

Chesapeake Theological Seminary

**The Concept of “Seeking” in the Theology of the Apostle Paul and Jonathan
Edwards**

A Term Paper
Submitted to
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In Romans 3:10-18 the apostle Paul draws a dim picture of fallen humanity. In this litany of Old Testament quotations, Paul shows that mankind is completely evil and lost, that there is no one who is good and no one who understands God. Most devastating of all, however, is Paul's assertion that "there is no one who seeks God." Thus, mankind not only is separated from God – he is not even seeking to find God. For Paul, man is hopelessly lost and is not even trying to find God.

Lest we think this is a random, unguarded thought for Paul, it is important to notice the critical place that this idea has in Paul's presentation of the Gospel. It is not a minor issue – rather, it is the indispensable element in his preparation for the presentation of the Gospel. Before unveiling the gracious offer of salvation through faith in Christ, Paul spends over two chapters detailing the sin of both Jews and Gentiles. This sin is then summarized in Romans 3:10-18, showing that this is universally true. All men need salvation, because all men are lost. No one does good, and no one even seeks after God.

Thus, it may seem somewhat surprising to find an eminent theologian like Jonathan Edwards seeming to flatly contradict Paul's statement that men do not seek God. Edwards appears to contradict this statement by urging lost men to seek God, and proclaiming that this is within their natural power. In fact, Edwards states that it is not only possible for them to seek God, but that God expects and commands them to do it, and if they are to harbor any hope of salvation, they must begin seeking God.¹ How can Edwards maintain this in light of the clear statements by Paul listed above? How can he urge lost men to seek God when Paul specifically says that there is no one who seeks God? Is Edwards directly contradicting Paul? Is there a way to reconcile the statements

¹ This is most clearly seen in Edwards' sermon *The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought*.

of Edwards regarding seeking God with the statements of Scripture on the same topic?

The solution to this dilemma lies in understanding the different meanings the two men attach to the concept of “seeking”. For Paul, what was in view was a true seeking from the heart, an inner desire of love for God and His ways, and a corresponding hatred for sin. Since no unregenerate man has either true love for God or true hatred for sin, Paul can clearly affirm that “no one seeks God”.

For Edwards however, the term “seeking” had a different connotation. Edwards has in view not a seeking of God from the heart, but a seeking of God using the natural faculties of man’s mind. To understand this, it is important to comprehend Edwards’ understanding of the nature of man and the effects of the fall.

Edwards taught that man was created in the image of God in two respects. First, man bore a moral likeness to God. In this respect, man was originally created, not as a morally neutral individual, but as a creature of positive morality, virtue and godliness. Man reflected the holiness of God, not only in his outward actions, but in his inner desire. Mans affections were godly. He was naturally inclined to love God and righteousness and to hate evil.

Second, man bore a rational likeness to God. Man was able to think and reason, to contemplate and communicate. In this respect, man was created with the faculties that allowed him to rationally contemplate God, the world and himself.

In the fall, the image of God in man was radically affected. For Edwards, however, this effect was not uniform across the two halves of the image. The first half, the moral image, was essentially obliterated. Man ceased to be moral and holy, but became immoral and unholy. Rather than desiring God and his holiness, man began to

loathe God and to desire evil. However, the second half, the rational image, remained virtually intact. Man could still rationally contemplate God, the world and himself. Though in the state of sin his contemplation might not be perfect, or more likely might be purposefully ignored and distorted in the interest of sin, it was still able to function essentially as it had prior to the fall.

With this understanding it is now possible to see how Edwards could agree with Paul that there is no one who seeks God among the unregenerate, but at the same time could urge his unregenerate hearers to seek God. He could do this because *while it was impossible for them to seek God from their hearts or affections, they could do so with their minds apart from their affections*. Although the moral image had been obliterated, the rational image had not. *Thus it was possible for them to seek God via rational means, even if they could not do so from their affections*.

This means that there is ultimately no difference between the teaching of Paul and that of Edwards. Both men would readily agree that it is impossible for unregenerate men to seek God from the affections. In this sense, no one seeks God, for lost man does not desire God, but rather hates him. We have seen that this is the meaning of Paul's words in Romans 3:11. Thus, it is certain that Paul would hold to this understanding. Yet, it is equally clear from his writings that Edwards would agree with this idea as well. This is most clearly seen in his works *On the Freedom of the Will* and *On the Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* in which Edwards identifies the disease which afflicts unregenerate man. In *Freedom of the Will* Edwards proves that the problem with men is not that they may not choose, but that they will choose only what they desire, and what unregenerate men desire is never God, but only evil. In *Original Sin* he shows the reason

for this: our sinful nature, which apart from the grace of God, will never seek God, but only sin. Thus, Edwards clearly taught that unregenerate men would never seek God in the sense of a loving pursuit of the heart.

However, both men would also readily acknowledge that unregenerate men can seek after God rationally, though not from the heart. That Paul would not deny this is clear; he himself had done this for most of his life prior to conversion (see Philippians 3:1-6). For Edwards this seeking would entail a use of the available means of grace such as listening to the preaching of the word, private reading of the Scripture, prayer, regular church attendance, and avoidance of willful, high-handed sin.² Although these things would be done without true affection, there would be great value nonetheless, for the seeker is most likely to truly meet God in these activities. If faith comes by hearing the Word, then unbelievers ought to make sure that they are receiving the Word of God, both through private reading and especially through the public proclamation of the Scripture. Though these things do not guarantee that one will find God, they certainly increase the likelihood of the prospect! Thus, there is great benefit to pursuing these means, even if it only as a function of the rational image, apart from true affections for the intermediate means or for God. This is true because they are the normal means that God uses to bring about salvation and the restoration of the moral image with its associated affections for God and His kingdom. As a result unregenerate men, who can not seek God from the heart, can and should use every available means to seek God rationally. If they do this, it will likely end in their salvation, ushering in new affections enabling them to truly seek God truly from the heart as well as the mind.

² *The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought*, Volume 2, page 52.