probable belongs to it.[3]

Edwards says that we are surrounded by beauties in the sounds, sights, colors, motions and shapes of the natural world. So much beauty surrounds us that "almost all men, and those that seem to be very miserable, love life: because they cannot bear to lose sight of such a lovely world."[4]

## The Beauty of Love

All natural beauties, consisting in these various relations, even when intensely beautiful, are in Edwards's philosophical system inferior to another kind of beauty. Natural beauties of equality, symmetry and proportionality, etc., comprise what Edwards calls *secondary beauty*. Secondary beauty always points beyond itself to what Edwards calls *primary beauty*. Like secondary beauty, primary beauty involves certain relations. However, in primary beauty the relatedness is between minds capable of volition. The relatedness is a matter of choice and an exercise of will. Here beauty is defined in such terms as harmony, as in a harmonious society of people or a church relating in harmony; consent or agreement, as between people actively agreeing on a particular point; and most especially love. Love is the ultimate form of primary beauty. Thus to experience love is to experience beauty; to be loving is to beautify; to be filled with love is to be beautiful. However, for Edwards, all beauties, both primary and secondary, are derived from that which is the highest beauty and the source of all beauty.

## God's Beauty

Edwards's understanding of beauty is grounded on his understanding of who God is:

> God is not only infinitely greater and more excellent than all other being, but he is the head of the universal system of existence; the foundation and fountain of all being and beauty; from whom all is perfectly derived, and on whom all is most absolutely and perfectly dependent; *of whom*, and *through whom*, and *to whom,* is all being and all perfection; and whose being and beauty is, as it were, the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence: much more than the sun is the fountain and summary comprehension of all light and brightness of the day.[5]

For Edwards, all beauty flows from God and is related to God's beauty.

The foundation principle is Edwards's understanding of God as Trinity. For Edwards, God is a triune society of love and beauty. In Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity, the Father is the "Lover," the source of love; the Son is the "Beloved," the object of the Father's love; and the Holy Spirit is "Love," the relatedness within the Godhead. In aesthetic categories one could say that the Father is the "Beautifier;" the Son is the "Beautiful;" and the Holy Spirit is "Primary Beauty." Edwards writes that "the Holy Spirit is the harmony and excellency and beauty of the Deity.[6] He further states:

> [God's] infinite beauty is his infinite mutual love of himself…. But he exerts himself towards himself no other way than in infinitely loving and delighting in himself, in the mutual love of the Father and the Son. This makes the third, the personal Holy Spirit, or the holiness of God, which is his infinite beauty, and this is God's infinite consent to being in general…. 'Tis peculiar to God that he has beauty within himself, consisting in being's consenting with his own being, or the love of himself in his own Holy Spirit.[7]

Beauty is a constitutive element of God's very being. For Edwards, God's Holy Spirit is Beauty, what we might call ontological beauty. Put more simply, for Edwards, beauty is not so much a *what* as it is a *who*. Beauty has a personal identity. All other beauties are derived from and point to God, who, in very being, is Beauty.

## Beauty Displayed

This conclusion concerning the definition or identity of beauty is a weighty and wonderful realization in and of itself. However, beauty plays a significant role in many other important areas of Edwards's thought. One aspect, already implicit in our discussion of primary and secondary beauty, is that creation exemplifies or manifests God's beauty. Indeed, says Edwards, it is the role of the Holy Spirit to bring beauty to the world: "So we read that 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters' or of the chaos to bring it out of its confusion, into harmony and beauty."[8] And in another place he says: "It was more especially the Holy Spirit's work to bring the world to its beauty and perfection out of chaos, for the beauty of the world is a communication of God's beauty."[9] As all truth is God's truth, so all beauty is God's beauty. To perceive beauty in the world, to look for it, to appreciate it wherever it may be encountered, is to honor God, its ultimate source.

Although for Edwards, nature displays God's beauty, it is in Jesus Christ that beauty is especially manifested. In a sermon entitled "The Excellency of Christ" Edwards describes the person and work of Christ in the language of beauty. He shows that Christ is intensely beautiful by demonstrating that antithetical qualities are harmonized or conjoined in Him. (Remember that beauty becomes intensified when the relations become more complex or sophisticated.) Explicating Rev. 5:5-6, Edwards portrays Christ as both a lion and a lamb. He writes that in Christ there is conjoined: infinite highness and infinite condescension; infinite justice and infinite grace; infinite glory and lowest humility; infinite majesty and

transcendent meekness; self sufficiency and entire trust.[10] The sermon continues in a wonderfully relentless fashion as Edwards describes how in Christ's person and work infinite polarities are conjoined; and that such a harmonization renders Christ infinitely beautiful.

It is also in Christian believers that God's beauty is experienced and made manifest. For Jonathan Edwards, a saving experience of God's grace involves a certain kind of communication of God. This experience is not just head knowledge about God, but heart knowledge, an actual experience of God. This experience comes through what Edwards calls "the sense of the heart." Through the sense of the heart, believers (whom Edwards calls "saints") experience an infusion or an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The sense of the heart is thus an aesthetic experience, an experience of beauty, or more properly, Beauty, itself: "The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of saints, that he there, as a seed or spring of life, exerts and communicates himself, in his sweet and divine nature, *making the soul a partaker of God's beauty.*"[11] Edwards expresses this same idea in that which was his first published work, a sermon entitled "God Glorified in Man's Dependence," etc.:

> The [saints] have spiritual excellency and joy by a kind of participation of God. They are made excellent by a communication of God's excellency: God puts his own beauty, i.e., his own beautiful likeness, upon their souls…. The saints are beautiful and blessed by a communication of God's holiness and joy…. The Holy Spirit becoming an inhabitant, is a vital principle, in the soul.[12]

For Edwards, to experience God's saving presence is to experience beauty. Such an experience fulfills that longing C. S. Lewis described, not just to appreciate beauty, but actually to experience it, to have beauty within us.

Edwards makes a further application of this experience of beauty in the life of a believer. For Edwards, the experience of God's beauty, through the sense of the heart, results in a manifestation of beauty in the godly living and affections of the saints. *Religious Affections*, written by Edwards in 1746, is a classic analysis of the psychology of religious experience. In that work Edwards identifies a number of "signs" that may or may not point to a genuine work of God's Spirit. One of the formal or positive signs of the authenticity of regeneration or of genuine religious experience, which Edwards notes in *Religious Affections,* is that saints will manifest beauty in their lives: "Another thing wherein those affections that are truly gracious and holy differ from those that are false is beautiful symmetry and proportion."[13] In another place he says that saints are to be "proportioned Christians" displaying a "concatenation" of the fruit of God's grace and beauty in their lives. Saints are especially to manifest God's love, which is primary beauty.[14] True saints become, themselves, a work of art showing forth the presence of the Divine Artist, the One who is Beauty, living within them. The life of sainthood is a life of beauty both experienced and manifested.

The beauty of proportioned affections becomes manifest in the life of the saint in several ways including the light of an enlightened mind and the heat of an affected heart. Gracious affections are accompanied by a change of nature in the person, evidencing itself in such qualities as "evangelical humiliation" and "the lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper of Jesus Christ." "Gracious affections," says Edwards, "soften the heart, and are attended and followed, with a Christian tenderness of spirit." In a true saint, the more these affections are manifested, the "more is a spiritual appetite and longing of soul after spiritual attainments, increased." In contrast, the false affections of "hypocrites"

> …are like the waters in the time of a shower of rain, which during the shower, and a little after, run like a brook, and flow abundantly; but are presently quite dry: and when another shower comes, then they will flow again. Whereas a true saint is like a stream from a living spring; which though it may be greatly increased by a shower of rain, and diminished in time of drought; yet constantly runs…. Many hypocrites are like comets, that appear for a while with a mighty blaze; but are very unsteady and irregular in their motion…and their blaze soon disappears, and they appear but once in a great while. But the true saints are like the fixed stars, which, though they rise and set, and are often clouded, yet are steadfast in their orb, and may truly be said to shine with a constant light. Hypocritical affections are like a violent motion; like that of the air that is moved with winds (Jude 12). But gracious affections are more a natural motion, like the stream of a river; which though it has many turns hither and thither, and may meet with obstacles, and run more freely and swiftly in some places than others; yet in the general, with a steady and constant course, tends the same way, till it gets to the ocean.[15]

Finally, it is in Christian practice that "gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit." Edwards teaches that the saints will continue to grow in beauty both in this life and throughout eternity in heaven:

> How soon do earthly lovers come to an end of their discoveries of each other's beauty; how soon do they see all that is to be seen…. And how happy is that love, in which there is an eternal progress in all these things; wherein new beauties are continually discovered, and more and more loveliness, *and in which we shall forever increase in beauty ourselves*; where we shall be made capable of finding out and giving, and shall receive, more and more endearing expressions of love forever: our union will become more close, and communication more intimate.[16]

For Jonathan Edwards heaven is a world of love and beauty in which saints will eternally delight in the increasing manifestation and discovery of beauty in God and in themselves. As believers produce, discover and appreciate beauty in this world, and especially as they recognize the presence of God in their lives, they enjoy a foretaste of heaven.

[1] C. S. Lewis. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. Edited by Walter Hooper. New York: Macmillan. 1980.
[2] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. 6. Edited by Wallace E. Anderson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. p. 332. This edition of Edwards' works will be cited throughout as Yale followed by the volume number and editor.
[3] Yale 6. Wallace E. Anderson, pp. 305, 306.
[4] Yale 6. Wallace E. Anderson, p. 306.
[5] Yale 8. Paul Ramsey, p. 551.
[6] Yale 13. Thomas A. Schafer, p. 384.
[7] Yale 6. Wallace E. Anderson, pp. 363-365.
[8] Yale 21. Sang H. Lee, p.123.
[9] Yale 13. Thomas A. Schafer, p. 384.
[10] The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader. Edited by Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1999, pp. 164-171.
[11] Yale 2. Jon E. Smith, p. 201, emphasis added.
[12] The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader. Edited by Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1999, p. 75.
[13] Yale 2. Jon E. Smith, p. 365.
[14] Yale 8. Paul Ramsey, p. 327.
[15] Yale 2. Jon E. Smith, pp. 373, 374, et passim.
[16] Yale 13. Thomas A. Schafer, pp. 336, 337, emphasis added.

*Louis Mitchell, Th. D., is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Cranbury, NJ.*

# Jonathan Edwards Responds to Deism

## By Gerald R. McDermott

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Because Edwards believed that deism was a major, perhaps the principal, ideological enemy of Reformed Christianity in the eighteenth century, he constructed his aesthetic revision of Christian faith in ways that often challenged deist proposals.[1] By deism I mean the system of thinking that denied that the Bible is revelation, and insisted that morality is the essence and purpose of religion.

Edwards expended considerable effort wrestling with the deist claim that reason alone can show humanity the most basic religious truths. Edwards agreed that reason alone can teach a considerable range of religious truth, but only when connected rightly to a heart that is open to the beauty of God. Reason that is rooted in aesthetic vision can prove the existence of God, tell us what God is like, disclose the purpose of creation, and even perceive God's excellency.[2]

But Edwards charged that reason that is not aesthetically grounded—which is what the tradition called "fallen" reason—had shown itself impotent to discover on its own the unity of God (*Misc.* 519),[3] life after death (*Misc.* 514), the author and purpose of the world, the length of the sabbatical week, the final judgment, the nature of heaven, and sacrifice for sin.[4] These things had been shown by God to Adam and Noah, who passed them down by tradition to their descendants. Just because they appear reasonable in hindsight, does not prove that reason originally discovered them.

Most importantly, reason was never able to show how sinful humans could be reconciled to their Creator. Locke and the deists may have been right to say that reason could show the necessity of repentance after sin, but they were wrong to believe that reason could show sinners how to achieve true repentance (*Misc.* 1304). So assurance of salvation was also impossible to find by reason alone (*Misc.* 1239). Since God is just, as well as, good, reason can never assure us that God is ready to forgive. What if he has greater regard for justice than mercy? Reason could never prove that he would forgive all sins, no matter how great. Nor could it prove how much repentance is necessary. Therefore the light of nature may show us the general shape of true religion, but it is unable to provide a religion of restoration. In other words, nature reveals God, but humans have not come to know the true God through nature. Even if they had come to this knowledge, they still would not know if God wanted to save them or damn them (*Misc.* 1304). Apart from grace humans typically misuse the natural knowledge of God for self-justification rather than self-mortification.

Besides failing to provide a religion of restoration, fallen reason has been unable to show God's excellency or beauty, which is seen only in Christ. This means that even if a person by reason discovered all Christian doctrines and all the moral and natural attributes of God, she still would not have saving knowledge of God. For that knowledge comes through a vision of God's beauty, which is found most clearly in Christ. Reason abstracted from history and sin is capable of seeing God's beauty in Christ, but fallen reason as known in this world has proved itself incapable of this aesthetic vision. As Wilson Kimnach has

noted, Edwards came to the conclusion that while fallen reason can prove religious propositions to be *true*, it cannot make them seem *real*.[6]

Such vision is impossible without knowledge of Christ that comes through revelation in Scripture. In fact, without knowledge of how it relates to Christ, *no* doctrine is known rightly (*Misc.* 519). Hence "the whole of Christian divinity depends on divine revelation" because even truths taught by the light of nature are not taught

> in that manner in which it is necessary for us to know it, for the knowledge of no truth in divinity is of any significance to us any otherwise than it some way or other belongs to the gospel scheme, or has relevance to Christ the Mediator. It signifies nothing for us to know anything of any one of God's perfections unless we know them as manifested in Christ, and so it signifies nothing to us to know any part of our duty unless it will [bear] some relation to Christ. It profits us not to have any knowledge of the law of God, unless it be either to fit us for the glad tidings of the gospel or to be a means of our sanctification in Christ Jesus and to influence us to serve God through Christ by an evangelical obedience and therefore we stand in the greatest necessity of a divine revelation. (*Misc.* 837)

Hence deist knowledge of God is not true knowledge because it denies the revelation of Christ. Even their knowledge that God is one and not many is somehow distorted because it does not acknowledge that the one God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If God the Redeemer is not known, God the Creator is not known truly.

This also means that all knowledge of God short of regeneration, though that knowledge is propositionally correct, is nevertheless fundamentally distorted. For without a vision of Christ's beauty, which comes in regeneration, nothing is seen truly. In a passage that may represent the canon within the Edwardsean canon, the New England theologian insisted on the centrality of this vision to all true religious knowledge.

> He that sees the beauty of holiness, or true moral good, sees the greatest and most important thing in the world, which is the fullness of all things, without which all the world is empty, no better than nothing, yea, worse than nothing. Unless this is seen, nothing is seen, that is worth the seeing, for there is no other true excellency or beauty. Unless this be understood, nothing is understood, that is worthy of the exercise of the noble faculty of understanding. This is the beauty of the Godhead, and the divinity of Divinity (if I may so speak), the good of the Infinite Fountain of God; without which God himself (if that were possible to be) would be an infinite evil: without which, we ourselves had better not have been; and without which there had better have been no being. He therefore in effect has nothing, that knows not this.[7]

For Edwards, failure to know and see these things was the reason deists rejected the "satisfaction" theory of the atonement. Only those with "sensible" (as opposed to "speculative") knowledge of God's excellency can imagine the "dreadfulness of the wrath of such a Being" and therefore understand the "natural agreement between affronts of such a majesty and the suffering of extreme misery; it appears much more credible to them that there is indeed an extreme misery to be suffered for sin." This lack of sensible knowledge explains why many are "blind to the suitableness of Christ's satisfaction." They don't see that this is a "divine contrivance" (*Misc.* 782).

Nor do they understand transcendence. As a result, they reduce it to human proportions: all the repentance humanity is capable of "is no repentance at all…. it is as little as none in comparison of the greatness of the injury, for it cannot bear any proportion to it." If God were to pardon simply on the basis of human repentance, it would be "dishonorable to God, just as dishonorable if he pardoned without any repentance at all" (*Misc.* oo).[8]

For Edwards, then, reason can show many religious truths, but they are not known properly unless they are seen in relation to Christ and his redemption. The problem, according to Edwards, was not reason itself, but minds which lack the "simple ideas" which are necessary to perceive certain divine things outside the mind. Hence the first explanation of why reason fails is that understanding of divine things requires the presence of certain mental conditions that the unregenerate do not possess. Without those simple ideas, reason cannot function as it ought. Its proper operation depends on a certain disposition of the mind; without that holy disposition, reason is stymied, and cannot see the highest and most essential religious truths. These truths therefore cannot be communicated in simply propositional form to the unregenerate; they are "incommunicable" and "ineffable" because they depend on the presence of simple ideas and a resulting vision that issues from "ten thousand little relations and mutual agreements" (*Misc.* 201).

Edwards's second way of explaining reason's failure was to point to prejudice, which arises from education and custom. The greatest demonstration of human prejudice, for Edwards, was a natural human propensity away from the true God. The fallen human mind, he declared, is "naturally" full of arguments against the gospel. It is prone to idolatry, with a disposition to act contrary to reason.[9]

The result is "a multiplicity of deceits…thousands of delusions."[10] Human beings "rack their brains" to devise arguments that will stop their consciences and make them feel justified in their sin.[11] They do not act rationally, and are incapable of seeing the beauty of divine things, which alone can free reason to work properly.[12]

Hence for Edwards, reason is capable of knowing God, but only when one's cognitive faculties are rightly disposed. God cannot be known by "objective" reason that has not been enlivened by spiritual experience. As William J. Wainwright has put it, "A suitably disposed natural reason is thus capable of establishing God's existence and general

nature. Truths which depend on the ideas of holiness and true beauty can also be established by rational arguments, but the force of these can be appreciated only by people with spiritual frames."[13]

Therefore reason is not enough. According to Edwards, it can tell many true things about God. But without aesthetic vision it can never get at the reality it was meant to show. For that reason, revelation is necessary.

More than anything else, it was their rejection of the Bible as written revelation that distinguished deists from all their religious adversaries.[14] They contended that God had already spoken all human beings need to hear through nature and reason, and that special revelation in the Bible was not only unnecessary but patently fraudulent.

Edwards began his defense of biblical revelation with a series of arguments for its necessity. Since he believed that reason was prevented by sin from leading human beings to the true God, he was convinced that revelation was necessary to supply what fallen reason could not. Only revelation had been able to provide true knowledge of God's nature and unity, God's works, creation, government, his great designs, his will, rewards and punishments, the nature and end of human happiness, morality, life after death, the origin of sin, the future state, and the way of redemption (*Misc.* 128, *Misc.* 582).

Besides, God is a moral governor. In moral government there is always communication between ruler and ruled, so that the ruled understand the moral rules by which they are to live. Hence it was reasonable that the mind of a ruler should declare his rules to his subjects (*Misc.* 1338, *Misc.* 864).

If reason tells us that revelation is necessary because of the need for communication, it also tells us that God's mercy requires revelation to his intelligent creatures. God has infinite concern for them (*Misc.* 544), and so would not leave them alone to reason. For it was painfully clear that fallen reason had failed to show the way to true religion (*Misc.* 249).

Edwards also attacked the deist slogan, "One must doubt revelation because it does not agree with reason." Edwards argued that this reveals human prejudice. It is analogous to doubting a reliable friend's report after he has returned from a long journey because what he reports is strange and unfamiliar to us.

But the real problem with the deist slogan is that it ignores the critical distinction between reason as a faculty and reason as a rule. Edwards used another analogy. To accept the deist slogan is like saying, "I'll never believe a telescope if it shows things different from what my naked eye sees, because my eye is the rule by which I see." This statement ignores the different senses in which the word "eye" is used: as a bodily organ and a faculty of seeing. To say that it is a rule is only to make the ridiculous assertion that I will refuse to accept as true anything I cannot see with my naked eye. No one actually intends that, but because of their sloppy use of the word "reason" the meaning of their words actually amounts to that.

In the case of the telescope, an acceptable *rule* could be to accept as true what the best instruments (including the eye and the best telescopes) affirm. This rule would also include correcting a perception of the eye with the best judgment of astronomers (for instance, discounting the eye's perception that the sun rises and sets). The eye, then, is not a rule but a faculty governed by the use of a rule.

Similarly, deists fail to make a proper distinction between the faculty of reason and the rule of reason. They fail to realize that the faculty of reason is a faculty of judgment—not only our highest but our only faculty of judgment. However, it is not and cannot be our highest *rule* of judgment. For the judge, and the rule by which he judges, are two different things, as are the judge and the faculty by which he judges. The eye is not a rule but a faculty governed by a rule. So too, the faculty of discerning truth, and a rule to regulate and determine the use of that faculty, are quite different things.

Now if by reason is meant the *faculty* of reason, Edwards continued, or the power of the mind to see the *force* of arguments, the statement is even more nonsensical. It is the same as saying that the mind's ability to see the force of arguments is a surer rule for judging truth than that particular argument: experience. Or, a man's understanding is a better rule to understand by than a particular means or rule of understanding. This is an "abuse of language!" [15]

In sum, Edwards concluded, to say that reason is a superior rule to revelation is as foolish as to say that human reason is a test of truth superior to experience.[16]

The eighteenth century debate over the meaning and roles of tradition and reason helped set the agenda for American theology in the next two centuries. That debate is critical to understanding not only the intellectual and political disputes of the eighteenth century but also their reverberations in the twenty-first.

[i] McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, an Non-Christian Faiths*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34-51.
[2] Ibid., 56-63.
[3] References to entries in Edwards's *Miscellanies* are embedded within the text; the Yale edition of the *Works* is in the process of publishing these entries in four volumes.
[4] *End for Which God Created the World*, ed. Paul Ramsey, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 8: 419; "Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath," in Edward Hickman, ed., *Works of President Edwards* (London, 1834), 2: 95; "The Final Judgment," in Hickman, 2:192; sermon on Rev. 21:18 [2]; *History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, in *Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 134, 137. In the remainder of this paper, volumes in the Yale edition of the *Works* will be indicated simply by volume and page number.
[5] "Man's Natural Blindness in Things of Religion," in Hickman 2: 252.
[6] Kimnach, "Introduction," 201.

[7] *Religious Affections*, 2: 274. This vision of divine beauty is Christological, as can be seen elsewhere in *Religious Affections*: 258-59, 274, 344-57, and *passim.*

[8] Curiously, there is some indication that deists may have influenced Edwards's understanding of the atonement, which eventually included aspects of the governmental theory to supplement his more Anselmian satisfaction theory. At Stockbridge Edwards quoted Thomas Chubb on the atonement without refuting him. The Chubb selection in *Misc.* 1213 states that an innocent person cannot be punished for the sake of the guilty; God is not thereby required to forgive the sins of the guilty. Therefore God's pardon of sinners is wholly free. The passion moved God to forgive, but not by satisfying God's wrath. For more on Edwards's atonement theory, see Dorus Paul Rudisill, *The Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and His Successors* (New York: Poseidon Books, 1971).

[9] *Religious Affections*, 2: 307; *Original Sin*, 3: 147, 153.

[10] "Man's Natural Blindness," 251.

[11] "Christian Cautions," in Hickman, 2: 176.

[12] *Original Sin*, 2: 157; "Divine and Supernatural Light," in Harold P. Simonson, ed., *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1970), 85.

[13] Wainwright, "The Nature of Reason: Locke, Swineburn, and Edwards," in Alan G. Padgett, ed. *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 106-07.

[14] McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods*, 21-33. To be sure, Jefferson accepted a small portion of the New Testament as a faithful record of Jesus's life and teaching. But even these parts were not "revelation" from God insofar as there was no Holy Spirit to reveal, the gospel authors were unreliable, and Jesus' authentic teachings were partly wrong. Even when they were right, they were merely illustrative of truths available to all human beings.

[15] "Book of Controversies" (Edwards Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University), 195-96.

[16] Ibid., 196.

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*Gerald McDermott, Ph.D. is Professor of Religion at Roanoke College, Roanoke, VA and author of numerous articles and books on Edwards.*

# Jonathan Edwards in Modernity: A Review Essay

## by Mark Valeri

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Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002.

Leon Chai, *Jonathan Edwards and the Limits of Enlightenment Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 21: *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003.

D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2003.

Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2001.

Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo, eds., *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1999.

George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003.

Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2002.

Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

The tercentenary of the birth of Jonathan Edwards (1703) has occasioned a vigorous reconsideration of his place in modern Christian thought. It has become commonplace to begin reviews of recent work on Edwards by celebrating or bemoaning the rapid procession of recent publications on him. The Yale University Press version of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* is nearing completion, with the final, twenty-seventh volume due out by the end of 2004. (Many of these volumes contain previously unpublished writings—sermons and notebooks—that inform the studies under review here). Conferences on Edwards, with the

obligatory anthology of essays in their aftermath, abound: from the last in a decade-long series of Yale-sponsored gatherings to special convocations sponsored by churches and seminaries. The works discussed below, then, represent only a small part of what can be characterized as a relentless profusion of Edwards studies.

Among many over-arching questions addressed in these books, two have attracted particularly innovative (and interrelated) interpretations. First, in what ways can we understand Edwards's conversation with the rationalist and deist creators of the Enlightenment? Second, what can his writings contribute to current issues in constructive or systematic theology, particularly in the Reformed tradition? Much of the previous scholarship minimized these issues. Most of the literature on Edwards from the 1970s through the early 1990s focused on Edwards's ethics or practical divinity, set in social context: revivalism and rhetorical strategies, provincial politics, the new commercial culture, or pastoral and domestic issues. Now we see a different set of issues emerging from the literature: epistemology and apologetics, Trinitarian theology, and eschatology.

The discursive interplay between Edwards and eighteenth-century philosophical and cultural trends (sometimes presented in general terms as "modernity") runs throughout many of the books under review here. It certainly drives George Marsden's massive new book (some six hundred pages). *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* will be the most authoritative biography of Edwards for many years to come. It has an exhaustive bibliography of the best and most recent works, including references to manuscript material, embedded in the notes. It provides thick detail of previously neglected periods in Edwards's life: his early years under the shadow of his minister father, first pastorates in New York, fate during the French and Indian War, and mission to the Indians in Stockbridge. It returns frequently to Edwards's personal affairs (here one suspects that Marsden has offered an Edwards whose psyche is a bit too familiar and admirable to current sensibilities). Moreover, Marsden has written in accessible, graceful prose; the sections that deal with theological issues present lucid and non-technical summaries that capture essential themes.

Setting Edwards in the context of an eighteenth century culture of hierarchy and deference, Marsden portrays Edwards as, above all else, a Reformed theologian who attempted to express Calvinist doctrine in contemporary idioms. From his conversion in the early 1720s through his death, Edwards was, by Marsden's account, consistently "Reformed" and "Calvinist," words used throughout the book (e.g. pp. 91, 112). If Edwards deployed the discourse of the Enlightenment, he did so only superficially. He read Enlightenment critics of Calvinism, such as the Scottish moralist Francis Hutcheson, chiefly to formulate arguments against them. Marsden's reading of Edwards's posthumously published treatises from late in life, his *The End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, reiterates this claim. According to Marsden, Edwards proposed an intensely theocentric reading of creation and history that contradicted rationalist ethics and liberal sentiments: what Marsden calls "the project that dominated Western thought" through the twentieth century (p. 471). Marsden's Edwards consistently rebuffed modernity with Calvinist doctrine.

Similar themes shape Avihu Zakai's monograph. Here too, from a sweeping, synthetic perspective, Edwards appears as a consistent critic of the leading edge of scientific, moral, and historical trends of his day. Yet Zakai, unlike Marsden, avoids the sometimes misleading and anachronistic terms "Reformed" and "Calvinist," which deafen current readers to the peculiarly eighteenth century inflection in Edwards's voice. Calvinist he was, of a sort; but Edwards was not preoccupied with the transmission of Calvinist doctrine *per se*. Focused on Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*, Zakai contends that Edwards, like Augustine and Eusebius (and not, we can infer, Calvin) shaped theology to a philosophy of history. Edwards took conversion to Christ as the controlling rubric for his theology. He used this motif to read nature (space) and time (history) in ways that confounded Newtonian physics, rationalist moral philosophy, and critical history.

Several recent studies might cause us to doubt Marsden's and Zakai's perspective on Edwards and the Enlightenment. Leon Chai's incisive but sketchy study of Edwards and three seminal thinkers—Locke, Malebranche, and Leibniz—provides an alternative interpretation. (The term Enlightenment sometimes obscures as much as it identifies, and should be examined more carefully than do Chai or any of the authors discussed here). Chai's reading of selective texts from Locke shows a deep fissure in empiricist notions of sensation and perception. Searching for sure knowledge based on sensory perception, Locke admitted that the status of ideas, derived from the mysteries of perception, eluded certain understanding. We know that ideas come from sensation, and that we think with ideas, but we ultimately do not know whether ideas objectively represent the world. In his *Religious Affections*, Edwards drew on this very dilemma to propose the legitimacy of ideas derived from divine revelation; they at least had the same epistemic status as other forms of knowledge. Edwards made the same sort of argument, Chai continues, in regard to the idealist Malebranche on the mind and to Leibniz on necessity and causation. Edwards admitted the purely functional role of causation as an idea. He thus worked within the limits of rationality as defined by the Enlightenment, rather than contested the whole program of the Enlightenment.

Michael McClymond's *Encounters with God* fits well into Chai's interpretation. This small book (only 112 pages of text) is problematic; it is devoid of reference to social context. Yet its central analytical point is suggestive. Like Chai, McClymond contends that Edwards linked an apology for Christian faith to Enlightenment categories of

subjectivity. Edwards argued that our interior states give rise to claims that Christian doctrines are objectively true. Such was the status, after all, of every truth claim. A theocentric interpretation of history could be certified as true in such terms. This set Edwards apart from Reformed apologists who rather naively defended Christian propositions without accounting for the subjective nature of knowledge. It also distinguished Edwards from later apologists such as Schleiermacher, who unnecessarily jettisoned claims to the objective truthfulness of Christian doctrines.

This interpretation of Edwards, as a proponent of an epistemological self-critique that was essential to the Enlightenment, also informs Gerald R. McDermott's *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods*. Having scoured Edwards's miscellaneous writings and sermons, especially from his late career, McDermott found a stunning amount of reflection on the question of non-Christian religions and deism. From their reading of natural religion, deists rejected many traditional Christian tenets (e.g. the deity of Jesus Christ, the Atonement, the impossibility of salvation outside of Christ). In response to deism, Edwards became intensely interested in the extent to which there was such a thing as natural religion. He began to read widely about and reflect on "religious others" (p. 7): Islam, Chinese religion, and Native American religion in particular. Surprisingly, Edwards admired Chinese religious teachings and the spiritual sensibilities of many Native Americans (he gave no compliments to Islam). He allowed that the elements of truth in these traditions evidenced some sort of universal divine revelation. Yet he concluded, unsurprisingly, that self-contradictions and superstitions within these traditions showed that natural revelation could never sustain anything approximating what deists deemed to be rational. Natural religion was irrational. Once again, we see here how Edwards used Enlightenment methods—a quite candid investigation of the natural world—to critique an overly ambitious trust in reason. Nature taught the need of revelation. McDermott concludes nonetheless that Edwards's openness to consider the possibility of natural revelation, even the salvation of non-Christians, set him apart as an especially progressive and cosmopolitan evangelical-Calvinist.

That Edwards was implicated in eighteenth century philosophical, scientific, and cultural innovations is beyond doubt. Robert Brown's monograph on Edwards's biblical interpretation reinforces claims for the influence of Enlightenment discourse on Edwards's theology. Brown provides a careful study of Edwards's previously unpublished notes (again, the Yale project has provided the evidence) on various topics relating to Scripture: history, philology, natural science, epistemology, and deist critiques of the Bible. Brown's well-documented thesis is that Edwards joined other moderns, such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and Blaise Pascal, who maintained a rather conservative understanding of the Bible even while joining the ranks of progressive intellectuals: "though he did retain a high degree of confidence in the integrity of scriptural history, his approach was really a kind of hybrid traditionalism, one modified in significant ways by his accommodation to the new learning" (p. xvii). That is, Edwards was quite conversant—through magazines, books, and newspapers—with early forms of higher criticism and natural-scientific works (e.g. Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* [1681-1689]) that cast doubt on the veracity of sacred history. He used their insights and yet provided a sophisticated exegetical argument for the historicity of the Bible. Brown concludes that Edwards's philosophical apologetic (of the sort described by Chai and McClymond) provided him with the means to use the science of criticism without capitulation to pure criticism.

Given these rich studies of the relationship of Edwards to modernity, it is not surprising that his writings recently have been considered as a source for contemporary theological reflection. The two anthologies reviewed here contain several essays that address this issue quite explicitly. In the "Introduction" to *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, Samuel T. Logan alerts readers to the common theme of the papers (most of which originally were delivered at a 2001 conference sponsored by Westminster Theological Seminary): Edwards was a synthetic thinker who oriented his work around an apology for Christianity. All of these essays are competent and engaging, but many present a simplistic dichotomy between the propositions of Edwardsean Calvinism and secular or liberal theologies. Some contributions risk more creative interpretations. Harry S. Stout's "Jonathan Edwards's Tri-World" vision parallels Zakai's argument. Stout argues that Edwards intended in *The History of the Work of Redemption* to eschew systematic theology in favor of a mythic or theological history. If so, then we might conclude that his theological program was short-lived at best—or, rather, that it disappeared until taken up in much modified form by the biblical theology movement or by Karl Barth during the mid-twentieth century. Beside Sean Lucas's splendid bibliographical essay at the end of this volume, however, perhaps the most helpful of the papers is D. G. Hart's thought-piece on Edwards as a Reformed theologian. Hart provides a suggestive typology of Reformed theology: the doctrinal theology regnant at Westminster Seminary, the cultural theology (i.e. Kuyperian) influential at Calvin Seminary, and the pietistic theology exemplified by Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. This is a rather narrow delineation of the Reformed world; but Hart's placement of Edwards in the last category—experimental, conversionist, pietistic Calvinism—integrates far more of Edwards's work into a coherent whole than do the other paradigms. Charles Hambrick-Stowe's elegant essay on Edwards's spiritual autobiography confirms this conclusion.

For all of its attempts to posit a legacy, Hart's and Lucas's collection still leaves Edwards somewhat remote from contemporary theological issues. Not so with Sang Hyun Lee's and Allen Guelzo's edition of papers from a 1996 Yale-sponsored conference on *Edwards in Our Time*. The essays do not present a coherent picture. They nonetheless offer several points of contact between Edwards and

contemporary theology. John E. Smith's ruminations on "The Perennial Jonathan Edwards" set out a general thesis: with his refusal to divorce intellectual from moral knowledge, stress on social union, and understanding of history as a dynamic and unfolding process of creation and redemption, Edwards anticipated solutions to many dilemmas of modern religious thought. To be sure, several of the authors contend that Edwards's theology did not accommodate modern religious sensibilities (Guelzo rues Edwards's moral determinism and Walter V. L. Eversley laments his dismissal of sacramental religiosity). Yet Edwards's thought strikes other contributors as potentially helpful. Sang suggests, not quite convincingly, that Edwards's stress on a dispositional ontology (God is disposed to union with the world) might provide resources for an ecological theology. Robert Jensen describes Edwards as a Trinitarian theologian so focused on social harmony (between the members of the godhead and between God and the world) that he found musical harmony to be the best image for heaven. Providing a quite different interpretation, Stephen H. Daniel's "Postmodern Concepts of God and Edwards's Trinitarian Ontology" is the most stimulating of the essays in this anthology. Edwards, according to Daniel, held an Augustinian understanding of the Trinity. God's being is a discursive or communicative space between beings. Daniel's Edwards sounds quite a lot like Karl Barth, and even postmodern in his insistence "on the primacy of revelation as that in which *the beginning* was truly *the Word*—expressive creativity—not some transcendental subject who uttered the Word" (p. 48).

Jensen's version of Edwards, focused on the social or relational aspects of the Trinity, and Daniel's, attentive to the discursive nature of divine being, alerts us to renewed interest in Trinitarian theology. Volume 21 in the Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* presents Edwards's fullest text on the issue, his "Discourse on the Trinity" (written c. 1730, and previously published in 1903). Sang Hyun Lee's introductory notes provide a large backdrop for reading Edwards: from the Cappadocian Fathers to eighteenth century Arminians. Sang suggests that Edwards was relatively indifferent to classical distinctions between Trinitarian formulas (e.g. the immanent and economic Trinity). Edwards blended different formulations, linking them always to the practical experience of the Christian life. Trinitarian issues recur in the other treatises in this volume, some of the most technical and speculative of Edwards's writings: the "Treatise on Grace" and "Efficacious Grace" (discussions of grace, the Holy Spirit, and human volition), selections from the "Controversies" notebook, and brief, previously unpublished essays on "Faith," "Signs of Godliness," "Christ's Example," and "Directions for Judging of Person's Experiences."

In *God of Grace and God of Glory*, Stephen Holmes pursues Trinitarian issues by focusing on Edwards's understanding of God's self-glorification. Holmes is uninterested in Lee's or Daniel's arguments that Edwards refused to assert a traditional ontology of God's self as a fixed substance; Holmes is relentlessly theological in traditional categories. Edwards, maintains Holmes, believed that the key to all revelation was the very status of God as subject (creator and redeemer) and object (the one glorified in history). God's self-glorification explains all divine interactions within the Trinity and with the world. This troubles Holmes at one point. It led Edwards to look for divine glory in eschatological judgment (i.e. Hell), to the neglect of a more humane (for Holmes, Barthian) conception of redemption.

Amy Plantinga Pauw puts Edwards to better use in her monograph. Pauw canvasses Edwards's miscellaneous theological speculations, "Discourse on the Trinity," and other formal treatises to portray a full Reformed Trinitarianism. Edwards, she contends quite reasonably, "refused to choose between" a psychological (Augustinian) and social model of the Trinity, which "is an indication of his high tolerance for theological tension" (p. 11). Edwards's "multi-lingual approach" (p. 190) models a method for contemporary theologians: balanced, eclectic, anything but doctrinaire. Pauw wishes to use Edwards, that is, to recommend a theological method that avoids typically liberal accommodations to social issues (the social Trinity model) and conservative (read Barthian) indifference to those issues in favor of dogmatic fidelity.

Pauw's valiant attempt to make use of Edwards for contemporary theological purposes—perhaps the best effort to date—falls short. The conclusion that Edwards's multivalent writings lead to a balance between two major Trinitarian options can be seen as reasonable but also as unproductive in solving major dilemmas. Pauw recommends Edwards as balanced and eclectic; but one might also decide that the best such eclecticism can lead to is theological vagueness or indecision.

Perhaps Pauw, like Holmes and others, tries to make too much of Edwards as a theologian interested in a systematic presentation of Christian doctrines. Contemporary studies that attempt to find a central, or defining idea to Edwards's religious writings and relate it to systematic issues (McClymond's theocentric history, Holmes's divine self-glorification, Pauw's bivalent Trinitarianism) misconstrue the nature of Edwards's thought. Undoubtedly this stems in part from the fact that Edwards avoided comprehensive reflection and wrote polemical works, short philosophical meditations, his rather unique *History of Redemption*, and thousands of sermons. The overall impression given by the publications reviewed here is that Edwards is best viewed as a philosophical or apologetic (one might even consider the possibility of something like a cultural) theologian.

To put this another way, Edwards's works are most helpful in charting the relationship between Reformed theology and deep currents of thought in the modern west. This is to distinguish him, however, as all the more, not the less, meaningful for Christian theology today. The current cultural agenda raises questions about Christianity and non-Christian discourses, religious truth claims in a

pluralist society, and the meaning of even the most basic Reformed beliefs. Edwards's conversation with Enlightened interlocutors is strikingly contemporary in such terms.

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*Mark Valeri, Ph. D., is E. T. Thompson Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA.*

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