

# Theology Matters

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## Spiritual Friendship

### The Evangelical Brotherhood in Colonial America

by Bradley J. Longfield

On October 22, 1746, Acting Governor John Hamilton of New Jersey granted a charter for the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) to seven petitioners: four Presbyterian clergy: Jonathan Dickinson, Aaron Burr, Ebenezer Pemberton, and John Pierson, and three laymen, William Smith, Peter Van Brugh Livingston, and William Peartree Smith.<sup>1</sup> The following spring, those seven, under the terms of the charter, elected five other clergy, Gilbert Tennent, William Tennent, Samuel Blair, Richard Treat, and Samuel Finley, to the Board of Trustees of the college.<sup>2</sup> Later that year, Jonathan Belcher, former governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay and a committed Reformed evangelical, was named governor of New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> Belcher, in order to further the interests of the school, granted a new charter, creating a larger and more diverse board, while preserving the theological center of the institution.<sup>4</sup> Responding to a letter he had received from Jonathan Edwards, minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, and chief theologian of the eighteenth-century awakening, Belcher assured Edwards that he had adopted the college “for a daughter” and thanked Edwards for advice in the management of the infant academy.<sup>5</sup>

Princeton was a child of the religious revivals that had been exercising the colonies since the 1730s and especially since the arrival of renowned Anglican revivalist George Whitefield in 1739. The clergy who organized the infant school essentially composed a list of the “Who’s Who” of the evangelical wing of the Presbyterian Church. They were all supporters of the

revivals and solidly committed to Reformed Christianity. Many of them were friends. Close friends.

The history of Reformed Christianity in eighteenth-century America has been told through many lenses over the years. One way into this discussion has been through denominational history such as Leonard Trinterud’s classic *The Forming of an American Tradition*.<sup>6</sup> Even so, and despite the energy invested in denominational struggles in the era, significant eighteenth-century revivalists, most notably George Whitefield, discounted the import of denominations, and many historians have followed suit, emphasizing the import of the Great Awakening as a religious movement.<sup>7</sup> One important way this has been investigated is through the lens of geography, such as Harry Stout’s *The New England Soul* and Rhys Isaac’s *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*.<sup>8</sup> This geographic lens expanded in the late-twentieth century, crossing the Atlantic, giving birth to works such as Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* and Michael Crawford’s *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England’s Revival Tradition in Its British Context*.<sup>9</sup>

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Consideration of the Great Awakening as a trans-geographical, trans-denominational movement has had its supporters and detractors as of late. Until the 1980s, the historical consensus clearly assumed the reality of a “Great Awakening.” However, in a 1982 essay, Jon Butler argued that historians needed “to abandon the term ‘Great Awakening’ because it distort[ed] the character of eighteenth-century religious life.”<sup>10</sup> Frank Lambert’s *Inventing the Great Awakening* took a slightly different tack on this claim and contended “that colonial revivalists themselves constructed ... the idea of a coherent, intercolonial revival.”<sup>11</sup> Many historians have been mostly unconvinced and Thomas Kidd, in 2007, published *The Great Awakening* to offer a fresh, synthetic account of this religious movement in America.<sup>12</sup>

Biographies have also provided significant and engaging insight into eighteenth-century Reformed evangelical life and thought. The Anglican revivalist George Whitefield has received enormous attention, most recently in Thomas Kidd’s *George Whitefield*.<sup>13</sup> George Marsden has provided the definitive biography of Jonathan Edwards with his magisterial *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*.<sup>14</sup> Other recent biographies of eighteenth-century Reformed evangelicals include studies of Jonathan Dickinson, Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Davies, Jonathan Belcher, Joseph Bellamy, and Sarah Osborn.<sup>15</sup>

In the midst of all of this, significant attention has been paid to the “publishing networks” and the role of letters for Reformed evangelicals in this era. Susan O’Brien, for example, has argued that “Calvinist revivalists of the mid-eighteenth century built a ‘community of saints’”<sup>16</sup> and George Whitefield has long been seen as a lynchpin in this community given his prominence on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>17</sup>

Just about everyone in recent scholarship notes the important local, intercolonial, or international network of evangelicals in the mid-eighteenth century, but, for the most part, consideration of this network is subsumed under some larger interpretive umbrella and loyalty to others in this network as friends, that is affective versus merely instrumental relationships, loyalty to a person or persons as distinct (though not removed) from loyalty to a movement or denomination, is rarely explored.<sup>18</sup> That is, many of these folks were not simply “friends of revival,” though they were that, but also friends of each other, spiritual friends, deeply concerned for each other for years and across geography.<sup>19</sup>

While these lenses—denomination, movement, geography, network—are obviously helpful ways of understanding the lives of eighteenth-century provincials, they can also tend to obscure. For example, those who have written through a denominational lens about Presbyterians, while often nodding at the blurred boundaries

between Congregationalists and Presbyterians in this era, will then proceed as if the categories themselves were essentially watertight. So while the Saybrook Platform, adopted by the Reformed churches in Connecticut in 1709, was, historian Williston Walker claimed, closer to “the Presbyterianism of the Middle Colonies, rather than with the more independent Congregationalism of Massachusetts,” churches in Connecticut are almost uniformly described as Congregationalist.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Solomon Stoddard, grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, and pastor of the Northampton, Massachusetts, church, led the way in founding the Hampshire Association of clergy (1714) to oversee ecclesial business in the region.<sup>21</sup> For his trouble, he was accused of being a Presbyterian. But almost all the historical literature understands the churches in the area as Congregationalist.<sup>22</sup>

As these “Congregationalists” were adopting presbyterian-like structures, Presbyterians in New Jersey were figuring out how “congregational” Presbyterianism was to be in the new world. As Richard Warch, historian of Yale, has summarized, “Twenty-five [Yale] ministers were or became Presbyterian, most of them serving churches in the Middle Colonies. For a Congregationalist, this switch involved little change in ecclesiastical belief, and some moved freely between the two denominations.”<sup>23</sup> But denominational histories and many biographies operate, for the most part, as if there were distinct boundaries between polities in this era. While immigrants surely brought notions of the most fitting form of church polity from the old country, the boundaries of what made for authentic Presbyterianism or Congregationalism as denominations were still in significant motion in New England and the middle colonies making a strict “denominational” analysis of the era, at the least, suspect.<sup>24</sup>

The fluidity of boundaries between polities in the era is also reflected in porous geographical boundaries.<sup>25</sup> There are good religious, political, and cultural reasons for taking New England as a unit for historical study, but the boundaries between New England, New York, and New Jersey were quite permeable and focusing on geography can also obscure more than it clarifies. Jonathan Dickinson, for example, pastor of the Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, church, was born in Hatfield, Massachusetts, graduated from Yale, and kept in very close touch with colleagues in New England throughout his career. In 1742, for example, he met with Benjamin Colman, Thomas Foxcroft, and Jonathan Edwards, leading Reformed evangelicals in Massachusetts, to seek counsel on divisions in the Synod of Philadelphia.<sup>26</sup> Many among those mentioned above involved in the founding of Princeton, were connected to Connecticut and/or Massachusetts. Of course, there were differences between Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, and

geography matters, but while geography is influential it is not necessarily determinative.

While this has been suggested by the more recent concern with trans-geographic clerical networks, I would like to suggest that a focus on friendship might be even more revealing. Trans-geographic friendships, loyalties among and between Reformed evangelicals in this era, could well help to explain loyalties, or lack thereof, toward denominations and loyalty to the movement of the religious awakening. Or, to put the issue as a question, how and how much did friendships among Reformed evangelicals in this era contribute to or detract from allegiance to denomination and allegiance to the awakening?

The answer to that question would take a lengthy study. In this essay, I simply want to consider the nature and scope of these friendships as a preface to considerations of the relationships between friendship, denomination, and religious movement. In particular, I would like to briefly explore relationships between thirteen individuals: Jonathan Dickinson, Gilbert Tennent, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Prince, Jonathan Belcher, David Brainerd, Benjamin Colman, Samuel Davies, Ebenezer Pemberton, Thomas Foxcroft, Joseph Bellamy, and Aaron Burr. These were (in a fluid way) Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and an Anglican, Reformed in commitment, who spanned the eastern seaboard from Massachusetts to Virginia (and England).

“Friendship,” historian Anne Lombard has claimed, “was the buzzword of the eighteenth century.” Obituaries increasingly mentioned the friendships of the deceased, poems and essays lauded the value of friends, and friendship “was celebrated as a helpful adjunct to commercial relationships.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Ray Pahl contends that “it was precisely the spread of market exchange in the eighteenth century that led to the development of [the] new benevolent bonds” of friendship.<sup>28</sup> Clubs for mutual self-improvement (such as Benjamin Franklin’s famous Junto) became more popular, and ministers encouraged men’s fellowship groups.<sup>29</sup> All of this, Lombard claims, “gave a new legitimacy to the idea of friendship among young men.”<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, Randolph Trumbach, considering kinship in eighteenth-century England, contends that “Friendship and kinship were not . . . easily distinguished in the eighteenth century,” and continues, “the difficulty in distinguishing friendship from kinship in eighteenth-century society ought not . . . to be taken as an indication of the importance of kinship ties but rather the contrary: the truly significant institution was friendship.”<sup>31</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century a friend was defined by Samuel Johnson as “one who supports you and comforts you while others do not,” or one “with whom to compare minds and cherish private virtues.”<sup>32</sup>

Of course, eighteenth-century evangelicals, as heirs of Puritanism, did not have to look far to find examples of the import of friendship in the Christian life. William Haller, in his classic study *The Rise of Puritanism*, posits the formation of a “spiritual brotherhood” in the seventeenth century, a “kind of Puritan order of preaching brothers.”<sup>33</sup> He continues:

The brotherhood of spiritual preachers never, let us make plain, entered upon anything like formal, corporate organization. It was at no time anything more than an association of ministers of the church united by personal ties and common purpose. Starting from Cambridge among Cartwright’s sympathizers, it spread along lines of personal relationship and friendship.<sup>34</sup>

This brotherhood in England crossed the Atlantic to New England in what historian Francis Bremer calls “Congregational Communion.” Bremer argues that:

Friendship among the Puritans was given a depth many non-Puritans could not relate to because it was a spiritual as well as a social relationship. . . . Friendship was a bond valued by all Englishmen, but for the Puritan it was also a duty. For some Puritans it went even further and was one of the defining characteristics of their religious life.<sup>35</sup>

John Winthrop, who would be longtime governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, well expressed this friendship to William Spring as Winthrop was about to depart for the new world. “The apprehension of your love and worth together has overcome my heart,” he wrote, “and removed the veil of modesty, that I must needs tell you, my soule is knit to you, as the soule of Jonathan to David.”<sup>36</sup>

Evangelicals in eighteenth-century America echoed these sentiments, frequently used the biblical friendship of David and Jonathan “as an inspiring example of man’s capacity for loving and virtuous friendship,” and “accorded such friendships a central place in their vision for the creation and sustenance of godly community.”<sup>37</sup> Friendships nurtured at Harvard and Yale emphasized the connection between love of God and love of friend. Moreover, friendships were seen as a key instrument in the nurture of virtue and faithfulness.<sup>38</sup>

As Richard Godbeer has argued, eighteenth-century revivalists, like their seventeenth-century Puritan forebears, “venerated love between men as a sanctified expression of membership in a transcendent spiritual family.”<sup>39</sup> Christian friends understood themselves as part of the elected family of God, so “friendship and family membership overlapped as categories of association.”<sup>40</sup> Male friends often called each other brother, or, if one were older, father.<sup>41</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth-century, young male friends were forthright in their feelings of love for each other, and letters served as a frequent vehicle for expressing these sentiments.<sup>42</sup> Among the evangelical brotherhood under consideration here, George Whitefield addressed allies as “my dear friend and brother” and wrote of the union of souls in the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> In 1743, Joseph Bellamy (Yale ’35), pastor in Bethlehem, Connecticut, wrote to his friend David Brainerd after Brainerd’s expulsion from Yale for claiming his tutor “had no more grace than this chair.” Bellamy wrote, “Dearest Brother, I read yours of February [and] loved you . . . It was not for want of love I did not come to see you [in Saybrook]; nor is it from want of love I do not now set for New York to meet you there.”<sup>44</sup> Remembering others in the fellowship, Bellamy closed, “Give my love and duty to Mr. Pemberton [Harvard ’21] and madam, Mr. Dickinson [Yale ’06], and Mr. Burr [Yale ’35].”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to expressing love and support, letters were instrumental in rendering counsel on church matters. Benjamin Colman, Harvard graduate (class of ’92) and Presbyterian-ordained pastor of Brattle Street Church in Boston, wrote many letters to friends in New York and New Jersey to give advice on “healing divisions, and quenching fires kindling and flaming among parties, pastors, and brethren.”<sup>46</sup>

Though these friendships varied in their intensity, all pursued what historian Mark Valeri has called “spiritual fraternalism.”<sup>47</sup> Such fraternalism, of course, was often rooted in a deep devotion to the common cause of the awakening, but it was not simply instrumental.<sup>48</sup> Often, these friends wrote to give words of personal encouragement. In November 1739, Ebenezer Pemberton, Pastor of Wall Street Presbyterian Church in New York, wrote to Whitefield, “I mention these things to strengthen you in the blessed cause you are engaged in, and support you in your abundant labors.”<sup>49</sup> And later that year Whitefield wrote to Gilbert Tennent (Yale MA ’25), “Be not angry because you have not heard from me. Indeed, I love and honor you in the bowels of Jesus Christ. You are seldom out of my thoughts.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise Aaron Burr wrote to Joseph Bellamy in 1742, “I bless the Lord he has taught you to rejoice always; that he feeds you with the heavenly manna. . . . The Lord has given you such clear discoveries of his love, I hope you will appear open and bold for him against all opposers.”<sup>51</sup>

This concern could take the form of reproof or counsel as when Aaron Burr, in 1742, wrote from his church in New Jersey to Joseph Bellamy in Connecticut, encouraging Bellamy to “distance himself” from radical revivalist James Davenport because Davenport’s preaching was not “well calculated to do good to mankind in general.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Jonathan Edwards (Yale ’20), during Whitefield’s visit to Northampton in 1740, took

Whitefield to task for “judging other people to be unconverted”<sup>53</sup> and Gilbert Tennent did not mince words with Whitefield in 1742, writing, “Your high opinion of the Moravians and attempts to join with them shocks me exceedingly and opens up a scene of terror and distress. O my dear brother! I believe in my soul you never did anything in all your life of such dreadful tendency to the church of God.”<sup>54</sup>

Conversely, this “spiritual fraternity” provided a forum for confession and forgiveness. In 1739, Whitefield wrote to Ebenezer Pemberton in New York to apologize for his behavior, “I have been much concerned since I saw you, lest I behaved not with that humility towards you which is due from a babe to a father in Christ . . . pity me, and pray to the Lord to heal my pride.”<sup>55</sup> In 1742, Gilbert Tennent wrote to Jonathan Dickinson about his sorrow for his contribution to the division of the Synod of Philadelphia in 1741. He wrote:

I have had many afflicting Thoughts about the Debates which have subsisted for some Time in our Synod; I would to God, the Breach were healed, if it was the Will of the Almighty. As for my own Part, wherein I have mismanaged in doing what I did;—I do look upon it to be my Duty, and should be willing to acknowledge it in the openest Manner.—I cannot justify the *excessive heat of Temper*, which has sometimes appeared in my Conduct.<sup>56</sup>

Repentance and forgiveness inspired these two to work together until Dickinson’s death five years later.

Members of this fraternity were concerned about each other as Christian brothers and friendship often took the form of personal care. Joseph Bellamy, friend and protégé of Edwards, shared living quarters with David Brainerd for a summer after Brainerd had been expelled from Yale.<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Dickinson served as Brainerd’s advocate and mentor, often opening his home to Brainerd, and Brainerd performed the marriage of Jonathan Dickinson after the death of Dickinson’s first wife.<sup>58</sup> This care often extended to presiding over friend’s funerals, such as Aaron Burr at the funeral of Jonathan Belcher in 1757 and Ebenezer Pemberton delivering the eulogy for George Whitefield at the Thursday lecture in Boston.<sup>59</sup>

The fraternity crossed generations and developed a clear mentoring and intellectual pedigree. For example, as Thomas Kidd claims, “for a time, [Gilbert] Tennent became . . . the mentor for whom Whitefield longed. . . . Tennent helped Whitefield see that they had to preach the gospel in its stark, offensive fullness.”<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Samuel Davies, pastor in Virginia, was converted under the preaching of Tennent and Davies understood Tennent to be his “spiritual father.”<sup>61</sup> In 1741, Ebenezer

Pemberton preached at Yale where the publication of his sermon was underwritten by generous subscriptions of approving undergraduates, most notably David Brainerd.<sup>62</sup> Joseph Bellamy, after graduating from Yale, studied with Edwards and became “one of Edwards’s most valued friends and allies.” Similarly, David Brainerd was the first student to study under Dickinson at the College of New Jersey.<sup>63</sup>

Members of this brotherhood recommended or supplied sermons, treatises, and pamphlets to further their study and writing and endorsed each other’s work. In 1741, Dickinson published *The True Scripture Doctrine* with a commendatory preface written by Thomas Foxcroft of Boston, and in 1742, Jonathan Dickinson anonymously published a defense of the revivals titled *A Display of God’s Special Grace* with an endorsement signed by leaders of the evangelical front in Boston including Benjamin Colman, Thomas Foxcroft (Harvard ’14), and Thomas Prince (Harvard ’07).<sup>64</sup> This would be Dickinson’s most popular work and, in 1743, Dickinson put his name on the title page and had Gilbert Tennent and five others write a new preface.<sup>65</sup> While on voyage to England, Samuel Davies read Dickinson’s *Defense of a Sermon* (1737), *Vindication of Sovereign Grace* (1746), and *A Second Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace* (1748), as well as the work of Thomas Prince.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, Joseph Bellamy sent a copy of Jonathan Dickinson’s *A Vindication of God’s Sovereign Free Grace* (Boston, 1746) to Jonathan Edwards to assist Edwards with his anti-Arminian writing.<sup>67</sup> Edwards, returning the favor, shared VanMastricht and Turretin with Bellamy to assist in the preparation of *True Religion Delineated* (1750).<sup>68</sup> In 1756, Joseph Bellamy traveled to Edwards’s home to listen to Edwards read a draft of *End for which God Created the World* and provide input.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Edwards benefitted from the work of Benjamin Colman in Boston, and Colman was instrumental in the publication of Edwards’s *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.<sup>70</sup>

These brothers also worked to secure callings for each other and offer support in the midst of those callings. When Brainerd was expelled from Yale, Pemberton secured a missionary calling for him and preached his ordination sermon.<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Dickinson played an even greater role in Brainerd’s life. Historian Norman Pettit claimed that, “No other man, apart from Edwards, showed such an interest in Brainerd’s plight.”<sup>72</sup> On a different level, when Edwards was fired from his pastorate in Northampton, Samuel Davies wrote to Bellamy seeking his assistance in either convincing Edwards to move to Virginia or coming himself. Davies wrote, “I assure myself, my dear sir, of your zealous concurrence to persuade him [Edwards] to Virginia. Do not send him a cold paper message but go to him yourself

in person. . . . If Mr. Edwards fails, shall I prevail with you to come yourself? O, how it would rejoice my soul to see you!”<sup>73</sup> Edwards did not go to Virginia, but was, in 1757, called to the presidency of Princeton.<sup>74</sup>

Friends open doors for friends, and members of this brotherhood assisted each other in extending their networks to further the evangelical cause. Before Tennent left for his New England preaching tour in 1740 to follow up on Whitefield’s recent evangelistic successes, Whitefield wrote a letter of recommendation for Tennent to Governor Jonathan Belcher in Boston to smooth the way. Tennent was, Whitefield claimed, “a solid, judicious, and zealous minister of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>75</sup> Whitefield, as the grand itinerant, served as a major thread running throughout the brotherhood. Dickinson in New Jersey, Pemberton, in New York, and Colman and Edwards in Massachusetts all opened their pulpits to him.<sup>76</sup> When Gilbert Tennent, now of Philadelphia, and Samuel Davies visited Great Britain to raise funds for the infant College of New Jersey in 1753, George Whitfield connected the two visitors with wealthy patrons.<sup>77</sup> That said, these allegiances, as is sometimes the case, could be seen as a detriment in the eyes of the wider public. Whitefield offered his home to Tennent and Davies upon their visit to England, but they concluded that Whitefield’s strained relations among some would damage their fundraising mission, and they met with him privately rather than in public.<sup>78</sup>

Extending the network often meant joining in travel, which deepened these relationships. The longest of such journeys was, no doubt, the joint fourteen-month venture of Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Davies to Great Britain just mentioned.<sup>79</sup> Tennent was twenty years Davies’s senior, and, prior to this trip, they had been no more than acquaintances. But in the month they spent together preparing for the journey, Davies confided to his diary that he was “much pleased with the pious Simplicity of my Spiritual Father, Mr. Tennent.”<sup>80</sup> Tennent’s presence on the journey alleviated some of Davies’s anxieties, and Tennent’s “unbounded freedoms of friendship” were deeply appreciated by the younger traveler.<sup>81</sup> Others in this fellowship who bonded while traveling together included Gilbert Tennent and George Whitefield,<sup>82</sup> Brainerd, Dickinson and Burr,<sup>83</sup> and Burr and Whitefield (whereupon Burr proposed to Esther Edwards in 1752).<sup>84</sup>

The brotherhood promoted the birth of institutions, significant institutions. One major project, the birth of the College of New Jersey, was noted earlier and another overlapping institution (if the term be allowed) was the founding of a denomination, the Synod of New York. These endeavors intersected, so much so that historian Richard Webster contended that “the Presbytery of New York was probably mainly induced to press the forming of a new synod, in order to found a seminary of

learning.”<sup>85</sup> But the College of New Jersey is better represented by the expansiveness of the evangelical brotherhood than by the Synod of New York. As historian Howard Miller points out, “At no point in the colonial period were the presbyteries or their churches the college’s principal source of income.” Rather, the largest gift came from the Philips brothers of Boston.<sup>86</sup> When the New Jersey legislature repeatedly refused the college’s request to have fundraising lotteries, Aaron Burr, looking to his home state, convinced the Connecticut legislature in 1754 to approve a lottery there.<sup>87</sup> The minutes of the Synod of New York do not even mention the college until 1752 and seventy-five percent of the students of Princeton in its first half-century came from outside New Jersey, a sizable portion of those from New England.<sup>88</sup>

The birth of the Synod of New York was inspired by the division of the church in 1741 between supporters of the revival and its opponents.<sup>89</sup> In the wake of that division, the Synod of Philadelphia stood in opposition to the Conjoint Presbyteries of New Brunswick and Londonderry, led, most notably by Gilbert Tennent. Dickinson worked behind the scenes seeking counsel from Colman, Foxcroft, and Edwards to effect a reunion but, after years of failed conversations, led the New York Presbytery, which included Dickinson, Pemberton, and Burr, to join with the Conjoint Presbyteries to form the Synod of New York in 1745.<sup>90</sup> In the years between the formation of the Synod of New York and the reunion with the Synod of Philadelphia in 1758, the Synod of New York grew from twenty-two to seventy-three members, with the number of congregations following similar trends.<sup>91</sup>

A final institution built by this brotherhood, including Jonathan Dickinson, Aaron Burr, Ebenezer Pemberton, and Gilbert Tennent, among others, was the creation of the New York Commissioners of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge in 1741.<sup>92</sup> This group (founded in the wake of the struggles of the Boston Board, founded by Jonathan Belcher and Benjamin Colman, among others) appointed David Brainerd to his missionary post after his expulsion from Yale.<sup>93</sup> Upon the birth of the College of New Jersey, the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge or SSPCK, supported a number of students in hopes that some would become missionaries.<sup>94</sup> Aaron Burr was instrumental in securing funding from the SSPCK to purchase 3,000 acres for settlement of Native Americans and funding for John Brainerd, David’s brother, as a missionary. Samuel Davies used his trip to Great Britain to secure funding for a missionary and schoolmaster for the Catawbas in South Carolina.<sup>95</sup> In a neat summary of the ties that bound these institutions together, the New York Board of Commissioners of the SSPCK and the Princeton Board of Trustees were made an interlocking directorate in 1764.<sup>96</sup>

These friends prayed with and for each other. David Brainerd, who suffered not a little melancholy, recorded in his diary for March 19, 1743, that he was “bitterly distressed under a sense of . . . ignorance, darkness, and unworthiness . . . but had some sweetness in conversation with Mr. [Aaron] Burr, and in praying together.”<sup>97</sup> Samuel Davies, who suffered horribly from seasickness on his voyage to England, found prayer with Tennent a great gift. “Yesterday and today we prayed together alternately in our Room,” he wrote in his diary, “and I felt some Tenderness and Importunity in so doing.” Indeed, Tennent and Davies were known to stay up until 3:00 AM praying together. Davies drew the close connection between friendship and prayer in the outset of his voyage to England, “I have been treated with uncommon Kindness during my Stay in Philadelphia by Many and have contracted sundry new Friendships, from which I hope to receive Happiness, hereafter, and especially to enjoy the Benefit of many Prayers.”<sup>98</sup> On a much wider stage, Jonathan Edwards was a major proponent of the international Concert of Prayer for the revival of religion. In *An Humble Attempt*, published in 1747, he sought to extend “international agreements to regularly scheduled extraordinary prayers for awakenings” and the advance of Christ’s kingdom.<sup>99</sup> This work was commended in a preface signed by Thomas Foxcroft and Thomas Prince, among others.<sup>100</sup>

The folks considered here were all committed to the course of the awakening and to Reformed denominationalism, but they were also committed to each other in profound ways: opening their homes, travelling long miles together, building institutions, sharing their joys, wisdom, hopes, fears, trials, confessions, prayers, and scholarship over extended periods of time. This brotherhood provided a point of stability in a world in serious transition. These friendships—I would suggest— Influenced the course of Reformed religious developments in this country in ways yet to be fully explored.

To take but two possibilities: in New England, the Great Awakening inspired many churches to become Baptist, but this, by in large, did not happen in the Middle Colonies.<sup>101</sup> The formation of the New York Synod, with New Side sympathies, and the lack of “civil pressure” in the middle colonies no doubt contributed to this.<sup>102</sup> But the friendships among the brotherhood, may well have played a role in maintaining the allegiance of clergy and laity to a specific denomination. Historian Marilyn Westerkamp nodded in this direction when she claimed, “I would argue that, in part, [clergy] resolved disputes and negotiated compromises because they were colleagues, friends, and confidants. They needed the emotional and institutional support that clergymen give to one another and that the church administration provided them in their work.”<sup>103</sup>

Likewise, the scholarly debate about the actuality of the awakening could well be informed by a more deliberate focus on the spiritual friendships that stood between the leadership of the movement and the development of institutions to undergird the movement. The connections in this brotherhood—from Massachusetts to Connecticut, to New York, to New Jersey, to Pennsylvania, to Virginia—provide a link that crosses not only geography, but also decades and denominations (however construed). This brotherhood provided glue to the religious movement of the awakening not unlike that usually attributed to Whitefield alone.

Years ago, Timothy Smith suggested that “the quest of community [was] a central feature of early American experience,” and that “the emotional fervor of religious revivals cemented [early voluntary associations into] new unions, making organizations organisms, denominations, “communions.”<sup>104</sup> Likewise, historian

Timothy Hall has claimed that the “ties of affection that linked members to a long-distance imagined community” invited them “into a close-knit, voluntary local expression of that wider community.”<sup>105</sup> The evangelical brotherhood was a powerful incarnate expression of this quest for intimate spiritual and personal community that traversed the eastern seaboard and shaped the future of Reformed Christianity in America. Dare I say, these spiritual friends have something to teach Reformed Christians in twenty-first century America.

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Bradley J. Longfield is Professor of Church History, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Iowa. He is author of *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* and *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Princeton: 1746–1896* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 16, 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> Wertenbaker, *Princeton*, 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> Wertenbaker, *Princeton*, 25–26; George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 339.

<sup>4</sup> Wertenbaker, *Princeton*, 26–27.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 262.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 247.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Michael Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England’s Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried,” *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): 322. Timothy Smith almost suggests this in “Congregation, State, and Denomination: The Forming of the American Religious Structure,” in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Kidd, *Whitefield*.

<sup>14</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*.

<sup>15</sup> See Bryan F. LeBeau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Milton Colalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); George Pilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971); Michael Batinski, *Jonathan Belcher: Colonial Governor* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy’s New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1994); Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Susan O’Brien, “A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735–1755,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 813; John Few, “Wheelock’s World: Letters and the Communication of Revival in Great Awakening New England,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (2001): 99.

<sup>17</sup> O’Brien, “A Transatlantic Community of Saints,” 813, 816.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Bremer, in his study of seventeenth-century friendships among Puritans, allows, “For purposes of this study friendship will be used as meaning a relationship between two individuals that is maintained over time and that satisfies mutual needs. ... The relationship is instrumental but also affective. In cases where friends share an intense religious experience which they identify as signifying spiritual rebirth into a communion of saints, that affection is very strong, the experience of defining them as an elect group separate from others.” (Francis Bremer, *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610–1692* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 11).

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 515. Charles Briggs is a notable exception to this tendency. He notes, “The Connecticut churches were commonly called Presbyterian from the earliest times” (Charles Briggs, *American Presbyterianism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885), 183).

<sup>21</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 116. Marsden notes the ambiguity in talking about denominations in this era in his observation that, “A striking feature of Massachusetts’ ecclesiastical affairs (a feature that eventually proved Edwards’s undoing) was that the churches never established uniform polity” (178). See also J. William Youngs, *God’s Messengers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 178; Sheila McIntyre, “‘This loving Correspondency’: New England Ministerial Communication and Association, 1670–1730,” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1996), 211; Edwards preferred Presbyterianism writing, “I have long been perfectly out of conceit of our unsettled, independent, confused way of church government in the land; and the Presbyterian way has ever appeared to me most agreeable to the word of God and the reason and nature of things.” (Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian*

*Church in America: from Its Origin Until the Year 1760* (Philadelphia: J.M. Wilson, 1857), 252).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets: Yale College, 1701–1740* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 271–72. This blurring was mirrored in England. See Russell E. Richey, *Denominationalism: Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013) 42, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Russell Richey has classified Jonathan Dickinson and Samuel Davies as “catholic” evangelicals and argued that “[Catholicity’s] place within liberalism has made its role in evangelicalism from the seventeenth century to the present less readily appreciated” (Richey, *Denominationalism: Illustrated and Explained*, 26–27). Likewise, Richey claims of life in England, “dissenters during most of the eighteenth century chose unity over denominationalism. Interaction and association took many forms: friendship, correspondence, societies, exchange of pulpits, gatherings, mutual assistance” (89). C.C. Goen allowed “In the Bay Colony a more strict congregational view had prevailed, while in Connecticut the ‘moderate Presbyterians’ controlled the religious establishment” (Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962; reprint, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 1).

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Hall claims, “Society had become more fluid, religion and culture more diverse, boundaries more porous than ever before” (Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 32).

<sup>26</sup> LeBeau, *Dickinson*, 136. See also Marsden, *Edwards*, 215.

<sup>27</sup> Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 79; Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Man and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Pahl, *On Friendship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 54–55.

<sup>29</sup> Lombard, *Manhood*, 79–80.

<sup>30</sup> Lombard, *Manhood*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 64–65.

<sup>32</sup> Allan Silver, “Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (May 1990): 1487.

<sup>33</sup> William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938; Second ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 52.

<sup>34</sup> Haller, *Rise of Puritanism*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Godbeer, *Friendship*, 7, 65–66.

<sup>38</sup> Godbeer, *Friendship*, 66–67.

<sup>39</sup> Godbeer, *Friendship*, 84

<sup>40</sup> Godbeer, *Friendship*, 8. Indeed, frequently, particularly in the seventeenth century, friendship and literal family relationship overlapped. See Godbeer, *Friendship*, 92–93, and Lombard, *Manhood*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Godbeer, *Friendship*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Lombard, *Manhood*, 96; Godbeer, *Friendship*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Godbeer, *Friendship*, 97–99. There has not been a lot of work on seventeenth-century male friendships among evangelicals. But Jessica Warner, in “Evangelical Male Friendships in America’s First Age of Reform,” *Journal of Social History* 43 (2010) noted that, “Evangelical friendships ... were more grounded than their secular counterparts, which is to say that shared religious values and experiences gave pious youths an additional dimension on which to bond,” and “the typical evangelical friendship would appear to have grown stronger over time precisely because the men in question enjoyed more than just a passing social bond” (691).

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Valeri, *Law and Providence*, p. 20. See also Joseph Bellamy, *The Works of Joseph Bellamy*, Vol. I (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), xii–xiii.

<sup>45</sup> Bellamy, *Works of Bellamy*, vol. I, xiii.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholic Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>47</sup> Valeri, *Bellamy*, 20. Thomas Kidd has pointed out that “The evangelical movement was formidable, but its most important leaders [Whitefield, Edwards, Wesley] struggled terribly to maintain interpersonal harmony.” (Kidd, *Whitefield*, 129). George Marsden contends that while Edwards and Whitefield were “firm allies” they were “too different in style to work closely together” Marsden, *Edwards*, 212.

<sup>48</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 280.

<sup>49</sup> George Whitefield, *Journals of George Whitefield*, (np: Christian Classics, 1970), 230–31.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 389.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Bellamy, *Works of Bellamy*, Vol. I (New York: Garland, 1987), x–xi.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Valeri, *Bellamy*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Ava Chamberlin, “The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards’s Critique of George Whitfield,” *New England Quarterly* 70 (1997): 369; Marsden, *Edwards*, 211.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Kidd, *Whitefield*, 197.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 399.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Coalter, *Tennent*, 105–06. See also Davenport’s retractions inspired by the ministry of Eleazar Wheelock in Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston, Charles Tappan, 1845; reprint edition, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 249–252.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 441.

<sup>58</sup> Edwards, *Life of David Brainerd*, ed., Pettit, 52, 54.

<sup>59</sup> *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, cv Ebenezer Pemberton; Batinski, *Belcher*, 171; Harry Stout, *Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 282.

<sup>60</sup> Kidd, *Whitefield*, 89, 90.

<sup>61</sup> Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 549.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 39–40.

<sup>63</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 239; Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 55.

<sup>64</sup> Keith Hardman, “Jonathan Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism, 1717–1747,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 239; Trinterud, *American Tradition*, 118.

<sup>65</sup> Trinterud, *American Tradition*, 119; Coalter, *Tennent*, 117. Colman also wrote a preface to Tennent’s sermon against the Moravians. (Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 392).

<sup>66</sup> George Pilcher, ed., *The Reverend Samuel Davies Abroad: the Diary of a Journey to England and Scotland, 1753–55* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 31, 32, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Valeri, *Bellamy*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Bellamy, *Works of Bellamy*, vol. I, fn. xiv.

<sup>69</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 450.

<sup>70</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 143, 180.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 40.

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 54.

<sup>73</sup> Bellamy, *Works of Bellamy*, vol. I, xiv.

<sup>74</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 428ff.

<sup>75</sup> Coalter, *Tennent*, 73 and fn. 55 p. 184.

<sup>76</sup> Coalter, *Tennent*, 63; Whitefield, *Journals*, 460–61.

<sup>77</sup> Kidd, *Whitefield*, 220.

<sup>78</sup> Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, 44.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Pilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Pilcher, *Davies*, 140.

<sup>81</sup> Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, 23.

<sup>82</sup> Kidd, *Whitefield*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 409.

<sup>84</sup> Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 448. Edwards also travelled to his father’s home with Whitefield. See Tracy, *Great Awakening*, 100.

<sup>85</sup> Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 258. This is to say, Dickinson had one eye on Philadelphia for the church and another eye on New Haven concerning Yale.

<sup>86</sup> Howard Miller, *The Revolutionary College* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 72, 73.



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<sup>87</sup> Miller, *Revolutionary College*, 74.

<sup>88</sup> Miller, *Revolutionary College*, 72, 309 fn. 67.

<sup>89</sup> See Bradley Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 7–14.

<sup>90</sup> Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 16–17. Webster, *Presbyterian Church in America*, 204, 215.

<sup>91</sup> Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 27.

<sup>92</sup> Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 301. A Board of Commissioners in Boston was created in 1731 which included Belcher and Colman. See Frederick Mills, “The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge in British North America, 1730–1775,” *Church History*, 63 (1994): 18–19.

<sup>93</sup> Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 302; Mills, “SSPCK,” 21.

<sup>94</sup> Mills, “SSPCK,” 22.

<sup>95</sup> Mills, “SSPCK,” 23–24.

<sup>96</sup> Mills, “SSPCK,” 27.

<sup>97</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 200.

<sup>98</sup> Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, 30, 44, 23. See also Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 108.

<sup>99</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, 334–35. Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 308.

<sup>100</sup> Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stein, 311.

<sup>101</sup> Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 51, 206; Brian F. LeBeau, “‘The Acrimonious, Controversial Spirit’ Among Baptists and Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies During the Great Awakening,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 9 (1990): 170. Some Presbyterian laity did move to the Baptist fold (LeBeau, “Baptists and Presbyterians,” 171) and some congregations did split (Miller, *Revolutionary College*, 13), but this was not as prevalent as in New England.

<sup>102</sup> LeBeau, “Baptists and Presbyterians,” 170. See e.g. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 63–64.

<sup>103</sup> Marilyn Westerkamp, “Division, Dissension, and Compromise: The Presbyterian Church during the Great Awakening” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000): 16.

<sup>104</sup> Timothy Smith, “Congregation, State, and Denomination: The Forming of the American Religious Structure,” in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 66–67.

<sup>105</sup> Hall, *Contested Boundaries*, 102.

# John Owen on the Beatific Vision Historic Reformed “Spirituality” in Action

by Suzanne McDonald

A good number of you might never have heard of John Owen, but for those of you who have, he might well be something of a polarizing figure. If he is known for anything today it is usually for a book called *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. It has been called the greatest defense of the doctrine of ‘limited atonement’ ever written, and it has become a sort of line in the sand for the kind of Reformed person you are. Do you love the Puritans—Owen is often called the Prince of Puritans—and does strict historical orthodoxy especially on the doctrine of election matter deeply to you? If so, John Owen is your hero, and liking this book means you have your ‘Reformed card’! But it probably also means that you think that someone who doesn’t like this book has forfeited theirs. For others, though, John Owen is presented as a theological bogeyman, and this book is used to warn others away from what is seen to be a fearful, narrow, heartless approach to being Reformed from which we need to flee into more spacious and generous ways of being Reformed today. Either way, John Owen himself ends up becoming a stick with which to beat people, and he and his theology are desperately short-changed. Because he is so relatively little known, but so often caricatured, I thought it might be helpful to share a little about him, and to get a bit of a sense of a life lived in the thick of one of the most turbulent times in English history.

John Owen was born in 1616 and died in 1683. His father was a parish pastor and he initially planned to become a parish minister himself, but he couldn’t in good conscience. This is the era of the Pilgrims—the Mayflower in 1620 when Owen was four years old, and then John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay colony when he was in his teens—when changes in the doctrine and worship of the Church of England made things difficult for many. By the time he could have entered the ministry, in the late 1630s, things were even worse. And by then what we now know as Great Britain was also lurching into a series of political and religious crises that would soon tumble into years of civil war between the forces of King Charles I and the forces of Parliament. This would end in victory for Parliament and with the trial and execution of the King, which took place on January 30, 1649. For the next eleven years England was a republic.

Owen was in the thick of all of this. He did become a parish minister once the Church of England broke apart during the civil wars, and was an ardent Parliamentarian, often being summoned to preach before Parliament in London, including the day after the execution of the King. During the 1650s, he was a major public figure at the center of church and political power.

And then all of that came crashing down. In 1660 the monarchy was restored under Charles II, and with the monarchy the Church of England was restored, too. That began decades of persecution against the Non-conformists, like John Owen.

From then on, John Owen pastored illegal underground congregations, and was a leader of the Nonconformists, using his considerable prestige and influence to help others. And it's to John Owen that we owe the fact that we can all read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He pleaded Bunyan's cause—and there is a memorable anecdote when the King is said to have asked him why he, the incredibly learned and eminent John Owen, would care anything about an imprisoned tinker, and Owen replied that he would surrender all his learning to be able to preach as powerfully as John Bunyan did. And it was John Owen who found Bunyan a publisher. When other publishers wouldn't touch his work, Owen asked his own publisher to take *Pilgrim's Progress*. He did, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Even that summary lets you know that he lived a quite extraordinary life. And in the midst of all that he wrote a very great deal. His complete works take up twenty-four hefty volumes, and they range from large tomes on major doctrines, to short catechisms, to books on aspects of the church and worship and the Christian life—although like all the Puritans you can't really divide his books up into categories. In everything he writes, he is always a rigorous theologian, and he is always concerned about how doctrines shape our worship and discipleship, and he is always pointing us towards the implications of all of this for what we would today call 'spirituality'—ways that the Holy Spirit enables us to grow in loving communion with the Triune God.

His *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* is the very last book he brought to the press before he died. We have the rather beautiful story of his friend, William Payne, bringing him the first page proofs, hot off the press, on what would turn out to be the day of his death. When he saw them, he apparently said, "O Brother Payne! The long wished-for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world."

He wrote it in the midst of what he thought was the serious decline of the church: as an institution, in its doctrine and practices, and in the personal spiritual lives of most church members. Does that sound familiar?! It basically became his last testament to the church. And what was it? A book on spirituality, in effect. It was a book urging every Christian to meditate on the glory of Christ, as we can know that now by faith, and as a fore-taste of the beatific vision in glory. Owen was convinced

that thinking more about the beatific vision was what the church urgently needed, as a means by which the Holy Spirit might remedy the terrible mess the church as an institution had fallen into, and the moribund discipleship and spiritual lives of many of its members.

If you are thinking, "What? Why?", you are not alone! As we will see, that is exactly the response Owen anticipated from his readers, too! Regular Reformed folks don't tend to think too much about the beatific vision. It has tended to be seen as a Roman Catholic doctrine. To be fair, that's because it's mostly the Roman Catholics who have thought and written about it down the centuries. But the beatific vision has never simply been a Roman Catholic doctrine—it is rooted in scripture, and every Christian theological tradition has something like it. The online magazine, *Credo*, devoted its December issue to the beatific vision, so if you would like to explore it further, this is a terrific place to start.

So, what is it? It's not about us expecting or having visions now. The beatific vision is about our ultimate salvation. It is the vision of God in glory that is experienced in eternity by those who are saved. Now, in this life, we live by faith and not by sight. But then, at the consummation of all things, those who are saved will apprehend as much as it is possible for a glorified mind to grasp of the essence and glory of the Triune God. As we'll see, John Owen is going to do something a little different from this traditional understanding. He is going to give us what he thinks is a more scriptural and Reformed approach to it, and along the way he is going to tell us that it's actually one of the most important things we could think about in this life.

But he knew he would have an uphill battle convincing his staid Reformed readers to think about the beatific vision, let alone asking them to make the anticipation of it the centerpiece of their Christian lives—the heart of their spirituality, in effect. Owen knew that plenty of his readers might not have an issue with any number of spiritual practices, or aspects of what we would today call 'spirituality.' They were Puritans! They were fine with things like prayer, fasting, meditation on scripture, daily self-examination before God. But meditating on the beatific vision? Isn't that just a distraction from seeking to live our day-to-day lives rightly before God—a classic case of being too heavenly minded to be any earthly use? In Owen's words, "Some," he says, "will say they understand not these things, nor any concernment of their own in them. If they are true, yet are they notions which they may safely be without knowledge of; for so far as they can discern, they have no influence on Christian practice or duties of morality... but take the minds of men from more necessary duties."<sup>1</sup>

And he knew there were other problems too. In his time alternative spiritualities were attracting attention, which Owen thought had become completely scripturally unmoored. There were people claiming visions and personal inspiration directly from the Holy Spirit and speaking of the ‘inner light’ within them. They claimed that this inner light and personal revelations they received were more authoritative than scripture, and despised those who were still dependent on the Bible as mere infants in the spiritual life, unlike themselves, the specially gifted spiritual elite.

Many of these folks were Quakers, but they were not Quakers as we know them today. They were a very new movement back then, and they were decidedly militant (many of them had fought in the Parliamentarian armies), and highly disruptive. They would barge into worship services and harangue ministers while they preached, and they sometimes did and said bizarre and blasphemous things which they claimed were prompted by the Holy Spirit within them. To Owen these were people who have gotten carried away with claims to personal experiences and revelations and allowed those things to trump scripture. They were refusing to allow the Holy Spirit as he is made known to us in scripture to “test the spirits,” so to speak. They were confusing their spirits with the Holy Spirit, and so, as far as Owen was concerned, they were giving the Holy Spirit, and true Christian spirituality, a bad name.

And then there were other groups in Owen’s time who completely rejected historic theological orthodoxy, in particular, the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. For Owen these people were guilty of elevating their own reasoning above the authority of scripture. And because they denied the Trinity and Christ’s two natures, they also denied that there was any such thing as personally intimate relationship with God, or union and communion with Christ by the Spirit. They saw this as fanciful and irrational.<sup>2</sup> None of this ‘spirituality’ stuff, please! For them, all that God wants of us is that we seek to live a decent, morally upright kind of life. Anything else they saw as mystical nonsense.

So, Owen was advocating for what he thought of as true Christian spirituality on two fronts—against those whose unscriptural excesses gave any kind of spirituality a bad name, and against those whose rationalist agenda meant they despised anything that looked like spirituality at all. He saw both as two sides of one false coin. Both elevated some other source of knowledge and authority over scripture: either their personal experience or their reason. For Owen, our only sure access to true knowledge of God, and therefore the only basis of a properly Christian spirituality, is God’s self-revelation in scripture, and especially in Jesus Christ, who is shown

in scripture to be the eternal Son of God incarnate. As he trenchantly puts it, “Men may talk what they please of a *Light within them*, or of the Power of Reason, to conduct them unto that Knowledge of God, whereby they may live unto him,” but, he says, without the light of divine revelation in scripture, and in particular, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, such people remain in utter darkness.<sup>3</sup>

This is the concept at the very heart of how John Owen presents the beatific vision, and why he thinks that meditating upon it is also absolutely essential for life now. It is all about the glory of Christ, and in particular, beholding the glory of *God* in the face of Jesus Christ, by faith now and by sight in the life to come. This entire treatise could be seen as one long exhortation to take up what might be called today the “spiritual practice” of Christ-focused scriptural contemplation.

Some key verses for Owen in this regard are 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:4–6. He combines these texts with Rom. 8:29 to show that it is as we behold the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit that the image of God in us is renewed and restored. We are conformed more and more into the image of Christ, the image of God. It is this Spirit-enabled beholding of Christ by faith through scripture that leads to the Spirit’s transforming and sanctifying work in us now. That process will then be consummated when we behold Christ face to face at the eschaton. Our beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ by faith now is our foretaste of the beatific vision, and the start of the transforming work in us that will be consummated in glory.<sup>4</sup>

So, what does it mean to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ by faith now? For Owen, it means meditating on what scripture tells us of who Jesus is, and what he has done, and continues to do, and promises he will do. All of a sudden meditating on the beatific vision doesn’t sound quite so esoteric and abstract, does it? But the one thing Owen wants to make sure that we grasp is that we do indeed need behold the glory of *God* in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the eternal Son of God in person. It is absolutely *vital* for Owen that our scriptural and doctrinal anchor for all of our thoughts about Jesus is that he is fully divine as well as fully human.

Owen has a great deal to say about the importance of Jesus’ humanity, but he emphasizes above all that we *must* keep a strong sense of the divinity of Christ because so many people were denying it outright. He writes of how denial of Christ’s divinity is making havoc of Christianity in his time, and of how belief in Christ’s divinity as well as his humanity is the foundation of our faith and of our salvation. If we do not acknowledge the divinity of Christ, says Owen, then we

do not truly behold the glory of God in him—we do not see God or know God in him. Above all, we do not truly know the self-giving and saving love that the Triune God has for us. And if we do not acknowledge the divinity of Christ, our salvation falls apart, because it is only as Jesus Christ is God himself amongst us that our sins are taken away, death is destroyed, and we are restored to union and communion with the Triune God. We absolutely need Jesus Christ to be a human being as we are, like us in every way except sin. But if we lose the divinity of Christ, we have lost everything. For Owen, beholding the glory of Christ in his divine as well as human nature is the touchstone for true faith and therefore for salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Even so, mere intellectual assent to the doctrine of Christ's two natures is not enough without heart knowledge—without personal experience of its transforming power. Owen says that we must not “rest ... in the *Notion of this Truth*, and a bare assent unto the Doctrine of it. The affecting Power of it upon our Hearts, is that which we should aim at.” Without this he says that “Religion...is a dead carcass without an animating soul.” By the Spirit, then, we are to cultivate habits—what we would now call spiritual practices—that will enable us to experience the glory and the love of Christ: “Be not content to have *right Notions* of the love of Christ in your minds, unless you can attain a Gracious *Taste* of it in your Hearts.”<sup>6</sup>

This is where doctrine and spirituality meet. On the one hand, there is no true spirituality without it being deeply grounded in rigorous theology. On the other, there is no true theology until we taste it in the depths of our hearts. Owen holds all of this together. He passionately loves the Lord and speaks rapturously of what he calls our ineffable and mystical union with Christ by the Spirit. But that passionate love of the Lord, and that spirituality of union with him, is inseparable from scripturally rooted historically orthodox doctrine. Doctrine lives and loves and sings and soars in prayer and contemplation and meditation, and in turn, all of that is in service to living more fully for the Lord in our day-to-day discipleship. Theology, spirituality, and discipleship are all of a piece.

As this indicates, discipleship is crucial to Owen, too. The fruit of all true theology and spirituality has to be living lives more fully oriented towards God. So, for example, meditating on the glory of Christ in his self-giving love is the way that we are made ready for a costly discipleship of self-giving love, self-denial, and the way of the cross. Owen speaks of how this enables believers to be able surrender “our Goods, our Liberties, our Relations, our Lives.”<sup>7</sup> When Owen wrote that, he meant it, and the people who read him knew exactly

what he meant. Loss of income and property, imprisonment, and the threat and reality of execution had been the lived reality for many Nonconformists in England for more than twenty years.

Even in less extreme situations, meditating on the glory of Christ—contemplating the riches of who he is, fully divine and fully human, and what he has done for us—is still formative for our ordinary day-to-day lives. Owen points to how this makes us all the more ready to turn to Christ as our comfort and our refuge in distress, and how it helps to strengthen us in our troubles, and give us a better perspective on what we would now call our anxieties and obsessions, so that we might experience more of the peace of Christ. It also gives us confidence to turn to him as our strong tower in temptation, and as our merciful savior when we are burdened by our sin. And he speaks of how steady meditation on the glory of Christ throughout our lives will bring us strength and hope as we face death.

In fact, Owen is convinced that *not* regularly meditating on the glory of Christ is one of the main reasons why there seems to be so little fruit from so many people's faith—why there are so few signs of sanctification in so many professing Christians. He remarks that if Christians were to spend more time meditating on Christ in his divinity and humanity and all that this means for us, “we should more represent the Glory of Christ in our ways and walking than usually we do.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, we would walk the Christian walk a good deal better in our daily lives, and we would show the world a good deal more of Jesus, if we were a good deal more intentional about spending time thinking about him.

This is because Owen is very well aware that we are all transformed more and more into the image of whatever most fills our minds. And most of the time, he says, that is anything else but Jesus. Owen reminds us that we all recognize the need to learn and practice skills for our work and our hobbies, but we don't think we need to practice what it means to meditate on the glory of Christ, even though that is the means God has ordained for us by the Holy Spirit to live rightly before him, as 2 Cor 3:18 makes clear. As he puts it, we “are not so vain as to hope for skill and understanding in the mystery of a secular art or trade without the diligent use of those means whereby it may be attained; and shall we suppose that we may be furnished with spiritual skill and wisdom in this sacred mystery [beholding the glory of God] without diligence in the use of the means appointed of God for the attaining of it?”<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to point out that we are usually able to find plenty of time to ruminate on how to be successful in our careers, or to get more money, or to fulfill a whole

list of desires, but somehow it seems to be a lot harder to find time to mediate on Christ. Owen says:

When the minds of men are vehemently fixed on the pursuit of their lusts [i.e. any inordinate desire], they will be continually ruminating on the objects of them. ... The objects of their lusts have framed and raised an image of themselves in their minds, and transformed them into their own likeness ... . And shall we be slothful and negligent in the contemplation of that glory which transforms our minds into its own likeness, so as that the eyes of our understandings shall be continually filled with it, until we see him and behold him continually, so as never to cease from the holy acts of delight in him and love to him?<sup>10</sup>

Again, he is reminding us that we are transformed into the image of what most occupies our minds. Our minds need more Jesus, says Owen, and then, by the Spirit our lives will show more of the fruit of that. All of this also means that it is not possible to follow Christ by simply trying harder to live a moral, decent, upright life, as those despisers of spirituality (and the doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's two natures) in Owen's time tried to claim. Sanctification is not mere moralism. We are not talking primarily about behavior adjustment here. We are talking about relationship, and we are talking about transformation at the core of our being. What we need is the transforming work of the Spirit within us to bring us into ever deeper and more intimate communion with Christ, and to conform us more and more to be like him. That is what changes us and how we live day by day. And this means—we need spirituality! We need Christ-focused contemplation! Owen thinks that we should all spend dedicated time every day meditating on the glory of Christ in the fullness of his divine-human personhood. That is the wellspring of a transformed life in conformity to the ways and the will of God.<sup>11</sup> It is also our anticipation of the beatific vision in glory.

And so we turn briefly to what we can say of what that will be like, as best Owen can discern it from scripture. As I mentioned earlier, the usual, traditional account of the beatific vision is that the saved are able to apprehend as much as it is possible for a glorified creaturely mind to grasp of the essence of the Triune God. For Owen, and others in the Reformed Puritan tradition, though, the beatific vision doesn't simply mean intellectual apprehension of the essence of God. It means *we will see Jesus*. Scripture indicates that we will quite literally behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ when we see him face to face in person at the eschaton.

That brings us to another issue of note, and another major difference between Owen's understanding of the beatific vision and the more traditional approach.

Owen's is a gloriously *bodily* account of the beatific vision. This isn't some glorified brain-on-a-stick intellectual apprehension of the essence of God. Our resurrected *bodies* will be central to the beatific vision. This is about *seeing the glorified Christ with our glorified eyes*, and in and through that, beholding the dazzling glory of the Triune God. Owen is utterly, rapturously lyrical about this. As he says: "The body as glorified, with its senses, shall have its use and place herein. After we are clothed again with our flesh, we shall *see our Redeemer with our eyes*." "Unto whom is it not a matter of rejoicing, that with the *same eyes* wherewith they see the tokens and signs of him in the Sacrament of the Supper, they shall behold himself immediately, in his own person. ... *As a man sees his neighbour when they stand and converse together face to face, so shall we see the Lord Christ in his glory.*"<sup>12</sup>

As a side note, Owen's powerful emphasis on the role of our glorified bodies in the beatific vision speaks into some contemporary debates about eschatology, about what the fullness of eternal life will be like. Those debates also have significant implications for how we think about the Christian life here and now. I think many of us have bought into a highly scripturally dubious idea of an all-but-disembodied eternal life in 'heaven.' We might pay lip service to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, but functionally, our understanding of eternal life is largely 'spiritualized.' You can see how the more traditional approach to the beatific vision can compound this. It appears that we might as well not have our resurrection bodies at all, because the focus is entirely on our intellectual apprehension of the essence of God. One of the most important aspects of eschatology in recent years has been the recovery of a much more scripturally robust account of how eternal life will involve our glorified resurrection bodies in the glorified new creation. But the people who emphasize this tend to place us and what we will be doing in the new creation so much at the center of how we envision eternal life that what scripture keeps at the center—beholding God, worshiping God, union and communion with God—gets lost. The prominent place Owen gives to our glorified resurrection bodies in the beatific vision helps us to hold all of this together. Worship of and communion with God remain at the center, but in a way that involves the whole of who we are: body, soul, mind, spirit.

It goes without saying that for Owen the beatific vision does involve our minds as well as our bodies. As we behold the glory of Christ so we will understand as fully as possible the divinity and humanity of Christ, the being of God as Trinity, and all that this means for us and our salvation. And as we behold and understand, so we will be fully and finally transformed. As Owen puts it, "The Vision which we shall have of the Glory of

Christ in Heaven, and of the Glory of the immense God in him, is perfectly and absolutely *transforming*. It doth change us wholly into the Image of Christ. *When we shall see him, we shall be as he is, we shall be like him, because we shall see him*" (1 Jn 3:2).<sup>13</sup> As we behold and understand and are glorified, so we are also taken up into fullest most ineffable union and communion with the Triune God and caught up in the Triune life of love. And so will worship and adore, lost in wonder, love and praise. All of these—body, mind, soul, sight, understanding, transformation, love, adoration, worship—are held together.

Do you see what Owen has done here, and also what he is calling us to do? In his account of the continuum between beholding the glory of Christ by faith now, and by sight in the life to come—the continuum between the practice of daily meditation on Christ in this life and the beatific vision—in all of this, he has offered us an example of a scripturally rooted, doctrinally rich Reformed spirituality through which the Spirit will shape our lives and our discipleship now, in anticipation of eternal life. And do you also see how this counters the kinds of objections and problems related to ‘spirituality’ that Owen faced in his own times, and that we still face in various ways now?

So, just as Owen expected many of his readers to be impatient with any idea of contemplating the glory of Christ, as a distraction from living for God now, we also encounter people who will say that any kind of contemplative spirituality is a waste of time when there are so many serious issues in our society and in the world that require urgent action.

We also have our own versions of those whom Owen thought of as elevating other things over the authority of scripture and right doctrine. So, there are so many spiritualities today that primarily encourage us to ‘look within’ in ways that aren’t carefully qualified and tested by scripture. And in addition to those who have rejected the divinity of Christ in our day, there are all sorts of popular spiritualities in the church that use the language

of Christian doctrines, such as the incarnation, but that undermine their biblical content by talking about how God is incarnate in all of creation, for example.

This means that those of us who value historic doctrinal orthodoxy can tend to dismiss any and all kinds of ‘spirituality’ as inherently unsound. In the process, we can come across as little more than heartless doctrinal brains-on-sticks. The problem is that the more that those of us who want to uphold classical Christian doctrines critique spirituality as doctrinally dubious, the more those seeking a deeper spirituality assume that to do that you have to abandon doctrinal orthodoxy. It sets up a false polarity: either you can have ‘spirituality’ or you can have ‘sound doctrine’ but you can’t have both.

To all these people I think Owen would say: a heart-deep relationship with God which is shaped by scripture and involves Spirit-led practices as a means of deepening our communion with Christ is essential. Call that spirituality if you wish. Whatever you call it, all believers need it. Without it, our doctrine is a lifeless carcass. Without it nothing we do in our lives—no aspect of our discipleship, or our activism, or our attempts to live a good and decent life—will be properly founded.

I think Owen would be deeply saddened that so many Reformed Christians and others, who rightly long for that heart-deep relationship with God and that deeper communion with Christ, feel compelled to seek it outside our tradition and apart from scripturally orthodox doctrine. I think he would tell us that deeply biblical spirituality is rooted in historically orthodox theology and our Reformed tradition is not an oxymoron!

*This address was delivered at the Theology Matters conference on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, March 8, 2023.*

Suzanne McDonald is Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan. She is author *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others and Others to God* and *John Knox for Armchair Theologians*

<sup>1</sup> John Owen, “Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ in his Person, Office and Grace ...” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-55), vol. 1, 273–415, 305. Hereafter cited “On the Glory of Christ.”

<sup>2</sup> Owen speaks of how some people scorn the idea that it is possible to experience the glory of Christ in union with him in this life as “distempered fancies and imaginations.” Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 398.

<sup>3</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 296–97.

<sup>4</sup> Our sanctification is a genuine foretaste of the glorification to come. It is a “*previous Participation* of future Glory, working in

them *Dispositions* unto, and *Preparation* for the enjoyment of it” Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 415.

<sup>5</sup> Belief in the incarnation is “the Foundation of our Religion, the *Rock whereon the Church is built*, the Ground of all our Hopes of Salvation, of Life and Immortality.” “On the Glory of Christ,” 294. To deny the divinity of Christ is to be an unbeliever (295).

<sup>6</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 307, 397, 337–338.

<sup>7</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 332.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 304.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 306–307.

<sup>10</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 307.

<sup>11</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 304–305, 316–319.

<sup>12</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 383, 378.

<sup>13</sup> Owen, “On the Glory of Christ,” 410.

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