

Chesapeake Theological Seminary

**Asleep in the Light: Why The Modern Church Desperately Needs to Recover the
Theology and Experience of Jonathan Edwards**

A Term Paper
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List of References

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"Why would anyone want to study theology by reading a bunch of dead guys? Shouldn't you focus mostly on current works, or risk becoming an irrelevant theological fossil?"¹

Whenever one recommends a theologian or book from the past, he runs the risk of eliciting comments such as the one just quoted. Yet, there are few things which would benefit the modern American church more than a healthy re-acquaintance with the great theologians from the history of the church. This is because the greatest corrective to the characteristic sins and foolishness of our own day is most likely to be found, not in those who are living and writing in our today, but in those who lived long ago and were not influenced by the spirit of our own age. C.S. Lewis has observed that "We all... need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books."² If Lewis is correct, and I certainly believe he is, what is needed today is not less reading of "theology from a bunch of dead guys", but more.³ Thus, at the risk of seeming antiquated, in these pages I hope to arouse an interest in the reader for an interaction with the theology of one of the greatest theologians from the church's past, Jonathan Edwards.

However, I do not do this simply because Jonathan Edwards's writings fit the category of 'old books'. On the contrary, I believe it is imperative that we interact with Jonathan Edwards because he is peculiarly relevant to our own day. The Puritans in

¹ This is the question that prompted Phil Johnson, who works with John MacArthur, to create a web site entitled "The Hall of Church History: Theology from A Bunch of Dead Guys". The site is located at <http://www.gty.org/~phil/hall.htm> and is an excellent resource for rediscovering the rich theological heritage of the Church. It also includes links to some great resources on Jonathan Edwards which may be found on the internet.

² C.S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 200-207.

³ For a similar view, see Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life, : Systematic Theology Volume 2* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), xiv-xvi, and his discussion of a "pyramid of sources" for theology.

general, and Jonathan Edwards in particular, have a focus on theological truths which is desperately needed in our day. Sensing this, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has observed that “no man is more relevant to the present condition of Christianity than Jonathan Edwards.”⁴ As a result, I hope to convince the reader to spend time with Edwards, not because he is merely from another time, but precisely because he speaks more relevantly to our time than almost any other writer.⁵

It should be noted that I am not encouraging the reading of a particular sermon or book by Edwards, but spending time reading many of the writings of Edwards. As a result, I will not be discussing a single book by him and relating it to our current culture. Instead, I plan to discuss several general characteristics of Edwards’s theology and writings, and show how they apply to the church today. I will then offer some general suggestions on how one might embark on a study of the theology and writing of Edwards.

The God-Centered Theology of Jonathan Edwards

The first defining characteristic of the theology of Jonathan Edwards that is desperately needed in the modern church is that it is theocentric or God-centered. Mark Noll, professor of church history at Wheaton College, has noted that “Jonathan Edwards was a theologian overwhelmed by the majesty and the splendor of the divine. The major themes of his theology are the greatness and glory of God, the utter dependence of sinful humanity on God for salvation, and the ethereal beauty of the life of holiness.”⁶ For Edwards, God was the foundation of all life and thought. God was the center of all

⁴ Quoted in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 20.

⁵ John Piper, *ibid.*, 31, makes a similar assessment, stating that “Edwards is strongest where we are weakest... Our culture is dying for want of this vision and this food.”

⁶ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 97.

existence and to know Him, glorify Him and enjoy Him should be the chief pursuit of every human being.

This theocentric focus is seen throughout the thought, sermons and writings of Edwards. It is clearly visible in writings such as *The Chief End for Which God Created the World*,⁷ in which Edwards argues that creation exists for the glory of God, and sermons such as *The Sole Consideration, That God is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty*.⁸ However, it is equally true that *all* of Edwards's writings and sermons are permeated with a theocentric focus. There is simply no way to understand Edwards apart from the notion that God is completely sovereign, that He may do as He pleases with creation in general and men in particular, and that this is as it should be, for God is the center of all existence. This is why John Piper speaks of Edwards's "riveted focus on God"⁹ and his "relentless God-centeredness."¹⁰ Piper sums up Edwards by saying that he "sees and savors the supremacy of God in all things".¹¹

It is important to note that when I say Edwards has a theocentric theology, I do not mean that God is the focus of his thinking regarding "religious" matters alone, but not for other parts of "reality". On the contrary, for Edwards there is no reality apart from God. He is the center of *all* existence, for everything is from God and exists only for Him and His pleasure. Thus, Mark Noll asserts that Edwards had a "God-entranced worldview" and a "profoundly theological philosophy".¹² It was impossible for Edwards

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint of 1834 Hickman edition originally published in Great Britain), 1:94-121.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:107-110.

⁹ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

to envision any truth apart from its relation to God.

Yet, this theocentric emphasis has been all but completely lost by the modern evangelical church, not to mention the culture at large. God is no longer the center of our thought and life; He has been moved to the periphery. He is still allowed a place at the table of course, but man now occupies the chief seat at the feast.¹³ This is seen in everything from the widespread acceptance of the “health and wealth” gospel, with its focus on faith as a power to get what you want (rather than the gift of God to receive what we truly need – salvation from sin), to the “seeker-sensitive” church movement, with its focus on the “felt needs” of the worshipper (rather than the declared desires of the God we are supposedly worshipping). In marked contrast to this anthropocentric emphasis, Edwards opined that the faith suffered when “religion consists so little in respect to the Divine Being, and almost wholly in benevolence to men.”¹⁴ It is not that Christianity is not concerned with benevolence to men; it certainly is, for this is our second great commandment. Yet, true Christianity realizes that it is the second commandment, not the first, and that if we wish to see the second commandment realized, it must be built upon the first. Thus, man can not be the center; this place must be reserved for God and God alone.

Therefore, Edwards can be of great value to us. He can help to correct our anthropocentricity with his theocentric theology. Noll observes that “the theocentric emphasis of Edwards has played a remarkably small role in the history of evangelical

¹³ For an excellent review of this trend within modern evangelicalism, see David Wells *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and David Wells *God In the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹⁴ Quoted in Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1949), 118.

Protestants”¹⁵ to this point in history. As a result, while Edwards vision was “steadily God-centered, our tends to be man-centered with occasional attention to God.”¹⁶ Yet, consistent exposure to Edwards can remedy this ill today and help the church return to a vital theocentric theology and view of life.

The Rational Theology of Jonathan Edwards

The second defining characteristic of the theology of Jonathan Edwards that is desperately needed in the modern church is that it is rational. Edwards was a man who took seriously the command to love God with all of our mind (Mark 12:29). This may be seen from several factors. First, one can scarcely miss the depth of Edwards’s thought when reading works such as *Freedom of the Will*.¹⁷ The sheer logic and force of thought behind this work is almost overwhelming. Edwards clearly was gifted with a keen intellect and the ability to use it in service to God.

Second, we can see it by the manner in which Edwards often wrote and preached. Although Edwards sermons and writings are full of scripture, they are also full of appeals to logic and rational thought. Edwards was not afraid to appeal to the reason of man, and he did so often. This tendency may be clearly seen in works such as *The Chief End for Which God Created the World*,¹⁸ in which the first half of the work is devoted to discovering from rational means, apart from Scripture, the reason why God created the universe.¹⁹ For Edwards, reason and the Scripture were not contradictory. True reason would not arrive at conclusions opposed to the Scripture. On the contrary, true reason

¹⁵ Quoted in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 21.

¹⁶ John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 29.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:1-93.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:94-121.

¹⁹ This does not mean that Edwards thought that rational thought alone was sufficient; he clearly did not. In this work he states that “revelation is the surest guide in these matters...Nevertheless, the ... voice of

would be useful in supporting the truth taught in Scripture.²⁰

Edwards also stressed the importance of the mind in Christian discipleship. In his sermon, *Christian Knowledge, or The Importance and Advantage of A Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth*,²¹ Edwards argues that while the goal of Christian faith lies in reaching the heart, or what he calls spiritual knowledge, it must gain access through the head, or what he calls speculative knowledge. Edwards says that “speculative knowledge is also of infinite importance in this respect, that without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge.”²² Thus, before one can truly and lastingly experience some part of the faith, he must normally read, study and think about it. For Edwards, deep thought was invaluable because it led to deep experience.²³

In contrast to this, the modern evangelical church seems to have an aversion to thinking. In the oft-quoted words of Harry Blamires, “There is no longer a Christian mind.”²⁴ While the early church in America produced some great thinkers, most notably Edwards, and many great institutions of higher learning, there has been a drift within the last century away from serious thought and reflection regarding the faith and the world we live in. The reasons behind this are multi-faceted, but the result is a church that focuses on feelings and is suspicious of serious thought.²⁵

In fact, the problem is not simply that modern evangelicals do not think; the real

reason.. may serve to prepare the way.” (Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:106). Thus, Scripture is the final rule; yet, reason can help point the way to the truth.

²⁰ For a helpful overview of Edwards use of reason, see 1986. John Gerstner, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards (taped audio series distributed by the Institute for Theological Studies)*, (Grand Rapids: Outreach, Inc.), especially Lectures 1 and 2.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:157-163.

²² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

²³ Edwards view of experience will be addressed below.

²⁴ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, (London: SPCK, 1963), 3.

²⁵ For a survey of how this happened, see David Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* and Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What*

problem is that many of them are actually proud of this fact. Much of the evangelical church in America today is awash in an anti-intellectual spirit. John Piper observes this when he states that Edwards “is truth focused and cherishes the contours of doctrine; we tend to be feeling-focused and suspicious of the claim that doctrine has contours.”²⁶ It is not just that we are not strong in doctrine and theology; we do not even think we should focus on them. In fact, we are positively suspicious of those who are given to thinking deeply about the faith.

Yet, this is not a mere battle of people with an intellectual bent versus those who are more feelings oriented; it is a matter of Christian discipleship. As Os Guinness observes, “thinking Christianly is first and foremost a matter of love – of minds in love with God and the truth of His world.”²⁷ There is no other option for a true disciple; the first command still contains the injunction that we are to love God with all of our *mind* (Mark 12:29).

However, learning to think again will not be an easy task. We have become entrenched in a feelings oriented faith that often lacks real substance and thought. We will need guides to help us recover this lost part of discipleship. Edwards can help us in this struggle by teaching us how to think deeply about God, His word, and the world we live in. In fact, consistent exposure to Edwards will force us to think deeply, for he simply can not be understood otherwise.

The Experiential Theology of Jonathan Edwards

The third defining characteristic of the theology of Jonathan Edwards that is

To Do About It (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

²⁶ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 29.

²⁷ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 19.

desperately needed in the modern church is that it is experiential. This seems contradictory given the previous section on the rationality of his thought, but this is precisely why we need exposure to Edwards so badly. In Edwards we see that thought and reason are not incompatible with affections and experience, for Edwards the great thinker and theologian was also Edwards the revivalist and man of deep experience with God. Commenting on this tendency to separate the two, one biographer notes that “Many think of him as an intellectual giant, indeed, but as a giant wholly composed of intellect, and suppose that his power consisted entirely in the cold conclusiveness of his unimpassioned logic. A greater mistake is scarce possible. Besides his logic, there was his strong realizing faith. God, heaven, hell, the sinfulness of sin, the beauty of holiness, the glory of Christ and the claims of his gospel, were as substantial realities to his mind and heart, as the valley of the Connecticut or the mountains of Berkshire. He spoke of them accordingly, and made them seem real to his hearers. He was perhaps as remarkable for his power and habit of deep and strong and tender feeling, as for his powers of argumentation.”²⁸

In Edwards, penetrating thought and orthodox theology were combined with a profound desire to *experience* the truths contemplated and to worship the God written about in theology. While preaching in Northampton, George Whitefield spent a week with Edwards and his family. Reflecting on this time, Whitefield noted that “Mr. Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian....I think I may say I have not seen his fellow in all New England.”²⁹ Whitefield also commented that when he preached in Edwards’s

²⁸ Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*, (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1976; reprint of original 1842 publication), 214.

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 99.

Northampton congregation “both minister and people wept much.”³⁰ Thus, Edwards was not merely a man who thought about God, but one who longed for God with deep affection, who lived the truths he taught, and who wept as he heard the truths of the Gospel expounded.

This experience of God is desperately needed in the church today as well. Those who are rightfully concerned with orthodox thought speak with disdain of the rampant emotionalism within the church. Yet, if all we have is proper thought, we have missed God’s intent. Edwards taught often on this need. The mind was the door, but the goal was always experience in the heart of his listeners. In *Christian Knowledge*³¹ Edwards discusses the importance of both “speculative” or head knowledge and “spiritual” or experiential knowledge. In this treatise he states that “Neither of these is intended in the doctrine exclusively of the other: but it is intended that we should seek the former in order to the latter. The latter, even a spiritual and practical knowledge of divinity, is of the greatest importance; for a speculative knowledge of it, without a spiritual knowledge, is in vain and to no purpose, but to make our condemnation the greater. Yet a speculative knowledge is also of infinite importance in this respect, that without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge.”³² According to Edwards we must have both head knowledge and experience. To reach the heart, we must go through the head, but the goal is always the heart.

This understanding has implications for both teachers and hearers in the church. For those called to teach, we must remember that we are called not just to dispense

³⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 99.

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:157-163.

³² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

information, but to pierce through to the heart. Our preaching must be filled not only with truth, but with a passion to touch the affections of those hearing us.³³ Anything less is a failure to follow the example of Christ and the apostles, who taught with authority and cut men to the heart with their words.

However, it must also affect us when we are hearing the word of God being taught. We must never confuse mere head knowledge of a subject with life application. We are not called to be merely hearers of the word, but doers (James 1:22). We must not simply know about justification; we must experience it. It is not enough that we can speak of the power of the Holy Spirit; His power must fill our everyday lives. This is the message of the writings and life of Jonathan Edwards, and it is desperately needed in our day.

The Balanced Theology of Jonathan Edwards

The final defining characteristic of the theology of Jonathan Edwards that is desperately needed in the modern church is that it is a balanced theology. This is seen in two ways: the range of topics included in the writings of Edwards, and the balance found in the thought and life of Edwards as he dealt with each topic.

First, Edwards theology is balanced because he dealt with a wide range of biblical topics. The breadth and depth of the topics covered by Jonathan Edwards in his writings is truly staggering. Though he did not write a commentary on the Scripture, his notes and sermons on various texts can fill volumes. Though he did not produce a systematic theology, he dealt at length with almost every major topic of the Christian faith. Edwards

³³ Samuel Logan refers to this as “phenomenological preaching” in his chapter on “The Phenomenology of Preaching” in *The Preacher and Preaching* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986). His main source for this idea is none other than Jonathan Edwards, especially his treatise on *Religious Affections*.

is not a musician who knows only a single note or tune; he is a master of entire symphonies of theological topics.

The reason this is important is that each of us faces the temptation to focus on one aspect of the truth to the exclusion of others. Edwards does not permit this for he deals at length with all the major themes of the faith, and his sermons and writings are full of Scriptures from every part of the bible. Thus, exposure to Edwards is exposure to the whole counsel of God.

Second, Edwards's theology is balanced because in his thought and life he joined ideas and experiences which many have thought to be contradictory. For example, as we have already seen, Edwards's theology stressed both thought and experience. How rare this is in the modern church! Too often the head and the heart are pitted against one another, and Christians are asked to opt for orthodoxy or experience, as if the two are mutually exclusive. In Edwards we see the mind and the heart embrace, and theology and experience kiss before the throne of God. Mark Noll has observed that "Edwards's *piety* continued on in the revivalist tradition, [while] his theology continued on in academic Calvinism."³⁴ Notice that the two were no longer joined. One group carried on Edwards's stress on personal piety and experience, while a different group carried on his stress for thought and orthodox theology. Yet, the separation of the two strands has proved disastrous for the church, as the hunger for experience apart from sound theology gave birth to revivalism,³⁵ and the pursuit of theology apart from a profound desire for

³⁴ Quoted in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 20.

³⁵ For an excellent review of this decline see Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1758* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1994). Separated from the profound thought of Edwards, the revivals of later generations eventually degenerated into emotionalism, and in some cases, downright heresy. As a result, we have not seen a mass awakening on American soil in almost 150 years.

experience eventually led to a cold formality, which in many places eventually led to a drift from orthodoxy itself. Thus, Noll correctly laments that “the disappearance of Edwards’s perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.”³⁶

What is needed to correct this malady is consistent exposure to the writings, thought and life of Jonathan Edwards. This is because Edwards is uniquely qualified to speak to groups on both sides of these divides. His experiential basis appeals to those stressing piety and spiritual experiences. Yet, as they read Edwards they will learn that the basis for piety and experience must be sound, rational, orthodox thought and theology. On the other hand, those who tend to stress thought and theology over piety and experience will find the writings of Edwards full of theological meat. Yet, this theology is always seen to be grist for the experiential mill. It does not exist for itself, but is rather the basis for *experiencing* what is believed.

Another example of the balance found in Edwards is his stress on both the supremacy of God and the enjoyment of man. In *The Chief End for Which God Created the World*,³⁷ Edwards argues that everything exists for the glory of God. However, he also maintains that the chief way God is glorified is when His people find overflowing fulfillment and satisfaction in Him. In fact, Edwards argues that these are not two separate goals, but in reality only one goal. He states that “God’s respect to the creature’s good, and His respect to Himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with Himself.”³⁸ Some theologians focus on God, some on man’s response to God, but how many tie the two

³⁶ Quoted in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 20.

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:94-121.

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:120.

together so neatly? Truly, here we see the depth of meaning behind the first question of the catechism: “What is the chief end of man? Answer: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever!” The two are not really two, but one, and it is Edwards who best expresses this truth in perfect balance.³⁹

Encountering Edwards Today

If all of this is true, then we stand in desperate need of a fresh encounter with Jonathan Edwards. Yet, how does one go about this? After all, Edwards’s writings fill volumes, and cover a broad range of topics, and are even written in varying styles. Where should one start the study of Edwards? I would like to make a few practical suggestions.

First, perhaps it is best to start with one of the shorter writings of Edwards. In general, his sermons are shorter than his extended treatises and would probably serve as a better introduction. In particular, I would recommend *Christian Knowledge*⁴⁰ as an excellent starting place. It is fairly short, and in its few brief pages you will encounter the rational, experiential and balanced aspects of Edwards’s theology that I have discussed above. Other excellent sermons to read early on would include *The Excellency of Christ*,⁴¹ which presents both the God centered and balanced aspects of Edwards theology, along with a strong appeal for men to turn to Christ, and *Divine Sovereignty*,⁴² which, as the name clearly shows, will introduce the reader to the exalted view of God to be found in Edwards.

³⁹ John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 47, captures this idea by saying that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”

⁴⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:157-163.

⁴¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:680-689.

⁴² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:107-110.

Second, the reader could then move on to the more lengthy works of Edwards. The book I would recommend for this is *Religious Affections*.⁴³ This book shows all of the elements I have discussed in their full strength, and it will challenge the reader in their own walk with God. Here we see Edwards the theologian, revivalist, pastor, philosopher and lover of God explaining what conversion looks like and how to grow in our affections for God. It is an excellent book in which the reader can really “get to know” the heart of Edwards, and it will prove incredibly valuable to stir the readers “religious affections”.

Third, the reader should then move on to some of Edwards more difficult and philosophical works such as *Freedom of the Will*⁴⁴ or *The Chief End for Which God Created the World*.⁴⁵ In fact, the reader might find it useful to consult John Piper’s *God’s Passion for His Glory* which contains an extended introduction to Edwards and then an excellent reprint of *The Chief End for Which God Created the World*, complete with helpful explanatory notes and improved paragraph headings and much easier to read print.

In these pages you have hopefully grasped why I think it is imperative for the modern American church to “rediscover” Jonathan Edwards. This does not mean that such a rediscovery will be without its difficulties. Edwards is not always easy to read, both because of his style of writing and the depth of his thought. Yet, the treasure to be uncovered is worth the effort. If the modern American church, and especially her leaders, would apply themselves to the writings of Edwards, we would undoubtedly be

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:234-343.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:1-93.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:94-121.

strengthened in our walks and have our vision of God greatly expanded. If the truths found in these writings were learned and applied, perhaps God in his grace would be pleased to come down and visit the heirs of Edwards with another great awakening.