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*Jonathan Edwards, Theologian  
for the Church*



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**PROVOCATEUR EXTRAORDINAIRE**

*J*onathan Edwards (1703-58) has always provoked extreme reactions. People have found it impossible to be neutral or indifferent toward him.

Many have been provoked by his most famous sermon—arguably the most famous sermon in American history—“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Lyman Beecher’s wife, for example, upon hearing the sermon read to her, exclaimed, “Dr Beecher, I shall not listen to another word of that slander on my Heavenly Father,” and stormed out of the room.

In point of fact, hellfire and damnation were not Edwards’ specialty. Of 1,300 extant sermons, 655 are related to eschatology or the Kingdom of God. Only 155 of those even mention damnation and hell, and most not centrally. Edwards was obsessed by God’s beauty not wrath.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was another modern reader revolted by the “Sinners” sermon. “Is it possible,” he wrote, “that Edwards read the text mothers love so well, ‘Suffer little *vipers* to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God?’”

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote that Edwards’ sermons on sin and suffering were “refined poetry of torture.”

Mark Twain was even more disturbed:

Continuously until near midnight I wallowed and reeked w/ Jonathan in his insane debauch; I rose immediately refreshed and fine at 10 this morning, but with a strange and haunting sense of having been on a three-day tear with a drunken lunatic. . . . All through the book [*Freedom of the Will*] is the glare of a resplendent intellect gone mad—a marvelous spectacle. No, not *all* thru the book—the drunk does not come on till the last third, where what I take to be Calvinism and its God begins to show up and shine red and hideous in the glow from the fires of hell, their only right and proper adornment. By God, I was ashamed to be in such company.

As recently as 1950, George Godwin in *The Great Revivalists* warned the world that “Edwards was a psychopath, a spiritual quack, a sadist[ic], half-insane, self-tortured prophet.”

Yet there were just as many who regarded Edwards as fearlessly and creatively engaging reality with its paradoxical blend of beauty and ferocity. Samuel Hopkins, the eighteenth-century theologian who lived for a year in Edwards’ home, remembered Edwards

as one of those men of whom it is not easy to speak with justice, without seeming, at first, to border on the marvelous [miraculous], and to incur the guilt of adulation . . . in the esteem of all the judicious, who were well-acquainted with him, either personally or by his writings, [he] was one of the greatest, best and most useful of men that have lived in this age.

Others have been similarly enamored. In 1834 Henry Rogers described Edwards as “the most perfect specimen of the intellectual athlete the world has ever seen.” Williston Walker, the church historian, declared that Edwards provided “the only original contribution of importance given by America to the development of Christian theology.” In the middle of the twentieth century, historian of American philosophy William Morris pronounced the Northampton theologian to have been “the greatest genius of America’s native intellectual heritage.”

Among current scholars, Henry May, America’s foremost student of the Enlightenment and historian of American intellectual culture, represents the fascination Edwards holds for thinkers. At the Wheaton, Illinois, conference on Edwards in 1984 May confessed, “I have found Edwards deeply interesting, sometimes repellent, often attractive and moving.”

#### EDWARDS’ ROLE IN WESTERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

In the last forty years there has been an explosion of scholarship devoted to Edwards. The number of dissertations on his work has doubled every decade. The most prestigious university presses have published, just in the last three decades, two score books on his thought. Leading journals in history, theology, philosophy, American studies, aesthetics and literature publish learned articles on Edwards every year. For the last forty years Yale University Press has been publishing the critical edition of his works. The series has just published volume twenty and will finish the series at twenty-seven volumes (500–800 pages each) in 2004. Amazingly, these twenty-seven volumes represent only half of his written corpus.

Why has there been such interest in, and fascination with, Edwards? One reason is certainly, as Morris once put it, “because genius fascinates,” but also because of the extraordinary range and depth of his thinking. For Perry Miller, the atheist Harvard historian whose intellectual biography of Edwards (1949) helped stimulate the current renaissance of Edwards scholarship, Edwards was a prophet of modernity. According to Miller, Edwards stood so far above and ahead of his immediate culture that our own time is “barely catching up.” Edwards’ understanding of the human psyche was so advanced that “it would have taken him about an hour’s reading in William James, and two hours in Freud, to catch up completely.” Edwards scholars have concluded that Edwards’ relationship to modernity was far more ambivalent, but Miller’s comment shows the intrigue which Edwards has excited in many thinkers outside the bounds of the Christian churches.

Another reason for the breadth of Edwards’ influence was

the wide range of his work. Historians have studied Edwards' role as a pastor and the effect of his sermons and books on the Great Awakening, the American Revolution, the modern missionary movement, and the course of both American theology and philosophy; theologians appreciate his insights into the history of salvation, the Trinity, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, original sin, typology, and spiritual discernment; ethicists profit from his writings on true virtue and Christian morality, and his attack on Enlightenment ethics; literary critics are fascinated by his masterly employment of imagery and other literary strategies; students of aesthetics point out that he related God to beauty more than anyone else in the history of Christian thought; historians of American philosophy argue that he was America's premier philosopher before the great flowering of American philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. Some scholars even suggest that Edwards offered the eighteenth century's most penetrating critique of the Enlightenment and has something to teach us about how Christians should think about non-Christian religions!

Perhaps most important for readers of this journal, Edwards is widely recognized as America's greatest theologian. Nearly twenty years ago Robert Jenson, the great American Lutheran theologian, published a monograph titled *America's Theologian*. The nearest competitor to Edwards for that moniker, H. Richard Niebuhr, confessed he was greatly indebted to Edwards and saw himself as extending the Edwardsean vision. Nineteenth-century American theologians at Andover, Princeton and Yale nearly universally claimed his mantle. But it wasn't only the theologians who were impressed: in large sections of antebellum America most homes contained two books—the Bible and a collection of Edwards writings.

### EDWARDS' THEOLOGY

Edwards' theological project was gargantuan, addressing hosts of issues both parochial and perennial. Because his thought is so complex and multi-dimensional, a brief descrip-

tion such as this can easily distort. But one can say that much of his work was related to his lifelong battle with deism, the early modern rationalist movement that identified religion with morality, and judged all religious expressions by what its thinkers deemed to be "common sense"—which was by no means common even to those in its own era.

Deists claimed that ordinary reason can determine what is true religion, so that the problem with bad religion and human relations generally was a failure to use reason properly. Edwards responded that this analysis of the human condition was too superficial. There is no such thing as "ordinary" or "naked" reason because the mind is darkened and disabled by indwelling sin. Hence reason is not neutral, but conditioned by self-interest. It is no wonder, he remarked more than once, that intelligent people are responsible for great evil.

Deists assumed that all human action proceeded from good or bad thinking. But Edwards insisted that the springs of human motivation lie much deeper than the thoughts of the mind. In his famous formulation, he asserted that all human feeling and thinking and acting are rooted in the "affections," the underlying loves and dispositions that incline us toward or away from things. (These are not the emotions, as many scholars have erroneously reported, but something akin to what earlier traditions called the "soul," from which emotions arise.) This is the source of true religion as well as all other human perception and behavior. Hence true religion, Edwards wrote, must influence and spring from these deepest levels of the human psyche. The Scriptures, he said, confirm this. They place the heart of religion in the affections: fear, joy, hope, love, hatred, desire, sorrow, gratitude, compassion and zeal.

On the one hand, then, Edwards defended the religion of the heart against the critics of revival who condemned emotionalism to the point that they were left with a religion of the head only. But on the other hand Edwards denounced religion that was merely emotion, devoid of cognitive understanding of basic Christian truth. In a manner unmatched by any other spiritual theologian, Edwards linked head and heart, experience and understanding.

Because true religion comes from sources much deeper than human thinking, Edwards insisted that we need a “divine and supernatural light.” The Spirit must penetrate beneath the surface convictions of human reason to awaken a “sense of the heart” focused on the glory of the divine nature and the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Therefore the essence of true religious experience is to be overwhelmed by a glimpse of the beauty of God, to be drawn to the glory of his perfections, and to sense his irresistible love. George Marsden once wrote that it is something like being overwhelmed by the beauty of a great work of art or music. We can become so enthralled by the beauty that we lose consciousness of self and self-interest and become absorbed by the magnificent object. So also we can become drawn out of self-absorption by the power of the beauty of a truly loveable person. Our hearts are changed by an irresistible power. But this power gently lures; it does not coerce. Edwards taught that our eyes are opened when we are captivated by the beautiful love and glory of God in Christ, when we see this love most powerfully demonstrated in Christ’s sacrificial love for the undeserving. Then we feel forced to abandon love for self as the central principle of our lives and turn to the love of God.

Edwards describes our side of this experience as like being given a sixth sense: a sense of the beauty, glory and love of God. Edwards observes, “The Bible speaks of giving eyes to see, ears to hear, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and opening the eyes of them that were born blind, and turning from darkness to light.” Therefore the spiritual knowledge gained in true conversion is a kind of “sensible” knowledge—as different from intellectual knowledge as the taste of honey is different from the mere intellectual understanding that honey is sweet.

True Christian experience, then, is sensible and affective. The Christian, says Edwards,

does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart: . . . For as

God is infinitely the Greatest Being, so He is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God . . . is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.

If Edwards challenged the religion of the Enlightenment (deism), he also took on Enlightenment ethics and cosmology. When nearly all eighteenth-century moralists were constructing ethical systems based on self-interest, presuming that human nature naturally seeks the good, Edwards countered that the affections are fallen. Therefore true virtue can come only from a heart spiritually transformed so that it sees God’s glory, and seeks his will and the public good rather than private interest.

Deists in the eighteenth century were also disconnecting the world from God’s immediate control, positing a clockwork cosmos that runs on its own. The result was to objectify the universe, separating nature from the human and its feelings so that it could be used for technological purposes. But Edwards was relentlessly God-centered. He taught a kind of “pantheism” in which no part of the creation is ever independent of God, but all is sustained by God, moment by throbbing moment, as an emanation of his being.

Yet Edwards was no pantheist. God is not the same as the universe. Just as a sunbeam is sustained by the sun but is different from the sun, so the world is sustained by God as his emanation, but is different from God. So while Enlightenment theorists said that the universe is a great machine that operates autonomously, Edwards said God sustains it nanosecond-to-nanosecond. In fact, God’s power is literally the binding force of atoms: the universe would collapse and disappear unless God upheld its existence from moment-to-moment (Colossians 1:17: “In him all things consist”). As Avihu Zakai has recently put it, Edwards re-enchanted a cosmos that had been stripped of the divine.

This is one of the many ways in which Edwards was ahead

of his time. He anticipated post-Newtonian physics, in which all matter is ultimately seen in terms of interacting fields of energy, with every part dependent on every other part, and the forces governing these rather mysterious. Physicists have been concluding for almost a century what Edwards declared two-and-a-half centuries ago: there are no independent substances that can subsist on their own.

### BAPTISM AND REGENERATION

All of what I have presented so far is routine for Edwards scholars and many Edwards readers. The balance of this article will look at a part of Edwards' thought that is unfamiliar to nearly all readers and scholars: his understanding of the relationship between baptism and regeneration. It has intriguing implications for the Church in its understandings of church membership, justification, spiritual discernment, and pastoral practice. It will help show that Edwards was not only a warrior against the cultured despisers of Reformed religion, but also a theologian who did theology *for* the Church. Edwards was first and foremost a pastor, and did theology in order to help the Church better understand how to live as the Body of Christ and witness to the world.

Baptism was a sacrament for Edwards. As was customary for Reformed thinkers, he understood a sacrament to be a visible word of God's grace, a seal of the covenant of grace. It is a means of grace that supplies the mind with ideas of the things of religion and thus gives opportunity for grace to act in the soul, just as Elijah's putting wood on the altar gave opportunity for the fire to burn when God sent it down from heaven.

But a sacrament, for Edwards, is not just a thing that God has put "out there" as a pedagogical aid: far more, it is a type of Christ in which Jesus Christ is present, speaking and communing with believers. Sacraments are re-presentations of Christ.

Edwards agreed with Calvin that baptism is an exhibition and token of regeneration (Romans 6:3-11), a sign of what has already taken place. The infants of believers are to be baptized since it is presumed by the covenant that they have been

or will be regenerated. To support this conviction, Edwards referred to a range of passages from both testaments: "The promise is to you and your children" (Acts 2:39); "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your house will be saved" (Acts 16:31); "The generation of the upright will be blessed" (Psalm 112:2); "God will save Zion, the seed also of his servants shall inherit it" (Psalm 69:35f); and other passages such as Proverbs 14:26; Psalm 103:17-18; Psalm 112:21; Exodus 20:5-6; and Deuteronomy 7:9.<sup>1</sup> So, for Edwards, infant baptism is the seal of these promises made to the seed of the righteous, and baptism of adults should follow profession of faith. Edwards also agreed with Calvin that circumcision of the heart, which he understood to mean regeneration, was the *res* to which the *signum* of Old Testament circumcision pointed, and that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of Old Testament circumcision.

But Edwards differed from Calvin in that the American theologian did not teach that the baptismal rite actually effected regeneration.<sup>2</sup> The spirit is at work in baptism, Edwards maintained, but without communicating regeneration by the rite. Look at Simon Magus, Edwards observed, and the baptized children of some believers who manifestly reject the covenant all the days of their lives. Yet parents can be assured that if they sincerely and believingly give the child up to God, then baptism "ordinarily" seals salvation to it. Salvation is more probable because of the blessings that infant baptism brings.

But why only "probable" and "ordinarily"? Because, said Edwards, we can never know our own hearts for sure. This is why Stephen the martyr still prayed to commend his spirit into Christ's hands at his death. Besides, a parent may be a true believer yet not entirely give up her child to God. Edwards finally concludes, "These things about baptism [are] doubtful," which means they are vulnerable to doubt since they are not so clearly attested in Scripture as some other doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

Edwards' understanding of baptism rests upon his conception of the covenant.<sup>4</sup> While Edwards taught that because

of God's unconditional grace the covenant is unconditional toward the elect, nevertheless he also insisted that there is a sense, from the human perspective, in which the covenant is conditional. The condition is faith, so that simply being in the covenant does not necessarily entitle you to the privileges of the covenant. Korah and the gross idolaters in Israel were in the covenant but forfeited the blessings of the covenant by their apostasy.

Like Calvin, Edwards considered baptism to be the sacrament of initiation into the Church, but did not consider church membership to necessarily involve regeneration. For the qualification for membership is not regeneration itself but *visibility* of regeneration. One can *look* like she is regenerated (by professing faith and avoiding scandalous behavior) without being regenerated. But that is enough for admission to baptism and the visible Church. Church officers do not need to know and will not know with any certainty who is regenerate, since that is impossible and God's prerogative anyway.

Not all of the three thousand at Pentecost who were baptized were regenerate, Edwards surmised, but they appeared to be so from their profession and repute. But when the officers of a church admit someone to the church, God concurs with them because he has given the keys of the Kingdom to those officers. What they do is done in heaven. They act on the "presumption" that "professors" (of faith) are sincere, upright and will be faithful.

God at this point conforms to his human officers and does not act as "searcher of hearts," but admits professors on the *presumption* of their sincerity and faithfulness. Yet God's admission (of these professors) is not absolute and unalterable, as his invisible justification is. Nor is it merely conditional. It is like marriage, where a spouse's promises are neither conditional (the promise is to be faithful no matter what) nor absolute if the other deserts or repeatedly commits adultery, one cannot continue to be a spouse), but *presumptive*—for it presumes the other will not desert or commit repeated adultery, and on that presumption promises to be faithful.

According to Edwards, this is what happens when human

officers of the church (or the Church as a whole) admit persons into the church by baptism: the church treats them as God's people. God concurs by giving them the means of grace—Scripture, preaching, fellowship, discipline, and the Lord's Supper—all of which the Spirit of Christ uses to challenge and grow them. God is more ready to hear and answer their prayers, and give them charismatic and common gifts of the Spirit. Eternal life is promised on the condition of perseverance (Revelation 3:12: "He that overcomes I will make a pillar in the Temple of God," and many similar passages). Edwards insisted that the apostles frequently speak of future glory suspended on perseverance, that they speak to "visible" Christians, not presuming that all visible Christians are in the invisible Church.

In this process, Edwards averred, the Church is not a searcher of hearts, just as Christ on earth was not. He received Judas as a disciple, minister and officer of the highest kind—an apostle! He gave him miraculous gifts of the Spirit! He didn't reject Judas until his behavior disqualified him.

So too, the Church receives the baptized into God's family as his children and Christ receives them as his spouse, and they are "as it were" redeemed and justified. Infants are baptized on the presumption of their parents' faith, and are received by God on the presumption of their own (future, but in God's eternal present) faith. It can be said, *provisionally*, that Christ's blood cleanses them from sin and they have the benefits of the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. They are *presumptively* justified and cleared of guilt by the blood of Christ. That is why Peter can speak of those who "denied the Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1): Christ bought them as presumptive members of his Church, but they eventually showed they were never among the elect by denying him. Hence eternal benefits are *presumptively* promised to the baptized on the condition of (the perseverance of) faith.

Not all of those baptized will respond or persevere, just as circumcised Israel repeatedly apostasized. According to Edwards, Christ said that he would spit out of his mouth baptized Christians (Revelation 3:16). Those who have professed

but later are false to Christ, shall be rejected and cast out (Matthew 10:37). The final "casting out" will be at the Final Judgment, one of whose purposes is to show why some professing church members were cast out though baptized. It will also show unbelievers that they, not God, have removed themselves from his grace.

This brief description of Edwards' thinking on Christian experience and baptism suggests a number of reflections. First, against Enlightenment rationalists of his own day and those today who would emphasize doctrine at the expense of experience, Edwards highlighted a subjective understanding of the affections as the heart of true faith. Second, his conception of sacraments can be seen as an illustration of Calvin's doctrine of "accommodation": God accommodates himself to our lowly human capacities by communicating spiritual realities in material signs. Third, Edwards protects God's sovereignty in baptism by a kind of occasionalism: baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration only on those occasions when God calls a person by the Spirit. Therefore the Church is not constituted by an individualistic voluntarism but by the Father's mysterious election. Fourth, Edwards's theology of baptism is remarkably similar to Luther's understanding that Christ calls through a baptism which a true believer can later reject. Edwards, however, would say that those who later reject were never truly regenerated in the first place. Finally, Edwards' depiction of conditional justification can permit us to say with integrity both that the baptized have been cleansed of their sins and that we cannot know their election with certainty.

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. "Misrepresentations Corrected," in *Ecclesiastical Writings*, edited by David D. Hall. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 182 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 484.
2. Calvin said the rite effects regeneration when it is received by faith. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4:15:14-15.
3. The previous two paragraphs are based on *Miscellanies* 577 and 595.
4. The rest of this discussion in this article draws from *Miscellanies* 689.