



# Jonathan Edwards: An Appreciation

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# The Founders Journal



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Contributors:

**Dr. Tom J. Nettles** is Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

**Peter Beck** is Director of Marketing at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a student in the advanced Master of Divinity program.

**Jeff Robinson** is a newswriter at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a graduate of the Master of Divinity program.

Cover Photo:

Designed by Robert Nettles. The men pictured are Jonathan Edwards (bottom), Robert Hall, Sr. (top left), Andrew Fuller (top center), and a young John L. Dagg (top right).

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*Editor:*

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# Jonathan Edwards: An Appreciation

[Tom J. Nettles](#)

Happy Birthday, Jonathan Edwards! By the time fall of 2003 is well under way, the three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Jonathan Edwards will be upon us. Baptists should breathe a collective word of gratitude to God for the positive impact of such a gifted servant for the cause of the gospel in general and for the positive impact on Baptists specifically. This edition of the *Founders Journal* is given to that privilege and duty.

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, the fifth child and first son of eleven children born to Timothy and Esther Edwards. Timothy Edwards had gone to the parish church in East Windsor, Massachusetts, in 1694 at twenty-five years of age and stayed there for life. He was zealous for the cause of the Gospel and for the piety and education of his children. Jonathan was the happy recipient of this care. He never seemed to resent it, but found it one of his chief graces to have been reared and educated in such an atmosphere. He learned to push himself much harder than his father ever dreamed of doing.

He accomplished his undergraduate work at Yale 1716-20 and finished the masters in 1722. From 1722 to 1724 he served as temporary pastor for two churches, less than a year each, in New York and Bolton, Connecticut. One of the most spiritually traumatic periods of his life came during the three years he spent as tutor at Yale during a very unsettled time at the college when its administration was most unstable. In 1726 he went to assist his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in the church at Northampton. In 1727 he married the love of his life, Sarah Pierpont. His grandfather died in 1729 and Edwards became pastor of the church. He stayed there until he was dismissed in 1750 in a controversy over the proper recipients of communion.

An unexpected and powerful intrusion of God's Spirit fell on the town of Northampton in 1735 and traveled north to Northfield and as far south as Stratford, Guilford, Lyme, and Groton, Connecticut. Edwards was in the midst of a rigorous defense of justification by faith, experiencing criticism for his stout Reformed biblicism, when the massive work of conversion and refreshment occurred. Edwards recorded the phenomenon and analyzed the variety of spiritual experiences in his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls*. He at once confirmed the Puritan morphology of conversion while modifying it by describing variety in the experiences and warning against carnal confidence that all such traumas issued in genuine conversion. The foundation he established in this writing set the course for his life's work. All of his writings from that point until his death explored some aspect of genuine spiritual experience. The character of human freedom and as it relates to the two great realities of God's absolute sovereignty and the pervasive effects of human sin constitutes the matrix from which Christian experience must be born, or re-born. None spoke so profoundly and searchingly of this as Jonathan Edwards.

The article by Jeff Robinson gives a summary of Edwards's great work and most thorough examination of human affections, and perhaps the most important book ever written in America, *Religious Affections*. Every Christian, but particularly every minister of the Gospel, should read Edwards's book and be chastened to greater spiritual jealousy for the honor of God and a more discerning but compassionate shepherd's heart. Jeff's article will help you see the value of this and suggest some contemporary issues to which it relates. One can sense the first-hand encounter that he has had with this captivating and searching treatment of Christian assurance.

None should forget, however, that Edwards was first and foremost a pastoral evangelist. He spent all the energy of every mental fiber and every creative impulse to impress on the minds and hearts of his people the infinitely important necessity of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. None could paint the human condition more bleakly and show its utter desperation so alarmingly; and none could show the attractiveness and compelling beauties of the Lord Jesus Christ with greater earnestness and freeness than Edwards. Nor has any uninspired author pressed back the scenes and purposes of eternity so far as Edwards. He sought to arrange every element of the gospel and its historical manifestation within the context of its ultimate purpose, its reason for being just as it is. Sometimes it appears that he has been taken to the mouth of hell and shown what it is like to be under an unrestrained torrent of divine wrath and then commissioned to go and tell what he saw. Then subsequently he was swept up to heaven to see the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory and in the ceaseless flow of divine love between the Father and the risen and ascended Redeemer and commissioned, not to tell no man, but to expand human language as much as possible to describe the loveliness of what he saw. His evangelism has that kind of first hand urgency.

Peter Beck's article gives us a concise and clear snapshot of the coherent theology behind Edwards's work as an evangelist. What kinds of appeals did he issue to his hearers, and how could he as a faithful Calvinist make such urgent demands and extend such gracious promises to an assembly of sinners, bound by their hostile affections and subject to the eternal decrees of divine justice and mercy? Mr. Beck unfolds for us the theology behind this consistent and sincere aspect of Edwards's sermons. Readers have the rare treat of illustrations coming from some of the as yet unpublished sermon material in the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Edwards sticks to the mind, and the heart. Those who study him thoroughly, and with sympathy, find it hard to conceive of biblical truth in an arrangement other than that presented by Edwards. He captures their manner of expression and the framework within which they perceive the relevance of the Gospel message. Perhaps that is not always good. Absent his facility in philosophical reasoning disciplined by his massive and thorough biblical knowledge in the context of an immersion in the history of Christian theology, Edwards imitators might become abstruse and more metaphysical than clearly expository. Edwards was not that way, but some of his followers have been and in so doing they completely reversed the theological concerns of Edwards. At the same time, a disciplined appreciation of Edwards within the context of a rigorously biblical orientation to preaching can produce edifying and convicting preaching. A meditative reading of his sermons can give food for thought and produce earnest desires for more of God for months and even years.

Baptists were affected that way. With rare exceptions, they resisted the metaphysical cravings and enjoyed Edwards in the context of their unalterable devotion to the dictates of biblical revelation. But they certainly did enjoy him and benefit from his spiritual power and distinctive arrangement of Reformed orthodoxy. Present day Baptist life cannot be understood apart from being aware of the massive influence he exerted. It might safely be contended that The Southern Baptist Convention was born, theologically, out of the energy of the writings of Jonathan Edwards. My article on *Edwards and His Impact on Baptists* attempts to show just a bit of this. Missions as well as the defense of religious liberty has a definite Edwardsean flavor.

We pray that the issue of the *Founders Journal* will inspire and enable you to live more to the glory of God.



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# Edwards and His Impact on Baptists

[\*Tom J. Nettles\*](#)

## The Context

By 1750, Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher/theologian/philosopher of the First Great Awakening had been dismissed from his church in Northampton. Showing the reality of his human frame Edwards remarked, "But I am now, as it were thrown upon the wide ocean of the world, and know not what will become of me, and my numerous and chargeable family."<sup>[1]</sup> His pastoral concern over the reality of his parishioners' spiritual experiences prompted his marvelously perceptive book, *Religious Affections*. Brainerd had died in 1747 in his home, his daughter Jerusha had followed him soon thereafter. The publication of Brainerd's journal had just been consummated in 1749.

The controversy over communion had prompted not only a crisis in his family but also a deep concern in Edwards' mind for the spiritual safety of his former flock. Not only had disagreement over the proper recipients of communion been controversial, Edwards lamented the presence of a general doctrinal carelessness, particular concerning the "doctrines of grace." He felt they "would be more likely to be thorough in their care to settle a minister of principles contrary to mine, as to terms of communion, than to settle one that is sound in the doctrines of grace." He feared that his first cousin, Joseph Hawley, was a "man of lax principles in religion, falling in, in some essential things, with Arminians." The problems posed by the merely formal church membership at Northampton caused Edwards to fear "the utmost danger, that the younger generation will be carried away with Arminianism, as with a flood." Subsequent to the finalization of his dismissal June 22, 1750, Edwards wrote to a minister friend in Scotland, July 1750, saying "Arminianism, and Pelagianism, have made a strange progress in a few years."

In his farewell sermon to his congregation he warned: "The progress they have made in the land, within this seven years, seems to have been vastly greater, than at any time in the like space before: and they are still prevailing and creeping into almost all parts of the land. ...and if these principles should greatly prevail in this town, as they very lately have done in another large town I could name, formerly greatly noted for religion, and for so long a time, it will threaten the spiritual and eternal ruin of this people, in the present and future generations."<sup>[2]</sup>

The large town he could name was, of course, Boston, and among the clergy that he detected moving in the direction of Arminianism, or worse, were Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, and Ebenezer Gay. Edwards saturated himself in their writings and in the sources from which they were deriving their gradual departures from orthodoxy and was determined to know their system thoroughly from its branches to its deepest roots. His efforts to lay the axe to the roots of this destructive system led to the production of at least four major theological treatises.

By 1753 the book *A careful and strict Enquiry into the modern prevailing notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is supposed to be essential to Moral Agency, Vertue and Vice, Reward and punishment, praise and blame* was ready for publication reaching the public the next year. In 1758 he published his treatise on *Original Sin*. Already drafted by 1755 but not published until 1765 were companion treatises entitled *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* and *On the Nature of True Vertue*. In these, he presses to uncover the roots of true morality and true worship. John Smith makes this pertinent and summarizing observation about the later of these that applies well to all of them: "The parallel between what Edwards was doing in finding distinguishing marks of truly gracious affections in the appraisal of heart religion and what he is doing here in the delineation of true vertue is clear. In both cases he aimed

to set forth what goes beyond the capacity of nature and the natural man and thus to delineate the new dimension represented in the work of the Spirit as the power of grace."<sup>[3]</sup>

Arminians argued that neither true sin, true faith, nor true virtue could exist if any arose from a predisposing bias. Some sphere of human freedom must exist in which choice was contingent, the disposition indifferent, and the will self-determining. Edwards argued that such a case was impossible philosophically, unbiblical, fallacious as a theological construct, and destructive of the moral texture of all human action. If true contingency exists, the God of the Bible is driven out of the world. He argued for the vital necessity of an immediate, effectual, sovereign, gracious work of God for spiritual life and salvation.

One of the most influential elements of his discussion, especially for Baptist thought, appears in *The Will* Section 4, part 1 entitled "Of the distinction of Natural and Moral Necessity and Inability" Edwards focussed on a captivating idea.

What has been said of natural and moral necessity, may serve to explain what is intended by natural and moral inability. We are said to be naturally unable to do a thing, when we can't do it if we will, because what is most commonly called nature don't allow of it, or because of some impeding defect or obstacle that is extrinsic to the will; either; either in the faculty of understanding, constitution of body, or external objects. Moral inability consists not in any of these things; but either in the want of inclination; or the strength of a contrary inclination; or the want of sufficient motives in view; to induce and excite the act of the will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary. Or both these may be resolved into one; and it may be said in one word, that moral inability consists in the opposition or want of inclination. For when a person is unable to will or choose such a thing, through a defect or motives, or prevalence of contrary motives, tis the same thing as his being unable through the want of an inclination, or the prevalence of a contrary inclination, in such circumstances, and under the influence of such views.

After providing examples of moral inability, both negative and positive, Edwards summarized the issue. "Therefore, in these things to ascribe a nonperformance to the want of power or ability, is not just; because the thing wanting is not a being able, but a being willing. There are faculties of mind, and capacity of nature, and everything, sufficient, but a disposition: nothing is wanting but a will."

## English Dissenters Problem

What began with Joseph Hussey, a Congregational minister, in *God's Operations of Grace but No Offers of His Grace* (1707) and was reinforced by Lewis Wayman in *A Further Enquiry after Truth*, came into Baptist life principally through John Brine. He contended that the divine word give no warrant for unregenerate men to consider repentance from sin and faith in Christ as their duty. As a corollary, no minister had warrant to call on the unregenerate to repent and believe. "This becomes duty of Men," he explained, "when they have Warrant from the divine Word, to consider God as their Redeemer in Christ, which no unregenerate Men have any Warrant to do." A sinner must know he is elect before he has warrant to believe.

**John Ryland** describes how this had affected English Baptists.

The same idea was spreading, faster than we were aware, among our churches also: the ministers might distinguish between repentance and faith, and other internal duties; allowing the latter to be required, while they scrupled exhorting men to the former; but had things gone on a little longer in

the same direction, we should soon have lost sight of the essence of duty, and of the spirituality of the divine law; and consequently men would have been treated, as though before conversion they were fallen below all obligation, to any thing spiritually good; and as though after conversion they were raised above all obligation, to any thing more than they were actually inclined to perform. Thus inclination would have been confined to the outward conduct, the turpitude of sin unspeakably lessened, and grace proportionably eclipsed, both as to the pardon of sin, and as to the application of salvation to the soul."[\[4\]](#)

## Baptists in England Discover Edwards

In 1775, Robert Hall, of Arnsby, had recommended to Fuller that he read Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*. Clearly, Hall himself had been greatly helped by Edwards in seeing invitations to sinners as entirely consistent with strictest Calvinism. In *Help to Zion's Travelers* (1781), Hall had argued, contrary to the position of Brine, for the warrant of any sinner to apply to Christ for salvation without an accompanying discernment that indeed he was chosen of God. When examining "A Sinner's Warrant to Apply to Christ," Hall fully consented that "there can be no gracious acts but in consequence of gracious principles." By the same token, however, there can be no knowledge of gracious principles apart from gracious actions. None, therefore, can know themselves to be elect of God, redeemed by Christ, or called by the Spirit apart from repentance toward God and faith in Christ.

Such knowledge, such experience, is impossible to be obtained, but in consequence of believing in or receiving Jesus the Saviour; for he who believeth not, is declared to be under condemnation; the wrath of God abideth on him. To attempt, therefore, to define, as some do, who ought, and ought not to return to God by Christ, is daring presumption, and tends to discourage the soul, and rivet the fetters of guilt, where a sense of meanness and misery prevails, and in others, to encourage self-righteousness, by establishing the idea of previous fitness in order to salvation.[\[5\]](#)

Robert Hall's adaptation of Edwards on this issue in *Help to Zion's Travelers* is remarkable. In addition to his recommendation, Hall's organization of Edwards's thought appears to have had an impact on Fuller's treatment. The final section of the book incorporates definitions and an extended discussion of the issues of natural and moral ability and inability. "No greater natural powers are necessary to love God, than to hate him; to serve him, than to oppose him," Hall reasoned; "Therefore God does not require more of any man than the right use of what he hath."[\[6\]](#) A serious attention to moral inability will convince any of the "absolute necessity of omnipotent grace" to deliver them. Though they cannot love God nor deliver themselves, "their criminality is equal to their inability."[\[7\]](#)

John Ryland, Jr., documents the cumulative effect the attention to Edwards produced. "At length, several of them began, independently of each other, to examine this question for themselves," he recalled. They concluded that they had "needlessly deviated from the scriptural path, in which the most orthodox of their predecessors had been used to walk."[\[8\]](#) He records his own discovery of the remedy in these words. "Closely studying Edwards on the Will, and entering into the distinction between natural and moral inability, removed the difficulties which had once embarrassed my mind." After studying some sermons by Newton on the subject he was ready to conclude, "this distinction well considered, would lead us to see that the affirmative side of the Modern Question was fully consistent with the strictest Calvinism." Later in a footnote Ryland states, "I question much if any thinking man can steer clear of False Calvinism on the one hand, and real Arminianism on the other, without entering into the distinction between Natural and moral inability, as it is commonly termed."[\[9\]](#)

In his *Serious Remarks on the Different Representation of Evangelical Doctrine*, Ryland includes an extended discussion of this distinction. It includes fourteen pages carefully delineating Scripture passages that suit the concept

of moral inability such as "The natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God," or Joseph's brothers "could not speak peaceably to him;" or combinations of natural ability and moral inability, "Having ears to hear but hear not;" or that moral inability is a matter of unwillingness--"You will not come to me that you may have life," or "The natural man *does not* receive the things of the Spirit of God." He relates these to the perpetuity and relevance of the moral law in its evangelical use and as a standard of sanctification.

**Andrew Fuller** recognized a great indebtedness to Edwards and reminisced about his growing acquaintance with the American theologian. In a letter giving recollections of his theological pilgrimage, he mentions that reading Edwards on the Will was pivotal in his thinking.<sup>[10]</sup> The preface to the second edition of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* contains Fuller's remarks on this pilgrimage.

He [Fuller speaks of himself in the third person] had also read and considered, as well as he was able, President Edwards's *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will*, with some other performances on the difference between natural and moral inability. He found much satisfaction in the distinction; as it appeared to him to carry with its own evidence--to be clearly and fully contained in the Scriptures--and calculated to disburden the Calvinistic system of a number of calumnies with which its enemies have loaded it, as well as to afford clear and honourable conceptions of the Divine government. If it were not the duty for unconverted sinners to believe in Christ, and that because of their inability, he supposed this inability must be natural, or something which did not arise from an evil disposition; but the more he examined the Scriptures, the more he was convinced that all the inability ascribed to man, with respect to believing, arises from the aversion of his heart. They *will not* come to Christ that they may have life; *will not* hearken to the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely; *will not* seek after God; and *desire not* the knowledge of his ways.<sup>[11]</sup>

This distinction is one of the clear guiding principles of Fuller's *Confession of Faith* presented to the church in Kettering in 1783.<sup>[12]</sup> In article 12 he professed "I believe that men are now born and grow up with a vile propensity to moral evil and that herein lies their inability to keep God's law, and as such it is a moral and a criminal inability. Were they but of a right disposition of mind there is nothing now in the law of God but what they could perform; but being wholly under the dominion of sin they have no heart remaining for God, but are full of wicked aversion to him." Later in article 15, he expanded the same theme. "I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the gospel to all who will hear it; and as I believe the inability of men to spiritual things to be wholly of the moral, and therefore of the criminal kind, and that it is their duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation though they do not; I therefore believe free and solemn addresses invitations calls and warnings to them to be not only consistent, but directly adapted, as means in the hand of the Spirit of God, to bring them to Christ. I consider it as a part of my duty which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls."

Fuller and his entire circle of friends found within Jonathan Edwards the key to their perplexity. Edwards provided a biblically consistent theology that did not merely tolerate but demanded practical response. While Edwards was aiming at Arminianism, the thought was just as effective against hyper-Calvinism.

Fuller recalls the theological importance of his reading Edwards on the Will "with some other performances on the difference between natural and moral inability."<sup>[13]</sup> He read Edwards's *Religious Affections* prior to 1781. On February 3, 1781, he wrote: "I think I have never yet entered into the true idea of the work of the ministry. ... I think I am by the ministry, as I was by my life as a Christian before I read *Edwards on the Affections*. I had never entered into the spirit of a great many important things. Oh for some such penetrating, edifying writer of this subject!"<sup>[14]</sup>

In an article entitled "Inward Witness of the Spirit," Fuller summarizes the substance of a couple of Edwards's

arguments in *Religious Affections*. He argues that the inward witness of the Spirit is not a special revelation to any individual that he in particular is a child of God. Instead, such assurance comes by inference from the presence of spiritual perceptions and actions in one's life. The truth of the Gospel, no matter how its impressions come to our minds, must be "cordially" embraced. That is, an "approving view of God's way of salvation, such a view as leads us to walk in it" is the foundation of peace and is the way that "God speaks peace to the soul." No sooner is "the gospel in possession of the heart than joy and peace will ordinarily accompany it." Since the New Testament promises eternal life to believers, "we cannot but conclude ourselves interested in it." He does not deny the personal work of the Spirit in this, but emphasizes that the internal work of the Spirit accompanies the knowledge of and heartfelt reception of what Scripture itself actually teaches.[\[15\]](#)

George Ella represents this as "Grotian rationalism and Socinian scepticism." He says Fuller "preaches as a wolf amongst the sheep" and that he "boils Christian assurance down to reason rather than revelation." Though Fuller believes he has "done the work of an evangelist," according to Ella his effort is a mere "caricature of the pastoral calling of a preacher and he misuses the Spirit's name to promote a gospel without means, based on pure rational inference to fulfil its end."[\[16\]](#)

Fuller's use of inference cannot be evidence that he promotes reason over revelation. He avoids the error of enthusiasm by adhering to the clarity of biblical revelation over any supposed private revelation in discerning the evidences of salvation. It is not clear why Ella prefers the word "revelation" in speaking of individual assurance. What Ella has in mind when he portrays Fuller as promoting a "gospel without means" is also unclear, for Fuller's advocacy of *means* is virtually impossible to challenge. If Ella is asserting that Fuller had no place for the Spirit's work in empowering the Gospel, his case could hardly be made. Fuller's challenge to the thought of Robert Sandeman puts to flight any suspicion that Fuller denied the necessity of the efficacious working of the Spirit. Though agreeing with Sandeman that the sinner's immediate closure with Christ should be the goal of gospel preaching, he argues against Sandeman's unspiritual view of faith. Fuller views all sinners as "intrenched [sic] in prejudice, self-righteousness, and the love of sin." These strongholds must be beaten down. As long as a "wreck of them remains sufficient to shelter him against the arrows of conviction" he will remain an unbeliever. In short, it is not until "by the renovating influence of the Holy Spirit they fall to the ground," that the "doctrine of salvation by mere grace, through a Mediator, is cordially believed."[\[17\]](#) Such a severe missing of the mark by Mr. Ella does neither him nor Edwards, nor Fuller justice. Far from Grotian rationalism, his argument is strictly biblical and purely Edwardsean.

Edwards's impact on John Sutcliff may be seen in two clear instances. First, the catechism that Sutcliff first published in 1783 demonstrates how deeply he drank of the Edwardsean fountain. Particularly important, according to Joseph Ivimey, were the issues of "the harmony between the obligations of men to love God with all their hearts, and their actual enmity against him; and between the duty of ministers to call on sinners to repent and believe in Christ for salvation, and the necessity of omnipotent grace to render the call effectual."[\[18\]](#) Sutcliff's catechism gives a notable amount of space to this issue in the term of natural and moral ability and inability.[\[19\]](#)

Second, in 1789 Sutcliff republished a pamphlet by Edwards entitled "Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People, in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion." Sutcliff's preface to this edition closed with a call to all lovers of Christ and His Kingdom, no matter what their denominations may be or what other small differences may exist, to join hands in seeking the overthrow of Satan and all his hellish allies. He called for "thousands upon thousands divided into small bands in their respective cities, towns, villages," to offer up "their united prayers." Perhaps God would give grace and "shower down blessings on all the scattered tribes of Zion!"[\[20\]](#)

This edition influenced **William Carey** in his writing of the now famous *Enquiry* and encouraged him to urge Christians not only to pray for the conversion of the heathen but also to preach to them!<sup>[21]</sup> Carey often refers to the encouragement he received from reading Edwards. In 1793 on board the ship *Cron Princess Marie*, he found spiritual refreshment in a volume of Edwards's sermons. On January 24, 1794, in the initial stages of engaging in evangelistic work with a congregation of "natives" Carey records, "All the morning I had a most unpleasant time, but at last found much pleasure in reading Edwards on the *Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*."<sup>[22]</sup>

The insights and spirit of Edwards became so pervasive that by the end of Fuller's life some complained, "If Sutcliff and some of the others had preached more of Christ and less of Jonathan Edwards, they would have been more useful." Fuller replied, "If those who talked thus preached Christ half as much as Jonathan Edwards did, and were half as useful as he was, their usefulness would double what it is."<sup>[23]</sup>

## Baptists in America

### Isaac Backus

In America, the influence of Isaac Backus on the theology and growth of Baptists is profound. His works for religious liberty, his theological treatises, and his history all contributed much toward the Baptist consciousness of identity. William J. McGloughlin has correctly observed, "Backus always remained a Calvinist in his theology and a great admirer of Jonathan Edwards."<sup>[24]</sup> McGloughlin makes an interesting observation about the relative impact of differing intellectual traditions on Backus.

Like Jonathan Edwards, whom he called "our excellent Edwards," Backus devoted a large part of his life to a futile attempt to defend the dying doctrines of Calvinism. Unlike Edwards, he nevertheless spoke with the accents of the new America that was being born in the latter half of the Eighteenth century. In a sense Backus' thought lies somewhere between that of Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, and more than either of these, certainly more than Thomas Jefferson, he foreshadowed the outlook of the nineteenth-century American mind. For the nineteenth century was preeminently the century of evangelical protestantism, based firmly upon the twin beliefs in the divine inspiration of the Bible and the divine law of separation of church and state. Edwards could never accept the second principle while both Franklin and Jefferson doubted the first. Backus believed firmly in both."<sup>[25]</sup>

Backus, despite McGloughlin's caveat, employs Edwards as foundational to his development of several concepts concerning liberty of conscience as well as the defense of Calvinism. In his treatise "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty" Backus bases the entire discussion on the virtues that characterized man in his unfallen state. His description of this condition draws immediately from the Westminster Confession and Edwards's *The Nature of True Virtue*. Backus says, "The true liberty of man is to know, obey, and enjoy his Creator to do all the good unto, and enjoy all the happiness with and in, his fellow creatures that he is capable of. In order to which the law of love was written in his heart which carries in its nature union and benevolence to Being in general and to each being in particular according to its relation and connection to and with the Supreme Being and ourselves."<sup>[26]</sup> Man's original purity, characterized by benevolence toward being in general, is the key to seeing government as conducive to, rather than restrictive of, true freedom. Government is not antithetical to the inalienable rights of man but endemic to it if one has a biblical understanding of the dynamics of human society.

When Backus finds it necessary to defend the Separate movement in Connecticut, the source of Baptist growth, he

finds in Edwards an ally for his argument that the basic impulse of sheep is to find food. Edwards, in his promotion of the revival, warned against the mentality that forbade parishioners to cross parish lines in order to hear lively and godly preaching. In addition, Edwards's farewell sermon upon his expulsion from the Northampton pulpit included an earnest warning that the people should guard themselves against those who would corrupt them by stealth. Backus reflected on this to justify the separation of people from those who have a form of godliness but deny its power. In defending the Baptist ideal of having only the regenerate, those who are the recipients of a gracious principle, as members of the same body, he again goes to Edwards as an ally. "I think," Backus writes, "this is an unanswerable reason which Mr. Edwards gives why the latter and not the other makes meet members for Christ's church, namely that moral sincerity is *transient*, and may be entirely lost, but a gracious principle *abides* forever."[\[27\]](#)

On several occasions, Backus quotes from Edwards *Freedom of the Will*. From the frequency of his citations and the exuberant evaluation he made of it, it is clear that Edwards's argument in that work is germane to Backus's entire system of thought. The doctrines of Edwards as preached by Baptists, including bondage of the will, imputation of Adams's sin and imputation of Christ's righteousness, and the necessity of the new birth were foundational not only for church purity but to freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. He observed *The Will* had passed through an edition in Boston and two in London "without ever being answered, although it is leveled directly against the turning point of Arminianism, to which the opinion of universal salvation naturally succeeds." While engaging an antagonist to Calvinism who made ill use of Edwards treatise, Backus writes, "But I must tell him and all his friends, that I am much better acquainted with Edwards's writings than they are, and I absolutely know that the ideas naturally arising from the words *Forcibly* and *Inevitable*, as here used, when charged upon Edwards, are entirely unjust and abusive. And it tends to raise an evil temper in those who read the same, against all the friends of Edwards's writings, of whom I am heartily one."[\[28\]](#)

### Baptists in the South

**Richard Furman** served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Charleston, 1787-1825 and served as first president of the Triennial Convention. He personifies the sympathy of doctrine and experience shared by both the Separate Baptists and the Regular Baptists. The influence of Edwards is unmistakable in a sermon entitled "Conversion Essential to Salvation." He describes conversion as a "renovation of the soul, by the spirit of God." the later he says, "Yet we do not understand by it an extinction of any natural faculties or powers of the soul; nor an addition to them of others. Those of the mind, as well as of the body remain as they were before conversion, according to the constitution of human nature. There is the same understanding, the same will, the same affections, and the same power of thought and of memory. But, by the divine operation, they all undergo, in regeneration, a great and evident change, in a moral or spiritual sense. They were alienated from God by Sin; now they are restored to him. They were rebellious, they now learn willing subjection. They were employed in seeking their chief happiness in the creatures, now they seek and find it in God himself."[\[29\]](#)

If one compares this to Jonathan Edwards, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*, he will see immediately the conceptual framework. Edwards argues that the prejudices of the heart argue against the proper use of one's reason, but when God, by special grace removes the "prejudices of the heart against the truth of divine things,...the mind becomes susceptible of the due force of rational arguments for their truth." He explains more fully:

The mind of man is naturally full of prejudices against the truth of divine things; it is full of enmity against the doctrines of the gospel; which is a disadvantage to those arguments that prove their truth, and causes them to lose their force upon the mind. But when a person has discovered to him the divine excellency of Christian doctrines, this destroys the enmity, removes those prejudices, and sanctifies the reason, and causes it to lie open to the force of arguments for their truth.[\[30\]](#)

Edwards expands and shows even more clearly the point at which Furman imbibed Edwards's manner of explanation as he points to the proper use of natural faculties.

'Tis not implied that the natural faculties are not made use of in it. The natural faculties are the subject of this light: and they are the subjects in such a manner, that they are not merely passive, but active in it; the acts of exercises of man's understanding are concerned and made use of in it. God, in letting light into the soul, deals with man according to his nature. Or as a rational creature; and makes use of his human faculties. But yet this light is not the less immediately from God for that; though the faculties are made use of, 'tis as the subject and not as the cause.[\[31\]](#)

A circular written by Furman to the Charleston Association in 1823 discussed "What are the most satisfactory evidences of a genuine, vital faith?" He divided the answer into two parts "*Holiness in the heart, and a holy practice.*"[\[32\]](#)

Though a natural man may admire the "natural perfections" of God, he has no proper relish for the moral character. The one who is changed in heart "by the omnipotence of the Holy Ghost from the love of sin to the love of holiness," however, has a "cordial love for the divine character,...admires holiness because it is excellent in itself,...has ardent desires to be as nearly conformed to the requisitions of God's most righteous law as it is possible,...views Jehovah as the greatest, best, and holiest of beings,...discovers the beauties of holiness as they are displayed in his character, and his bosom burns with an unquenchable flame to be conformed to the moral image of the Deity."

Many places in Edwards *Religious Affections* enforce these ideas, but one illustration must suffice. Edwards affirms that "affections that are truly spiritual and gracious, do arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are spiritual, supernatural, and divine."[\[33\]](#) Furthermore, the Holy Spirit so "dwells in the hearts of the saints,...that he exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ... The grace which is in the hearts of the saints, is of the same nature with the divine holiness, as much as 'tis possible for that holiness to be."[\[34\]](#)

Furman's second point, "A Holy Practice," corresponds to Edwards's last point "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice." The language and argument of Furman again corresponds precisely with that of Edwards. Furman establishes as a principle in making this point, "If a man have holiness in the heart, he will be found in the production of good works, for they constitute the proper evidence of his having holiness in the heart.... This is the natural tendency of a holy disposition." Edwards, on this point, says, "the tendency of grace in the heart to holy practice, is very direct, and the connection most natural close and necessary." Edwards again affirms, "Reason plainly shows that those things which put it to the proof what men will actually cleave to and prefer in their practice, when left to follow their own choice and inclinations, are the proper trial what they do really prefer in their hearts." Furman's circular letter was an abbreviated presentation of Edwards's *Religious Affections*.

**Basil Manly, Sr.** could also be classified as an admirer and imitator of Edwards. Three prominent ideas that he discussed, and preached, in a distinctive Edwardsean style were (1) the definition of freedom as it relates to human will; (2) the necessity of distinguishing between natural ability (or inability) and moral ability (or inability); and (3) that personal religion consists most prominently in sanctified religious affections.

In Manly's preaching, these ideas are not exceptional and clandestine, but characteristic and clear. While these same thoughts could reflect Andrew Fuller's influence, since many Baptists in the South read him, in Manly's case his

acquaintance with Edwards was direct. In Feb., 1830, Thomas Screven gave Manly a gift of books that included volumes by John Owen, Richard Baxter, John Gill [*The Cause of God and Truth*], John Brine, Isaac Backus, one entitled *Anti-paedo Rantism* by Abel Morgan, and one he lists simply as "Edwards Against Chauncy." In this polemic with Chauncy, Edwards developed his view of religious affections. In the climax of one of Manly's "reflections" on the inner relations of the Trinity he parenthetically noted "(President Edwards's meditation)." Probably he would either read, summarize, or extemporize one of Edwards's lovely meditations concerning the complacency of God's love for the Son and the Son for the Father. In 1844, writing to Basil Manly, Jr., he remarked "Edwards on the Nature of Virtue I have laid by to read."

His familiarity with Edwards on the will can be clearly deduced from the following:

What is moral freedom of will? We can give no better definition, than that a man is always at liberty to do that which he thinks, on the whole, to be best. That a man should be just as capable of doing, and as free to do, what he thinks not best, is no notion of freedom at all. It is an absurdity. It is necessary that he should be inclined, by his constitution, to do that which, (all things taken together,) seems to him, at the moment of choice, best; and, if not,--he would not be a free moral agent.[\[35\]](#)

Manly's absorption of Edwards's view of the relation of the affections to true knowledge and faith governs the entire structure of the sermon "To know God is Eternal Life" preached in July, 1831, just more than a year after he added "Edwards against Chauncy" to his library. Spiritual knowledge implies "light in understanding and approbation in the heart." And more particularly to know the true God "is to know him so as to approve, choose, love, and obey Him - to perceive all those qualities of moral excellence and beauty in Him, which gain the assent of the will, & of the affections."

Manly's employment of the Edwardsean distinction between the "natural" and "moral" aspects of human nature pop up many places in his sermons and addresses. In a discussion on reprobation Manly argues,

But objectors forget that this is the sense in which they suppose God has reprobated all mankind, themselves included; i.e. determined to leave them to their own free choice, There is no other reprobation taught in the Scriptures; none which destroys human liberty or impairs the sinner's natural power, which limits the offers of mercy or bars the gates of Heaven against any man who is disposed to enter; and there is no impediment to salvation, of any kind, but the want of a right inclination.[\[36\]](#)

This concept he employed in preaching. Reflecting at the close of one his sermons, Manly implores, "Let none think to insure himself from the guilt of neglecting the present case of his soul, on the ground that he may not be embraced in the special prayer of XT." After an expository and theological enforcement of that thought, Manly continues, "And what does conscience testify? Has not God oft striven with thee? Hast thou not resisted? Though some who have resisted have afterward been conquered and overcome, you are not sure it will fare thus with you. But you are sure that coming now in obedience to the drawings of the spirit you will find a welcome and be safe. Why do you not come? Is it not plainly, because you like it not."[\[37\]](#)

Again we see his plea to sinners in the style and after the theology of Edwards. "When we call on the sinner to repent, we feel that we are exhorting him to a duty," Manly teaches; "yet, if we have any sense or gospel in us, we do not mean that he either will, or can, do it without divine aid." Our sense of free agency and personal moral responsibility is intuitive for "the sinner knows that he is responsible. If he does not repent, he knows that it is his own fault." We know in our conscience that unbelief is not "a calamity, a misfortune; but a sin."

How little excusable are you, when you do not come to Christ? You may do right--you may love God--choose life--walk the narrow way:--you are required to do this; and are guilty and condemned for not doing it... The sinner's inability consists not in his dependence on God, which is no hindrance; but in his guilty disinclination to him. Is this an excuse for the omission of any duty, or the commission of any evil?... This deep-seated indisposition to love and obey God is, in fact, as aggravation of the fault,--the very essence of the fault and sinfulness of our fallen nature.[\[38\]](#)

Manly even gave precise definition to the aspects of one's natural capacities that established true moral agency. "We are left...in full possession of all that is necessary to moral agency." "These three things," he continues, "are the essentials to moral agency; understanding, to comprehend the nature of the action; conscience, to appreciate its moral quality; and will, to apprehend motives and choose freely." To Manly it was clear that none of these was taken away or hindered by God's operation of grace and thus "the agent is fully a moral agent."[\[39\]](#)

**William B. Johnson**, founder of First Baptist Church, Columbia, South Carolina, long time pastor at Edgefield and Beaufort, the only man present at the founding both of the General Missionary Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, and to serve as president of both was greatly influenced by Edwards.[\[40\]](#) He preached, in 1822, a sermon before the Charleston Association entitled *Love Characteristic of the Deity*. This was a missionary sermon and set forth the both the foundation and purpose of missions in terms of two of Edwards's great treatises, *The Nature of True Virtue* and *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. In addition he drew upon principles resident in Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*.

Johnson defines the love of God as the "exercise of infinite benevolence or good will to being, in general, or in other words a supreme regard to the highest good of the universe."[\[41\]](#) This summarizes Edwards's closely argued definition of true virtue as "benevolence to Being in general" or later "consent and good will to Being in General." After more argument Edwards again states that true virtue is an exercise of love toward "Being in general or the great system of universal existence, for its direct and immediate object."[\[42\]](#)

Johnson moves quickly from his definition to the conclusion that the first exercise of God's love must be the choice of "his own glory" as its chief object, the main contention Edwards pursues in the *Dissertation*. From the foundation of God's wisdom manifest in creation, his moral perfection, and the biblical witness, Johnson concludes that it is "most fit and proper he should pursue his own glory as the supreme object in his view." In summary, Johnson asserts "In pursuing his own glory then as a supreme object, Jehovah gives the most lucid, the most satisfactory, and the strongest proof of his nature as a God of love, or infinite benevolence."[\[43\]](#)

Again this reflects biblical insight filtered through the language and argument of Jonathan Edwards. "Tis evident," Edwards insists, "that true virtue must chiefly consist in love to God; the Being of beings, infinitely the greatest and best of beings." If one has benevolence to Being in general, as well as complacency toward virtuous being, he "must necessarily have a supreme love to God."

By extension then God, as the supremely and infinitely virtuous Being and having infinitely the greatest portion of being in general, must have infinite regard for and love for Himself. "From hence also it is evident that the *divine virtue*, or the virtue of the divine mind, must consist primarily in *love to himself*, or in the mutual love and friendship which subsists eternally and necessarily between the several persons in the Godhead, or that infinitely strong propensity there is in these divine persons one to another."

Like Johnson projects, Edwards demonstrates that such love necessarily involves the reception of glory: "By these

things it appears that a truly virtuous mind, being as it were under the sovereign dominion of *love to God*, does above all things seek the *glory of God*, and makes *this* his supreme, governing, and ultimate end: consisting in the expression of God's perfections in their proper effects, and in the manifestation of God's glory to created understandings, and the communications of the infinite fullness of God to the creature."[\[44\]](#)

When Johnson speaks of the destruction of the finally impenitent as tending to the glory of God and characterizes this too as a manifestation of the love of God, he adapts Edwards's distinction between the love of a private sphere and love for the whole. Eternal punishment is not a specific display of love to the "miserable subjects of his justice, but to being in general, which is a higher display of benevolence, than the manifestation of particular favor to individuals." This idea constitutes chapter two of *Virtue* after being introduced in chapter one in these words: "If there be any being that is looked upon as stately and irreclaimably opposite and an enemy to Being in general, then consent and adherence to Being in general will induce the truly virtuous heart to forsake that being, and to oppose it."[\[45\]](#)

Johnson also makes use of the distinction between natural ability and moral disposition in showing the justice of God's actions. He did this in demonstrating that God's unfrustrable determination to save a particular people for the manifestation of his mercy and grace is not the proper cause of any person's refusal to meet the conditions of the gospel. They are only left in their state of rebellion and "exclude themselves by their own act" and will serve to demonstrate his justice, or, as Johnson states, "the eternal destruction of these will display the attribute of justice, which we have already demonstrated to comport in the highest sense, with the exercise of love or benevolence."[\[46\]](#)

Without money, and without price, irrespective of merit in them, and freed from all conditions on their part, they are invited, encouraged, commanded to believe in Christ, and assured that believing in his name, they shall have life and be eternally saved. For the exercise of this faith, they have the natural ability.--For with the same ability that they disbelieve, they can believe. Their hearts are enmity against God. Under the influence of this enmity, they exercise the ability which they possess, in refusing to accept of Jesus. They refuse to exercise faith in his name. They treat the offer of his mercy with neglect, if not with contempt. God is under no obligation to exert his transforming influence upon their hearts, to bring them to the exercise of faith.[\[47\]](#)

**John L. Dagg** fills his *Manual of Theology* with theological arguments shaped by the thinking of Jonathan Edwards. In his first chapter, entitled "Duty of Love to God," he intends to show the power and sublimity and revelatory character of the Bible's assertion that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. To do this he argues that the Bible begins with the command as virtually self-evident whereas reason would arrive at the duty by the most rigorous process of thought.

In demonstrating that reason eventually would arrive at the same place, he summarizes the most salient features of *The Nature of True Virtue*. Dagg assumes Edwards's definition that true virtue is "benevolence toward Being in general." He also assumes Edwards's argument that the generality of mankind recognizes that an action done purely for self-gratification has no real virtue in it. Promotion of happiness must be intentional, not accidental, and this promotion of happiness must be for others, and, as to one's personal advantage, it must be disinterested. "Disinterested benevolence is virtue," Dagg argues, and the morality of actions is determined "by the disinterested benevolence which they exhibit."

Built on those Edwardsean ideas, he then summarizes how natural reason reaches the conclusion that love to God is supreme virtue by distilling the argument of Edwards.

As virtue aims at the general good, it must favour the means necessary for the attainment of this end. Civil government and laws, enacted and executed in wisdom and justice, are highly conducive to the general welfare, and these receive the approbation and support of the virtuous. Were an individual of our race, by a happy exception to the general rule, born with a virtuous bias of the mind instead of the selfish propensity natural to mankind; and were this virtuous bias fostered and developed in his education, he would be found seeking the good of all. His first benefits conferred, would be on those nearest to him; but his disinterested benevolence would not stop here.[48] As his acquaintance extended into the ramifications of society, his desire and labour for the general good would extend with it, and civil government, wholesome laws, and every institution tending to public benefit, would receive his cordial approbation and support; and every wise and righteous governor, and every subordinate individual, aiming at the public good, would be an object of his favour. If we suppose the knowledge of this individual to increase, and his virtuous principles to expand, widening the exercise of universal benevolence; and if, at length, the idea of a God, a being of every possible moral excellence, the wise and righteous governor of the universe, should be presented; how should his heart be affected? Here his virtuous principles would find occasion for their highest exercise, and would grow into religious devotion. This glorious being would have the highest place in his admiration and love; and the discovery of his universal dominion would produce ineffable joy. Such are the affections of heart which even natural religion teaches, that the knowledge of God's existence and perfections ought to produce.[49]

We find the clear influence of Edwards again when Dagg discusses the character of true religious affections. Edwards work on *Religious Affections* and again *the Nature of True Virtue* as well as his sermon on "True Grace Distinguished from the faith of devils" infiltrates this pivotal paragraph.

Some have maintained the opinion that a revelation of God's love to us is sufficient to produce love to him. That it ought to do so, cannot be denied; and in a heart under no evil bias, it would produce this effect. We may rather say, that a heart in which no evil bias exists, will love God, on receiving a revelation of his general character, without waiting for evidence of special favor. If our love to God proceeds from a belief that he loves us in particular, it is merely a modification of self-love. Such love has no moral excellence in it; for 'sinners love those that love them.' Some have supposed, that the faith of devils differs from the faith of Christian in the circumstances, that it sees in God no manifestation of love towards them, and therefore can produce no love in their hearts towards God. But this opinion regards the faith which distinguishes the people of God, and purifies their hearts, as possessing no moral excellence in its nature. The circumstances in which it is exercised, do not make its nature better. If it may consist with perfect hatred to God, it cannot have moral excellence in itself, or tend to produce moral purity." [50]

Dagg shows evidence of intimate knowledge of Edwards *Freedom of the Will* in several places. Edwards describes the supposed freedom Arminians argue for in three terms: Self-determination, contingency, and indifference. Dagg discusses these three issues in his sections entitled "Free Agency" and "Moral Necessity." [51]

He specifically deals with the "Self-determining power of the will" by showing the philosophical absurdity of the concept. He argues, again like Edwards, that contingency is a self-defeating concept. "The doctrine of necessity," Dagg says, "denies the existence of absolute contingency, and maintains that the relation of cause and effect, with its established order of sequence, is not only general, but universal. " Though this cannot be traced out successfully in each case with human volition, analogy to other things "favors the doctrine of necessity."

Like Edwards, Dagg also argue that the foreknowledge of God makes necessary the absolute certainty in human

actions, even those of moral texture. "If there is absolute contingency in the world, it is out of our power to conceive how even God himself can foreknow it, and it is alleged that he may be disappointed, and perhaps defeated in some of his plans by its occurrence." [52]

Though Dagg does not use the word, indifference, he argues against the thing itself in Edwardsean terms. "Freedom of action consists in doing what we please." That our actions are the result, not of a state of indifference but of preference, in no way diminishes our free agency. "When a man's actions are known to be determined by strong ruling principles of action, it is maintained that his free agency is as perfect as if they were the result of long continued deliberation, or proceeded from no known cause." Acting on the basis of such "strong ruling principles is in fact, for Dagg as for Edwards, the very foundation of virtue, not a detraction from it, and "is our highest praise." [53]

In all of this, however, Dagg argues strongly that God cannot be made the author of sin as his proper action. He uses it and overrules it to his glory but divine revelation requires that we eschew any doctrine of necessity that would place sin as the result of God's active will. Rather than God being blamable for sin, Dagg teaches that man's inability releases from no obligation. His dependence on mere mercy as displayed in effectual calling does not make God the author of sin, but displays the full culpability of man. To those that object that such determination renders its subject free of guilt and not blameworthy for being impenitent.

The objection virtually assumes, that men are under no obligation to serve God further than they please; or that if their unwillingness to serve him can be overcome by nothing less than omnipotent grace, it excuses their disobedience. Let the man who makes to himself this apology for his impenitence and unbelief, consider will, with what face he can present his plea before the great judge. "I did not serve God, because I was wholly unwilling to serve him; and so exceedingly unwilling that nothing less than omnipotent grace could reconcile me to the hated service." Who will dare offer this plea of the great day? [54]

## Conclusion

Edwards aimed his arguments at the growing Arminianism encroaching on Puritan New England. The Baptists' original use of the same arguments was in their exit from hyper-Calvinism. They also were employed, however, as Edwards had employed them, in the refutation of Arminianism. We find this so particularly in the cases of Backus, Manly, and Dagg. With the beginnings of Southern Baptists so deeply connected with this Edwardsean understanding of grace in its relation to man's will and the foundation of all actions being to live to the glory of God, perhaps a call to return to our original missionary vision is a call to return to Edwards's biblical understanding of the Glory of God as the final end for which God has created the world. After all, it was W. B. Johnson who wrote in the "Address to the Public" after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention: "Our Objects, then, are the extension of the Messiah's kingdom, and the glory of our God."

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works* 2 vols. (Banner of Truth)1:cxx

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "A Farewell Sermon," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 238.

- <sup>3</sup> John E. Smith *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 104.
- <sup>4</sup> John Ryland, Jr. *The Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button & Son, 1816) 10, 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Hall, "Help to Zion's Travelers" in *The Baptist Library* (Prattsville, N. Y.: Robert H. Hill, 1843) 3:86, 87.
- <sup>6</sup> Hall, *Help*, p.111.
- <sup>7</sup> Hall, *Help*, P. 112.
- <sup>8</sup> Ryland, 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Ryland, 43.
- <sup>10</sup> Ryland, 44.
- <sup>11</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 2:330
- <sup>12</sup> Ryland, 99-109.
- <sup>13</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 2:330.
- <sup>14</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 1:25. This contradicts George Ella's remark: "Convincing evidence for a direct influence by Edwards on Fuller has still to be produced as Fuller's theology is radically different from Edwards" [Ella, *Law and Gospel in the Theology of Andrew Fuller* (Durham: GO Publications, 1996) 168].
- <sup>15</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 1:624-626.
- <sup>16</sup> Ella, 144, 145.
- <sup>17</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 2:562-564, 576.
- <sup>18</sup> Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for the author, 1811-1830), 4:437.
- <sup>19</sup> Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 1998) 113-16.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 2:279.
- <sup>21</sup> William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, new facsimile edition with an introduction by Ernest A. Payne (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1961),

p. 12

<sup>22</sup> Terry G. Carter, *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000) 4, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Fuller, *Works*, 1:101. *Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, new facsimile edition with an introduction by Ernest A. Payne (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1961), 12.

<sup>24</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968) 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>26</sup> McLoughlin, 309.

<sup>27</sup> McLoughlin, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Isaac Backus, *A History of New England With Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians called Baptists*, Second edition with notes by David Weston, 2 vols (Newton: Backus Historical Society, 1871) 2:251-52. For the full argument of Backus on the relation between Edwardsean Calvinism as embraced by Baptists and the issues of a new constitution for the new nation, see 2:250-66. This actually contains three volumes but volumes two and three are numbered consecutively.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Furman, *Conversion Essential to Salvation* (Charleston: J. Hoff, 1816) 6,7.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in *Reader*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> *Reader*, 114.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Furman, *Circular Letter*, Minutes for The Charleston Baptist Association, 1823, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Reader*, 155.

<sup>34</sup> *Reader*, 158.

<sup>35</sup> Basil Manly, Sr. *Divine Efficiency Consistent With Human Activity* (Tuscaloosa: M. D. J. Slade, 1849) 17.

<sup>36</sup> Basil Manly, 1844 circular letter on Election, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Basil Manly in "Prayer for Xt People and not for the World" (August 21, 1831).

<sup>38</sup> *Divine Efficiency*, 26, 27.

<sup>39</sup>*Divine Efficiency*, 16, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson also imbibed aspects of the New England theology. That is not under discussion here, but only those areas in which the direct impact of Edwards can be seen

<sup>41</sup> W.B. Johnson, *Love Characteristic of the Deity* (Charleston: W. Riley, 1823) 4, 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Reader*, 246.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Reader*, 252, 257, 258.

<sup>45</sup> *Reader* 249. See 252-258 for an extended discussion of the nature of private affections or ultimate regard for a particular person or private system that is not subordinate to benevolence to Being in general.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards makes this same point. "No wonder that he who is of a generally benevolent disposition should be more disposed than another to have his heart move with benevolent affection to particular persons, whom he is acquainted and conversant with, and from whom arise the greatest and most frequent occasions for exciting his benevolent temper." *Reader*, 246.

<sup>49</sup> John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Greenville: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857) 47-48.

<sup>50</sup> Dagg, 280.

<sup>51</sup> Dagg, 120-128.

<sup>52</sup> Dagg, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Dagg, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Dagg, 334, 335.



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# Awakening an Interest in Evangelism and Edwards

*[Peter Beck](#)*

In the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening rounds of the twenty-first, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in evangelism. A recent visit to an online bookstore revealed that there are at present nearly 2300 books available about evangelism. People are turning to gospel gurus left and right in their search for the perfect presentation, the most welcoming invitation, and the most adroit introit to the witnessing encounter. Given the explicit command of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should not be surprised by this interest. In fact, we should be quite pleased that modern Christians are seeking to fulfill the Great Commission in such large numbers.

However, our enthusiasm for evangelism must be tempered by a concern for biblical accuracy and doctrinal integrity. The primary way in which we are to ensure that our evangelistic fervor is well founded and guided is by turning to the Scriptures. There we find both the mandate and the message of our evangelistic call. Another way in which we can check our modern methods is to compare them with the effective models of those who have gone before. Augustine, Calvin, Carey, and Spurgeon all have much that they can teach us. The same can be said of Jonathan Edwards, America's theologian, who saw over 300 come to a saving knowledge of Christ in six short months. It is to the evangelist of the First Great Awakening that we turn our attention.

## Sinners, Seeking, and Salvation

While Jonathan Edwards never embraced Baxter's call for door-to-door encounters with his parishioners, he was very much concerned with the condition of their souls. Edwards never tired of showing his hearers the errors of their ways and calling them to seek their salvation. An example of this call to seek can be found in the famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God,"

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God.[\[1\]](#)

For some, Edwards' evangelistic call for sinners to seek their salvation seems out of place, contrary to his Reformed theology. Given Edwards' adherence to the doctrines of grace, they ask, how could he expect fallen sinners, trapped in their sin, to embrace a gospel that they, by nature, reject? Yet, it is this doctrine of seeking that makes Edwards' model of evangelism so intriguing and effective. In it, Edwards recognized man's sinful condition for what it is—total. Moreover, he addressed the gospel call to the total man, not just felt needs but real needs, all the while depending upon God's sovereign grace to complete its work.

### Sinners

The nature of fallen humanity, Edwards believed, is totally corrupt and ruined by moral depravity. He explained the effect of man's depravity in this way,

They are naturally, totally blind, wholly without any light...deprived of spiritual light...They never

understand the meanings of the things that are [crucial] concerning Christ and the vital religion. They have many clear and plain instructions, an abundance of them, but they are never plain to them.... They never understand the way of salvation by Christ tho' they have it so often described.... They are like dull scholars that go to school many years but never learn to read.[2]

The sin renders the heart "dull and stupid to any sense or taste of those things wherein the moral glory of the divine perfections consists." [3] Moreover, man's sinful nature, which streams from him like bitter water from a poisonous stream in the form of sinful acts and thoughts, leaves him unable and unwilling to choose that which is right. As a result, fallen man finds himself "utterly unfit to enter into the kingdom of God." [4]

## Seeking

According to John Gerstner, the doctrine of seeking was "the keystone of [Edwards'] evangelistic theory." [5] Seeking involves the pursuit of God's gracious gift of regeneration. In seeking, the sinner attends to the means that God has appointed for salvation. He will place himself under the sound preaching of a godly pastor. True seekers should participate in the sacraments of the church that portray the gospel-baptism and the Lord's Supper. The seeker should pray. He should study the Scriptures in order to understand God and his own sinful condition. However, seeking does not guarantee that salvation will be found for that is God's choice alone. Yet, Edwards argued that there is no salvation for those who do not seek.

There are many other things besides faith, which are directly proposed to us, to be pursued or performed by us, in order to eternal life, as those which, if they are done or obtained, we shall have eternal life, and if not done or not obtained, we shall surely perish. [6]

To that end, Edwards appealed to the heart, the mind, and the will of sinners, calling them to seek, to enter "the door of mercy" when it is offered to them, and find their salvation.

## Moving the Heart

"The things of religion take place in men's hearts, no further than they are affected with them," Edwards wrote in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*. [7] "Our people don't so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched," Edwards continued. [8] Apart from a change of heart there is no salvation.

Never was a natural man engaged earnestly to seek his salvation: never were any such brought to cry after wisdom, and lift up their voice for understanding, and to wrestle with God in prayer for mercy; and never was one humbled, and brought to the foot of God, from anything that ever he heard or imagined of his own unworthiness and deserving of God's displeasure; nor was ever one induced to fly for refuge unto Christ, while his heart remained unaffected. [9]

The evidence of heart that has been moved toward God, Edwards taught, is a recognition of the depth and despair of one's sinful nature. True seekers reflect upon and consider their wretched condition. Persons who are seeking ought to endeavor to be convinced and convicted of their sin.

In the renewal of the heart, legal humility follows upon the heels of conviction. Seeing the sinfulness of his heart, a person has every reason to humble himself and lie low before God: "Such thoughts as these make the proud

heart...come down low before the throne of grace."[\[10\]](#) Humility "prepares the heart for God's grace and makes it better."[\[11\]](#) Humility leads to repentance. Edwards continued, "When once the heart has been thus broken for sin, it shall be forsaken; when once the sinner hath thus seen the vileness of it, he takes his leave of [it]-bids it an eternal adieu, desires to have no more to do with it."[\[12\]](#) That is, the heart is turned and the life is changed.

For that reason, Edwards specifically addressed the hearts of sinners in his evangelistic messages. "Sinners at the same time that they are told how miserable their case is, should be earnestly invited to come and accept of a Saviour, and yield their hearts unto him, with all the winning, encouraging arguments for 'em so to do, that the Gospel affords," Edwards wrote.[\[13\]](#)

## **Changing the Mind**

Not only must the heart be moved, the mind of the sinner must also be changed.

For although to true religion, there must be indeed be something else besides affection,...there must be light in the understanding, as well as an affected fervent heart, where there is heat without light, there can be nothing divine or heavenly in that heart.[\[14\]](#)

To effect this change, Edwards argued for the powerful application of preaching to the natural man's mind. The preacher's job, and the evangelist's, is to explain the truths of Scripture clearly and apply them as salve to human soul.

To which I would say, I am far from thinking that it is not very profitable, for ministers in their preaching, to endeavor clearly and distinctly to explain the doctrines of religion, and unravel the difficulties that attend them, and to confirm them with strength of reason and argumentation, and also to observe some easy and clear method and order in their discourses, for the help of the understanding and memory . . .[\[15\]](#)

Edwards argued in Miscellany 539, "The knowledge of the rational arguments [presented in preaching]...prepares the mind for grace."[\[16\]](#) Moreover, he encouraged his audience, pleading "all that desire ever to be savingly profited by the Word to get the understanding of it. With all your gettings, get this understanding."[\[17\]](#) By this means God delivers sinful men from their ignorance.

To some sinners who seek, God imparts the saving, spiritual light of his Spirit according to his gracious purposes. In this, the Spirit unites with the mind of man and makes use of those resident faculties that sin had rendered useless. Spiritual light, Edwards argued, "reveals no new thing to men, but only gives a due understanding of them."[\[18\]](#) In this way, the sinner who truly seeks develops a new and "real sense and apprehension of the divine excellency of things revealed in the Word of God."[\[19\]](#)

When the mind of the fallen man has been thus awakened, Edwards said, his principles are restored, his mind enlightened, and he acquires the spiritual knowledge which transforms the heart and changes the will.

## **Altering the Will**

Salvation mandates an outward expression and work of the will, Edwards taught. It is the conjoining of affections of

the heart and spiritual knowledge that motivates the sinner's will, enabling him to embrace his only hope, the gospel.

Edwards defined the will as "that by which the soul chooses."[\[20\]](#) Edwards understood the operation of the will to be the outworking of human inclinations. Informed by the response of the heart and mind, these inclinations direct the actions of the seeker by leading him to choose one way or another. This choosing, so informed, always inclines to the greatest apparent good, according to the present state of the soul. Therefore, the sinner, his heart and mind totally incapacitated by his depravity, can and will only choose evil. The regenerate, once his heart has been warmed and his mind changed by the effective work of the Spirit through God-given means of grace, can and will make a choice for the better.

In the salvific process, the will, now quickened by the Spirit, is not only able to respond to God's gracious offer, it has finally been made willing. The preacher's call to seek becomes attractive to them; it becomes the greatest apparent good. "'Tis plain from the Scripture that it is the tendency of true grace to cause persons very much to delight in such religious exercises."[\[21\]](#) The person whose will has been altered will be henceforth inclined to do those things that are God-honoring and God-seeking. With his will now truly free, he seeks those means appointed by God to affect his salvation.

## Conclusion

Edwards longed to shepherd his hearers through the door of mercy and see them embrace their Savior. He urged them to seek their salvation while remaining firmly committed to his Calvinistic understanding of the human nature. Sin has maimed the individual, heart, mind, and will. This depravity and its resultant destruction demand that man must be changed before he will be willing to flee to take hold of eternal hope.

This change, Edwards believed, necessitates intervention. The evangelistic sermon, used a tool by God, offers the preacher such a means. The preacher and his sermon, presenting the gospel in spoken form, become the means by which God imparts his saving grace to the individual who is otherwise bound by sin and devoid of hope.

Therefore, when he preached, Edwards sought to present the gospel and man's dreadful condition in such a way as to effect a change of heart in his listeners. However, religious emotions, in and of themselves, fail to produce the necessary change. There must be an accompanying change of the mind as well. Once the heart has been touched and the mind changed, the will will follow. But man's seeking is not enough. For the sermon to accomplish its mission of leading the lost to the door of mercy that they might enter in, Edwards maintained, one thing remained-God's divine intervention, that divine and supernatural light that truly moves the heart, changes the mind, and alters the will.

In this way, Edwards held comfortably in tension the doctrines of man's responsibility and God's sovereignty. He called on man to do the only thing within his power, seek after his salvation, and he counted on God to do everything within his power: change the fallen man. He was a Calvinist and he was consistent. He called men to seek.

It is the work of seeking salvation in a way of constant observance of all the duty to which God directs us in his word. If we would be saved, we must seek salvation. For although men do not obtain heaven of themselves; they do not go thither accidentally, or without any intention or endeavors of their own. God, in his word, hath directed men to seek their salvation as they would hope to obtain it. There is a race that is set before them, which they must run, and in that race come off victors, in order to their winning the prize.[\[22\]](#)

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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*, ed. Ola E. Winslow (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 165.
- <sup>2</sup>Edwards, "Tho a People that Live Under Means Are Wont in General to Seek and Hope for Salvation, Yet 'tis the Elect Only that Obtains It and the Rest are Blinded [1740]," Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- <sup>3</sup>Edwards, *Religious Affections*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Works], ed. by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 301.
- <sup>4</sup>Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. by Clyde A. Holbrook, Works 3 (1970):279.
- <sup>5</sup>John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: Evangelist* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 71.
- <sup>6</sup>Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *Sermons and Discourses: 1734-1738*, ed. by M. X. Lesser, Works 19 (2001):152.
- <sup>7</sup>Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England," in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C.C. Goen, Works 4 (1972):297-298.
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 388.
- <sup>9</sup>Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Works 2:102.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup>Edwards, "That If We Would Be in the Way of God's Grace and Blessing We Must Wait upon Him in His Own Way and in the Use of His Appointed Means [n.d.]," Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- <sup>12</sup>Edwards, "True Repentance Required," in *Sermons and Discourses: 1720-1723*, ed. by Wilson H. Kinnach, Works 10 (1992):515.
- <sup>13</sup> Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival," Works 4:391.
- <sup>14</sup>Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Works 2:120.
- <sup>15</sup>Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival," Works 4:386.
- <sup>16</sup>Edwards, "Means of Grace," entry no. 539, *The "Miscellanies," Entry Nos. 501-832*, ed. by Ava Chamberlain,

Works 18 (2000):87.

<sup>17</sup>Edwards, "Profitable Hearers of the Word," in *Sermons and Discourses: 1723-1729*, ed. by Kenneth P. Minkema, Works 14(1997):264.

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Edwards, "False Light and True," in *Sermons and Discourses: 1734-1738*, ed. by M. X. Lesser, Works 19 (2001):8.

<sup>19</sup>Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. by Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 127.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, Works 4 (1957):137.

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Works 2:163.

<sup>22</sup>Edwards, "The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought," in *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards' Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, ed. by William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, Inc., 2001), 221.



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**By choosing Christ for your friend and portion, you will obtain these two infinite benefits:**

FIRST. CHRIST WILL GIVE HIMSELF TO YOU, with all those various excellencies that meet in him, to your full and everlasting enjoyment. He will ever after treat you as his dear friend; and you shall ere long be where he is, and shall behold his glory, and shall dwell with him, in most free and intimate communion and enjoyment....

SECOND. By your being united to Christ, you will have a more glorious union with, and enjoyment of, God the Father, than otherwise could be. For hereby the saints' relation to God becomes much nearer; they are the children of God in an higher manner, than otherwise could be. For being members of God's own natural Son, they are in a sort partakers of his relation to the Father: they are not only sons of God by regeneration, but by a kind of communion in the sonship of the eternal Son.

Jonathan Edwards

From *The Excellency of Christ*



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# Religious Affections: Sorting the Wheat From the Chaff

[Jeff Robinson](#)

When a newly-converted young lady from Connecticut wrote Jonathan Edwards a letter in 1741 seeking advice on growth in godliness and assurance, the venerable theologian wrote back and offered words that might be unconscionable in popular evangelical circles today.

Essentially, Edwards told her, "Don't look back."

In point 10 of his 17-point answer, Edwards advised the young matron regarding "times when you fall into doubts about the state of your soul" as follows:

It is proper to review your past experience; but do not consume too much time and strength in this way; rather apply yourself, with all your might, to an earnest pursuit after renewed experience, new light, and new lively acts of faith and love. One new discovery of the glory of Christ's face, will do more toward scattering clouds of darkness in one minute, than examining old experience, by the best marks that can be given, through a whole year.<sup>[1]</sup>

For Edwards, "looking back" did little or nothing to imbue the believer with unshakable assurance of salvation. Edwards held that the believer must, by God's grace, persevere in bearing fruit and then the evidence of a sanctified life would effectively assure the believer of his or her standing before God. Edwards understood the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians and how he spoke of "forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead:" the Christian pilgrimage is not a fifty-yard dash, but a rigorous marathon, fraught with obstacles and alternative dead-end paths. To stay such a treacherous course, Christians need objective marks of conversion, thus Edwards' admonition for the young lady to apply herself to "new lively acts of faith and love."

This was typical of the pastoral insight of Edwards. While Edwards' pastoral skills have been lampooned due to his preference for long hours in the study over regular visits to his parishioners' homes, his writings vindicate the great pastor/theologian as a shepherd of first rank. Perhaps a few visits would have enhanced the affection of the people for him and served to solve the eventual impasse that led to his dismissal in 1750. Even with that omission, however, he had much contact with his people and never refused to see any about his soul's concerns. Few men in the history of Christendom offer insight into the workings of the human heart regarding salvation on par with Edwards. His classic treatment of the distinguishing marks of genuine conversion and religious experience is his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (hereafter referred to as *RA*). The late John Gerstner, who devoted years of his ministry to the study of Edwards, called *RA* "a near exhaustive study of the signs of conversion."<sup>[2]</sup>

This sustained and careful study is invaluable in sorting the wheat from the chaff amid intense religious experiences. It offers contemporary believers sage pastoral wisdom in discerning the marks of genuine saving faith from Satanic counterfeit marks that would deceive unto destruction. *RA* painstakingly probes the prideful root of human depravity and helps answer the existential angst of the Gen-Xer who lies awake at night and obsesses over the thought, "What must I do to be certain that I was saved a age seven?"

Edwards originally preached the content of *RA* as a series of sermons in 1742 and 1743 during the Great Awakening.

He sets forth the gravity of the subject in the preface: "There is no question whatsoever that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this: What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to His eternal rewards?" Edwards first unpacks marks that are not necessarily indicative of true conversion. Then, over the final two-thirds of *RA*, he expounds a dozen positive marks of the genuine believer. Regarding the contemporary Christian, *RA* exhibits a genius unmatched in exploding common delusions and establishing a biblical foundation for authentic assurance. Edwards admits up front that "true religion, in great part, consists in Holy Affections."[\[3\]](#) Edwards is not espousing a heart-hardening brand of dead-orthodoxy, but a genuine experiential evangelicalism. *The Religious Affections* is a sobering antidote to the incipient "feel-good" shallowness which typifies much that passes for authentic spirituality within modern evangelicalism.

## Neutral signs: No ironclad evidence of conversion

Edwards briefly but pungently expounds upon twelve signs that "are no certain signs that religious affections are truly gracious, or that they are not." The devil has often prevailed in spiritual awakenings by producing counterfeits, Edwards contended. This fact, coupled with fallen humanity's tendency toward self-centeredness and self-deception, drives Edwards to show that an individual may not rely on inward feelings and impressions--no matter how intense--to find proof positive of genuine conversion.

These "neutral signs" include bodily effects, frequent talk about religion, fervor for God, increase in love for God and man, sudden bursts of Scripture texts upon the mind, moving testimonies, increased urges to praise God, and zeal in carrying out Christian duty, among others. We will examine a handful of these before considering the positive marks.

Regarding physical effects upon the body, Edwards' analysis is particularly salient with regards to the modern-day charismatic movement and its insistence upon swoonings and bodily agitations as a *sine qua non* for authentic, divinely-imbued experience. Edwards was reacting to the outbreak of faintings, groanings, and similar enthusiasms that accompanied the revivals of the Great Awakening. Bodily agitations might well accompany a true awakening once a sinner apprehends the despicable nature of his sin and the horrors of hell. However, Edwards pointed out that the apprehension of both eternal and transitory subjects might well overwhelm frail human vessels, rendering physical responses an unreliable source of assurance:

Great effects on the body certainly are no sure evidences that affections are spiritual, for we see that such effects oftentimes arise from great affections about temporal things, and when religion is no way concerned in them. And if great affections about secular things, that are purely natural, may have these effects, I know not by what rule we should determine that high affections about religious things, which arise in like manner from nature, cannot have that effect.[\[4\]](#)

Edwards did not regard constant chatter about religious subjects as evidencing genuine effectual faith. Here, one is reminded of the character "Talkative" in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Edwards went so far to say that "a person may be over-full of talk of his own experiences, commonly falling upon it everywhere and in all companies, and when it is so, it is rather a dark sign than a good one." Authentic Christianity is more clearly seen in deeds than heard in words:

As a tree that is over-full of leaves seldom bears much fruit; and as a cloud, though to appearance very pregnant and full of water; if it brings with it overmuch wind, seldom affords much rain to the dry and thirsty earth; False affections, if they are equally strong, are much forward to declare themselves than true: because it is the nature of false religion to affect show and observation, as it

was with the Pharisees.[\[5\]](#)

A current evangelical cliché is, "Brother, God just gave me a word for you," followed by the quoting of a Scripture verse. In some circles, one who can offer such a 'word' is seen as having reached the apex of Christian spirituality. Edwards, however, warned of the possibility of Satanic delusion.

What evidence is there that the devil cannot bring texts of Scripture to mind, and misapply them to deceive persons? He was bold enough to lay hold on Christ Himself...what reason have we to determine that he dare not, or will not be permitted, to put wicked men in mind of texts of Scripture to deceive them?[\[6\]](#)

In his first epistle, the apostle John tells his audience that one's love for fellow Christians is a mark of a truly regenerate person. Nevertheless, Edwards points out that even this type of Christian love may be a mere fabrication of Satan. It will fail to be the sort of authentic Christian love of which John speaks and instead be only an insidious expression of self-love, Edwards argued. Edwards points to Paul's letter to the churches at Galatia; the people there were once so full of brotherly affection, they were ready to pluck out their eyeballs and give them to the apostle. Soon afterward, they ran after false teachers. The same may be true for persons who seem to exhibit strong love for God, as evidenced in the New Testament by the Jews who followed Jesus for a time, Edwards wrote. "This was evidently the case in the graceless Jews, such as cried Jesus up so high, following him day and night, without meat, drink, or sleep; such as said, 'Lord, I will follow thee wherever you go,' and cried, 'Hosanna to the Son of David.'"[\[7\]](#)

So pernicious and subtle is false religion, it may also cause persons "to be loud and earnest in prayer," to delight in hearing the preached Word of God, and even to admit their unworthiness of receiving the grace of God, Edwards wrote. "Those that yet remain with unmortified pride and enmity against God, may, when they imagine that they have received extraordinary kindness from God, deplore their unworthiness, and magnify God's undeserved goodness to them."[\[8\]](#)

Within the "neutral marks," Edwards also warned of a "one experience fits all" approach to authenticating conversion. Unlike the cookie-cutter approaches to evangelism that typify modern decisionism, Edwards argued that no two believers could be expected to be saved identically. While Edwards held to a modified version of Puritan preparationism, he saw through the revivals that the Spirit worked variously in individuals. "Experience plainly shows that God's Spirit is untraceable, in the method of His operations in their conversion. Nor does the Spirit of God proceed discernibly in the steps of a particular established scheme, one half so often as imagined."[\[9\]](#) Further, he cited a classic work on preparationism, *A Guide to Christ*, penned by his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in debunking the necessity of a believer's knowledge of the precise date of his conversion. Edwards cited from Stoddard's work: "If the man do not know the time of his conversion, or first closing with Christ, the minister may not draw any peremptory conclusion from thence he is not godly."

Edwards ended the section on the "neutral" signs by warning that, in the last analysis, it is impossible for any human to determine with absolute certainty the nature of another's heart. Still, very strong vital signs indicate the presence of God-endowed spiritual life.

## **Positive signs: the nature of the true Christian**

Edwards spent much of *RA* exegeting twelve signs of genuine Christian affections under the heading "Showing What are Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections." Here, Edwards, seeks to counteract what he sees as Satan's use of human self-centeredness to produce false affections by establishing biblical checks against such

deception. As with the "neutral" signs, we will examine some of the positive signs.

As George Marsden points out in his new biography, most of the signs delineating genuine affections have to do with God being both the source and object of affections.<sup>[10]</sup> Sign two deals comprehensively with this as Edwards argued that authentic affections cause a person to love God for his intrinsic excellence, beauty, and perfections. Loving God merely for what he can do for a person is ungodly self-love. The genuine Christian loves God because He is the sovereign Creator. This runs counter to contemporary evangelism methodologies that begin--and often end-- with God's love for man. This thinking is backward, according to Edwards.

The exercises of true and holy love in the saints arise in another way. They do not first see that God loves them, and then see that He is lovely, but they first see that God is lovely and that Christ is excellent and glorious, and their hearts are first captivated by this view, and the exercises of their love are wont from time to time to begin here, and to arise primarily from these views; and then, consequentially, they see God's love, and great favor to them. The saint's affections begin with God; and self-love has a hand in these affections consequentially and secondarily only. On the contrary, false affections begin with self, and an acknowledgement of an excellency in God, and an affectedness with it, is only consequential and dependent. In the love of the true saint God is the lowest foundation...but the hypocrite lays himself at the bottom of all, as the first foundation, and lays God as the superstructure; and even his acknowledgement of God's glory itself depends on his regard to his private interest. <sup>[11]</sup>

Sign three builds upon sign two, arguing that authentic affections are founded upon a love for the moral excellence--or holiness--of God.

With the sixth sign, Edwards deals with the events that take place before salvation. Here, he distinguishes between legal humiliation and evangelical humiliation, arguing that genuine saints exhibit the latter. Evangelical humiliation is "a sense that a Christian has of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness, with an answerable frame of heart."<sup>[12]</sup> In legal humiliation, sinners see the law of God and despair of helping themselves. Legal humiliation is not salvific, but is an important step toward evangelical humiliation, he writes. Evangelical humiliation leads to a sinner's denying and renouncing his own dignity and glory and embracing that of Christ.

Signs seven through ten move toward the culmination of all evidences of grace in sign twelve. Sign seven argues that a truly regenerate person undergoes a change of nature and with sign eight Edwards asserted that genuine religious affections beget in a person "the lamb-like, dove-like spirit and temper of Jesus." In opposition to the mind of Christ, false professors often exhibit pugnacious and ostentatious behavior, but self-righteously do so in the name of Christ. This arises from sinful pride, because some will use Christ to provoke others and shine the spotlight on themselves. Edwards calls this "false boldness."

With sign ten, Edwards calls for balance, stating that gracious affections have a "beautiful symmetry and proportion." Genuine Christians have both joy and comfort alongside godly sorrow and mourning for sin. Genuine affections strike a balance between light and heat. True affections arise only through the mind's apprehension of the truth of Scripture, he asserts.

Just before reaching the climatic twelfth sign, Edwards, in sign eleven, adds a negative sign: "false affections rest satisfied in themselves." A genuine Christian will not view salvation as merely being a sort of "fire insurance" that will allow them to escape eternal wrath. A seeker who is being truly drawn by the Spirit will continue to seek the grace of God throughout his lifetime. This will exhibit itself in an unquenchable thirst for the Word of God, Edwards wrote.

The saints desire the sincere milk of the Word, not so much to testify God's love to them, as that they may grow in holiness....Hypocrites long for discoveries, more for the present comfort of the discovery, and the high manifestation of God's love in it, than for any sanctifying influence of it.<sup>[13]</sup>

Edwards would not have countenanced the cheap grace of modern-day "non-Lordship" evangelism. This is apparent in the twelfth and culminating sign: "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice." The way to gauge the authenticity of one's conversion is not through subjective feelings and impressions, but by objective fruit, Edwards argued. This sign encompassed all others and served as the most accurate yardstick by which to measure the authenticity of both saving faith and religious experience. A person might be considered an honest, upstanding member of the community, but still stand outside the pale of God's grace, for the true believer delights in holiness and keeping God's commandments. For Edwards, authentic Christianity rung most clearly through the tolling bell of the fruit of the Spirit:

A man therefore cannot be said to be universally obedient, and of a Christian conversation, only because he is no thief, nor oppressor, nor fraudulent person, nor drunkard, nor tavern-hunter, nor whore-master, nor rioter, nor night-walker, nor unclean, nor profane in his language, nor slanderer, nor liar, nor furious, nor malicious, nor reviler. He is falsely said to be of a conversation that becomes the gospel, who goes thus and no farther. But, in order to this, it is necessary that he should also be of a serious, religious, devout, humble, meek, forgiving, peaceful, respectful, condescending, benevolent, merciful, charitable, and beneficent walk and conversation.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Religious Affections is also for the "secure" believer

While Edwards' treatise is an invaluable work for the pastor who is charged with shepherding the flock, it is likewise for every believer a wrenching enforcement of 2 Cor. 13:5, which demands complacent Christians to "examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith."

*Religious Affections* is one of Edwards' most readable works. It is also one of his most dissecting, sobering, and convicting. Read *Religious Affections* and prepare to be shaken from spiritual slumber.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xcvi.

<sup>2</sup> John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 1993), 3:337.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>10</sup> George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 288.

<sup>11</sup> RA, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



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## Helpful Books

Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987. 503 pages + xxxi. 3 appendices, index.

No lover of Edwards should be without this volume. As has come to be expected, Murray includes a wealth of material from the era and provides helpful, but not obtrusive, theological engagement along the way. Though the book is weighted, and helpfully so, toward Edwards's theological importance, it is still informative and interesting in demographics, details of social life in general, and interesting entrances into the Edwards family life in particular. Murray writes with an underlying challenge to the reader to consider seriously how Edwards might elevate our spiritual devotion, theological coherence, and Christian ministry. Some seem to chafe under Murray's advocacy of piety, but many will enjoy this edifying feature.

George M. Marsden. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003. 615 pages, + xx; index, map, chronological chart.

Marsden writes easily and charmingly. He obviously has absorbed Edwards so thoroughly in thought and life that that the narrative flows out like a good story. Marsden writes as a historian of American culture and has in mind an audience that might not be familiar with Edwards or particularly enamored of his viewpoint. He does not therefore, drive home an Edwardsean world view polemically but weaves it skillfully into the progressive narrative. He certainly is not oblivious to the importance Edwards had in intellectual and Christian history, but he deals with this in such a way as not to put off those more interested in the overall cultural impact of Edwards or those who just like an interesting and highly pertinent biography. He assumes that every serious minded reader will want an accurate description of Edwards's life and thought. Though told simply and prosaically, Marsden gives the content of Edwards thought with enchanting accuracy. He states his hope that "this account will be helpful to others, as it has been to myself, in thinking about what might be best appropriated from Edwards" [502]. He then suggests some tantalizing challenges. Those who benefit from this challenge will, in Marsden's words, "be drawn from their self-centered universes. Seeing the beauty of the redemptive love of Christ as the true center of reality, they will love God and all that he has created" [505]. I recommend loaning this book to a thoughtful non-Christian who likes to read and enjoys good literary style. Gospel ideas are insinuated so naturally in the narrative that they will lead to many opportunities for discussion of the infinite importance of eternal things.

Richard A. Bailey & Gregory A. Wills, ed. *The Salvation of Souls*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002. 189 pages, 2 indices.

Wills and Bailey have gone to the Edwards archives of the Beinecke Library and found nine previously unpublished sermons for inclusion in this volume. They survived the mind-numbing paleographic task of deciphering Edwardsean script. Each included sermon highlights a particular duty and/or privilege of Gospel ministry. Both pastor and congregation are addressed, as well as deacons. The sermons are arranged chronologically beginning in 1729 with the death of Solomon Stoddard, including sermons preached prior to the awakening, during the awakening, and subsequent to his removal from Northampton. The two longest sermons are *The Minister before the Judgment Seat of Christ* and *The Work of the Ministry is Saving Sinners*. Each sermon has a brief introduction setting it in context. I have three suggestions for use of this book. One, every preacher should read it and meditate on the privilege and responsibility of ministry as described by Edwards. Two, church staffs should read the sermons together one by one and set aside time for discussion in order to evaluate if their view of ministry is on target. Three,

a pastor should lead his congregation in a study of the book and engage in a congregational dialogue on the meaning of pastoral ministry as an aspect of congregational life. These should be read along with Edwards's farewell sermon to his congregation.

D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols. *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

Twelve different writers contribute essays. Both the number and different backgrounds of the contributors and the variety of subjects with which they deal show the amazingly eclectic appeal of Jonathan Edwards. Theology, philosophy, history, aesthetics, psychology, spirituality, preaching, politics, missions, apologetics--these are some of the subjects to which the Edwards corpus contributes and which are discussed in *The Legacy*. Not all the authors agree, and I certainly do not agree with all, but all provoke invigorating thought. Sam Storms unabashed confrontation with open theism through the medium of Edwards's exposition of exhaustive divine foreknowledge is one of the most polemical of the articles and, probably on that account given the subject matter, among the most helpful. Darryl Hart presents a provocative essay proposing an alternative to the conversionism of Edwards that he posits as more true to historic Reformed faith. He presses Edwards into too tight a mold to make his point and Finney emerges as the image of Edwards. Baptist heirs of Edwards will wonder about Hart's "covenant child who never knows anything other than that he or she is a child of God" [176]. They certainly will not respond to his positive appraisal and apparent advocacy of "sacramentalism, 'which regards the Christian life as beginning with the bestowal of grace at baptism.'" [177] Can it really be that Hart is serious about a "churchly and covenantal pattern of inheriting the faith of one's parents and church" [178]. *Inheriting?! If Edwards is to blame for minimizing that notion , then all the more reason to congratulate Edwards. Sean Lucas's essay, "He Cut up Edwardsism by the Roots," has an interesting and stimulating twist when he suggests that southern Presbyterians, particularly Girardeau and Dabney, in dismissing Edwards's supposed innovations left Baptists to be the Southern heirs of Edwards. Also Lucas's final bibliographical essay discussing both popular and academic works on Edwards provides a marvelous map to guide and instruct an eager readership.*



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## News

### National Church Planting Ministry Announced

PENSACOLA, FL -- Interested in seeing the pace of biblical reformation quickened within the SBC? Willing to cooperate with like-minded colleagues in planting doctrinally-sound churches throughout North America?

There are now approximately 300 self-identified "Founders-friendly" churches and over 1,000 "Founders friends" scattered across North America. Although these may embrace a common theological heritage, inter-church cooperation has never been fully engaged, particularly in the area of missions and evangelism.

What could happen if a cooperative, intentional, national strategy was developed to plant historic SBC churches? What if resources and training could be made available to strengthen and encourage church planters and their core groups?

After serving as a bivocational church planter for 17 years and a church planting strategist with the North American Mission Board (NAMB) for the past 6 years, Bill Lollar is pursuing such a ministry. This new ministry, Grace to North America, is now being organized.

In order to get Grace to North America fully operational, churches or individuals are currently needed to support this new ministry through intercessory prayer and monthly financial gifts. Those willing to explore such a partnership are encouraged to respond to:

Bill Lollar  
Grace to North America  
7606 Harvey Street, Pensacola, FL 32506  
Home/Office: (850) 455-7938 \* Cell: (850) 261-6848  
E-Mail: [williamlollar@cox.net](mailto:williamlollar@cox.net)  
Web: [www.Grace2NorthAmerica.com](http://www.Grace2NorthAmerica.com)



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