



*Reformation*  
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**JONATHAN EDWARDS:**  
*An Anniversary Celebration*

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## *FINAL THOUGHTS*

*John H. Armstrong*

A friend who ministers in a rural Midwestern mainline denominational setting recently shared with me how distressing it is in his community to see theology treated as a nonexistent or irrelevant reality in the churches. My friend participated in a baptism in his community in which a Lutheran clergyman (it could have been any Protestant denomination if the truth is told) officiated. After several Scripture texts were read the officiating minister normally says something about the significance and importance of baptism. In this instance the presiding pastor said, "I could bore you with a lot of technical talk about baptism but I wasn't much of a student of theology in seminary so I want to open up the service for anyone to make comments or share thoughts that you have today."

As my friend wrote, "He had nothing to say so he became Phil Donahue for the moment!" My pastor friend turned to the minister next to him and whispered, "Maybe we can take up a collection and send him to a refresher course at his seminary." Another colleague, also a Lutheran minister, replied, "Maybe so."

This pastor is typical of many professional clergy across America. They seem to have little to do but settle into the most comfortable ways of living and fill out their days as clergy. This particular clergyman is the town favorite! The real tragedy, beside the fact that his congregation must hear nothing of consequence each Lord's Day, is that this minister will more than likely be judged rather severely in the Last Day (James 3:1). Renewal by the Spirit would result in many such ministers being startled awake by the glory and power of God the Holy Spirit. May the day come sooner than later for the

sake of thousands of churches scattered across North America.



Humor is essential in the ministry. Indeed, good humor will help us take seriously what really matters. Here is one I think appropriate for a chuckle or two.

A minister was preoccupied with thoughts of how he was going to, after the worship service, ask the congregation to come up with more money than they were expecting for repairs to the church building. Therefore, he was annoyed to find that the regular organist was sick this particular Sunday and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute.

The substitute wanted to know what to play. "Here's a copy of the service," said the minister impatiently. "But you'll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the financial need." During the service the minister paused and said, "Brother and sisters, we are in great difficulty; the roof needs repairs and it will cost twice as much as we expected, so we need \$4,000 more than we planned. Any of you who can pledge \$100 more, please stand up as an indication of your commitment." At that exact moment the substitute organist played, "The Star Spangled Banner."

This is how the substitute organist became the regular organist at this particular church.



Fareed Zakaria is an editor for *Newsweek International* and a regular columnist for the magazine's domestic version, as well as a political analyst for ABC News. He is an immigrant, by way of India, and received a B. A. from Yale and a Ph. D. from Harvard. He is also one of the brightest political thinkers I have read lately. His recent book *The Future of Freedom* (Norton, 2003), makes the case that Aristotle and de Tocqueville made long ago, namely that unregulated democracy actually undermines liberty and the rule of law. This may at first appear specious but you must only dig a little to see the point.

All freedom is not created equal! And democracy, or popular elections by the people, do not always result in good governments and a society where liberty and law rules. One needs only look as far as those countries in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East where elections have only produced bad rulers and terrible government. And if you are prone to think this is not a Western problem remember that the large majority of Germans voted for Hitler.

Zakaria is filled with insightful ideas about how culture works, popular and otherwise, and he understands religious influence in democracy well. The bottom line in America is that the view of the general public matters most. This is why we get weak leadership and constant poll watching day after day. Zakaria notes that it is "a race [among our leaders], actually, to be the first to genuflect before them [the public] (15). He notes that "We have heard from the American people" actually "sounds like a 'divine visitation.' It has the force of a biblical revelation" (24). This is not only true in the political arena but in this case the world has led the Church to follow suit, at least in America.

Zakaria's call is for self-control, for restoring the balance between democracy and liberty. He believes, simply put, that there can be too much of a good thing. "The essence of liberal democratic politics is the construction of a rich, complex social order, not one dominated by a single idea" (26). And "Only by understanding freedom's past can we help secure its future" (27). And his comments regarding liberty are worth the book: "Liberty in the modern world is first and foremost the freedom of the individual from arbitrary authority, which has meant, for most of history, from the power of the state" (32).

In our present setting capitalism reigns. But capitalism "has made change and dynamism—rather than order and tradition—the governing philosophy of the modern age" (45).

Constitutional liberalism is finally about the limitation of power; democracy is about accumulating power and using it to win. The best democracy is always an indirect one; i.e., a republic of laws with checks and balances. This was the view of

our founders. And this is this view that Zakaria believes we are losing. In its place we are exporting a kind of raw democracy, argues Zakaria, that makes the world much more unstable.

This is an intellectually challenging call to deal with the real causes of our political problems. Those who have faith and who believe that it matters in the public arena would do well to read and wrestle with Zakaria's able arguments.



Jonathan Edwards is important to us for a number of reasons. For one, he showed us how a learned man could be an effective theologian and a powerful preacher at the same time. For another he provides a marvelous model for how the mind and the heart can both be used to the fullest in a faithful minister of the gospel. He may be best known for his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," but his legacy is really one of missions and revival. He understood the bigger picture of God's work in the world and had an all-encompassing view of redemption that is clearly missing today. It is a cause for real joy that Edwards celebrations have occurred all across the world in 2003!