

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN EMERGENT CHURCH:  
JONATHAN EDWARDS JOINS THE CONVERSATION

by  
William D. Henard  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Paper Presented to  
The Academy For Evangelism in Theological Education  
Ashland, Ohio  
October 4, 2007

**Introduction**

In his book *A Western Jesus*, Mike Minter argues that, although certain hymns or expressions of the past have something to say as they are interpreted in light of their time period, looking to the past does not serve the church as well as looking to the present culture. While the purpose of the book appears to focus on the dilemma of how western bias has developed a westernized Jesus, Minter downplays the role of historical theology and its personalities in reaching a postmodern world, explaining:

But let us not forget that God has his giants in every generation, and the battles are different as satanic strategies change. . . . Jonathan Edwards didn't have to raise children in a day of Internet pornography, video games, amusement parks, shopping malls, cell phones, and TV's with 350 channels. . . . There seems to be more despair in our present culture, which is why we so often read about postmodernism and the emerging church, and our bookstores are filled with titles on anorexia, bulimia, and self-image. Such topics would have been foreign to Spurgeon, Luther, and Edwards.

So what must a church do? It must reflect its culture.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Mike Minter, *A Western Jesus: the Wayward Americanization of Christ and the Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 37-38.

One can understand Minter's concern and passion for reaching this present generation, but it is quite apparent that he fails to recognize two things. First, even though Edwards may not have faced exactly the forms of evil as found in today's world, he did encounter sin and temptation in some expressions not even experienced in this postmodern culture. How he handled those situations has something to say to the church today.

For example, the possible reasons for Edwards's termination from his Northampton pastorate and his response provide some important insights into how Edwards might speak to the modern church. My research indicates that Edwards was fired for four primary reasons. First, Edwards's theological position regarding a regenerate membership and the half-way covenant served as the primary motive. In his treatise *An Humble Inquiry*,<sup>2</sup> Edwards expostulated:

The name and visibility, that nominal or visible Christianity had in the days of the New Testament, was of saving Christianity, and not of moral sincerity; for they had a name to live, though many of them were dead (Rev. 3:1). Now it is very plain what that is in religion which is called by the name of life, all over the New Testament, viz. saving grace; and I don't know that anything else, of a religious nature, is ever so called. . . . It is evident, that it is not only a visibility of moral sincerity in religion, which is the scripture qualification of admission into the Christian church, but a visibility of regeneration and renovation of heart, because it was foretold that God's people and the ministers of his house in the days of the Messiah, should not admit into the Christian church any that were not visibly circumcised in heart. Eze. 44:6-9.<sup>3</sup>

Edwards knew that his position could possibly lead to his ouster. In a letter written to his friend Thomas Foxcroft in May 1749, Edwards confessed, "And this will be very likely to overthrow

---

<sup>2</sup>*An Humble Inquiry* was the paper presented by Edwards in defense of himself and his position to his congregation and those churches involved in the controversy.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Inquiry," in *Ecclesiastical Writings*, vol. 12 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. David D. Hall (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 194.

me, not only with regard to my usefulness in the work of the ministry here, but everywhere.”<sup>4</sup>

Theology was always at the forefront of Edwards’s life and ministry.

Second, Edwards became distant from some within his congregation and some fellow pastors over the issue of the Awakening. He entered into a lengthy debate and disagreement with Charles Chauncey regarding this particular issue. Ola Winslow writes, “Jonathan Edwards’s part in this unhappy warfare consisted in two treatises, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, in 1741, and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, in 1742; the series of sermons preached in the same year, later to be made the basis of the *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*.”<sup>5</sup> When it came time for a council to be chosen to examine Edwards’s fitness to remain pastor at Northampton, his opposition chose pastors within the Hampshire Association who did not side with Edwards with regard to the Awakening and Arminianism. Philip Gura notes that, as the revival spread through 1741, there was “the increased polarization of pro- and antirevivalists within the Hampshire Association.”<sup>6</sup> The threat of Arminianism fueled this division as Edwards, early on, took an unpopular stand against pastors and church members who would embrace such a theology.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the revival

---

<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, vol. 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 283-84.

<sup>5</sup>Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 201.

<sup>6</sup>Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America’s Evangelical* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2005), 120.

<sup>7</sup>Edwards’s stance against Robert Breck’s appointment to a Hampshire Association congregation was met with great opposition. These same opponents served on the council which dismissed Edwards. Edwards’s cousin, Joseph Hawley III had been a supporter of Edwards but broke with him as Hawley embraced the fashionable views of a liberal Arminianism. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 358-59.

changed the perspective many church members had with regard to their freedom and rights. Previously, the church pastor yielded strong authority over his parishioners. Now what changed was “their sense of empowerment in the wake of the revivals.”<sup>8</sup>

Third, his dismissal resulted from a power struggle and personality clash within the church. From the time of his stance against Robert Breck, Edwards faced some formidable opponents in the Williams clan. As Edwards faced his ad hoc committee of neighboring churches, his fate seemed doomed. Marsden notes, “Breck and his friends were still there, and the Williams clan and other Stoddardeans controlled most of the rest of the churches.”<sup>9</sup> This power struggle even spilled out after Edwards left Northampton for Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to pastor the English speaking church there and to minister to the Mohawk and Housatunncock Indians. The powerful Williams family, who silently led the revolt against Edwards at his previous church, also had ties to the Stockbridge congregation. Even though Edwards’s contention with the Williams clan dealt with their handling of the boarding school, the underlying issue stemmed from the liberal theology of Abigail Williams, who oversaw the girl’s school.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, Edwards faced dismissal from his church because of certain moral stands he took while in Northampton. One occurred over the practice of bundling. While the Awakening essentially began as a movement among the youth of Northampton, Edwards’s demise also rested in their affairs. Early in his ministry at Northampton, Edwards preached a fast-day sermon in

---

<sup>8</sup>Gura, *Jonathan Edwards*, 159.

<sup>9</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 359.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 395-398.

December 1729 commemorating the meeting of the Hampshire County court in Northampton. In the sermon, entitled “Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery on a People,” he deplored the immorality that characterized young people’s lives in the township. He proclaimed:

And parents are very much to blame in its being thus. There are those practices that parents commonly allow of that lead to uncleanness, that is so evident to the common light of mankind . . . I believe there is not a country in the Christian world, however debauched and vicious, where parent indulge their children in such liberties in company-keeping as they do in this country. . . . Such things as are commonly winked at by parents here, trusting in their children that they won’t give way to temptation.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the reference inferred by Edwards originated out of this activity in which “parents allowed young people to spend the night in bed together partly clothed.”<sup>12</sup> While the practice subsided during the Revival, the hiatus of the Awakening by the mid-1740s led to a return to this and other immoral practices.

A second moral controversy arose over the discovery of the “young folk’s Bible,” named such by one of the perpetrators Timothy Root.<sup>13</sup> Edwards found that some young men, ages twenty-one to twenty-six, had been sharing some books that addressed modern medicine and midwifery. The young men were using the books to taunt some of the young women in Northampton. Stephen Holmes says that this book was the closest thing to pornography that New England had to offer.<sup>14</sup> In his attempts to initiate discipline, he caused further resentment in

---

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Sin and Wickedness Being Calamity and Misery on a People,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 502-03. The text of the sermon is based upon Prov 14:34, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.”

<sup>12</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 130.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>14</sup>Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 5.

the hearts of the townspeople. Patricia Tracy notes that “Edwards’s mistake in this case was not in trying to punish the children of ‘considerable families.’ but in pointing out to the whole community that their young people were completely out of control.”<sup>15</sup> Even though some blame might be given to Edwards in how he handled these particular situations, both issues demonstrate how Edwards faced specific moral problems within his culture and why his theology and practice still speak to the church today.

The second issue Minter fails to recognize arises from the fact that many postmoderns and emergents are drawn to Edwards and his theology. They are looking to the past in order to better understand the present. In the September 2006 edition of *Christianity Today*, the front page provides a photograph of a young man wearing a t-shirt which boldly says, “Jonathan Edwards is My Homeboy.”<sup>16</sup> While the article barely mentions Edwards, only to say in reference to Calvinism, that he “rejected the label, saying he neither depended on Calvinism nor always agreed with him,”<sup>17</sup> the point of the article indicates the impression that the Reformers and other past Divines are having on the present generation of theologues and pastors, both young and old. The article demonstrates in simple terms how theologians of the past might speak to people today.

This paper proposes to demonstrate how Jonathan Edwards’s theology and church practice still provide a viable understanding for emergent and postmodern ecclesiology. Little

---

<sup>15</sup>Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 162.

<sup>16</sup>Collin Hanse, “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback—and shaking up the church.” *Christianity Today*, September 2006, 32-38.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

doubt exists that the church must change in order to reach people of all ages.<sup>18</sup> The present-day church struggles to reach postmoderns. Thus, the Emergent/Emerging church movement has begun. Many of the churches that identify themselves as Emergent are experiencing rapid growth. They claim to be reaching postmoderns and young adults. Robert Webber reported that Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, grew to ten thousand in attendance in its first three years of existence. The church's pastor, Rob Bell, says, "We started Mars Hill in February of 1999 out of a desperate desire to build a new church that speaks a new language for a new world."<sup>19</sup>

One must ask, though, what is this new language? It is precisely here that one finds answers in Edwards. Although no one model or definition exists that pigeonholes the emerging church,<sup>20</sup> one still discovers that a consistent model of inconsistency exists within much of Emergent, both theologically and ecclesiologicaly. Sinners have been placed into the hands of an Emergent church. Edwards must now join the conversation.

---

<sup>18</sup>Ed Stetzer offers several statistics which justify this statement. He says, "According to *Leadership Journal*, 340,000 churches are in need of church revitalization. . . . 70 to 80 percent of North American churches [are] stagnant or declining. . . . George Barna's research indicated that 95 to 100 million Americans of all ages were unchurched. . . . Since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92% increase." Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 18-26.

<sup>19</sup>Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the new World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 136.

<sup>20</sup>Dan Kimball declares that there is "no single model for the emerging church . . . there's no one-size-fits-all way of doing things." Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 14.

### **Emergent: An Introduction**

Ed Stetzer identifies three essential strains of Emergent. First are the relevants. Stetzer says that these churches are “not filled with the angry white children of evangelical megachurches. They are, instead, intentionally reaching their communities . . . they are doctrinally sound, growing and impacting lostness.”<sup>21</sup> Second are the reconstructionists. They “think that the current form of church is frequently irrelevant and the structure is unhelpful. Yet, they typically hold to a more orthodox view of the Gospel and Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Third are the revisionists. Stetzer asserts, “. . . many of those who are revisionists are being read by younger leaders and perceived as evangelicals. They are not—at least according to our evangelical understanding of Scripture. We significantly differ from them regarding what the Bible is, what it teaches and how we should live it in our churches.”<sup>23</sup>

The focus, then, needs to be primarily on the revisionists, although some overlap may occur. Obviously there will be some Emergents who would identify themselves within one group, but theological, ethically, or practically would cross-over into another.

---

<sup>21</sup>Ed Stetzer, “Understanding the Emerging Church,” [on-line], accessed 28 September 2007, available from <http://www.baptistpress.org>; internet.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. Mark Driscoll calls this group Reformers, of which he identifies himself. He made this distinction at the Convergent Conference held at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, on 21 September 2007.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

## Areas of Agreement

It is not the position of this paper to prove that Edwards would totally disagree with this modern church movement. In fact, several areas exist where Edwards would affirm or support the emerging church.

### Innovative Methods

Edwards would first agree with Emergent in the use of innovative or culturally relevant methods designed to reach people, especially in worship. Dan Kimball explains how Emergent services use singing and praise music as a means to promote greater participation of people in worship.<sup>24</sup> Edwards employed several methods himself.

**The Use of Hymns.** While churchgoers today might not think that using hymns serves as much of an innovation, one must recognize that this practice in Edwards's day was as new as drums in the sanctuary or a guitar solo during a praise chorus. Ola Winslow reveals that the *Bay Song Book* developed as the most common song book used by colonists in Massachusetts. The book itself did not include tunes.<sup>25</sup> Marsden notes:

New England congregational singing had become chaotic and dissonant. Seventeenth-century Puritans had strictly followed the anti-Anglican principle that nothing should be part of public worship except what was commanded in Scripture. Like others of the Reformed, they would sing only literally translated biblical psalms. Although many Puritans owned musical instruments, they would not think of using them in the meetinghouse. As though to underscore the point that music was incidental to words, they published the metric psalms without musical notes.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Dan Kimball, *Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 155.

<sup>25</sup>Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards*, 349.

<sup>26</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 143.

English dissenter Isaac Watts became one of the primary proponents of hymn singing. Watts and Edwards became acquainted through Benjamin Colman, who mediated for Edwards the publication of his *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* by Watts and John Guyse.<sup>27</sup> Watts argued for the use of hymns and spiritual songs that did not necessarily follow an exactness with the biblical text but, instead, rested upon scriptural themes. In his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, published in 1707, Watts included songs such as, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed,” and “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun.” As these hymns were introduced to New England, so was the method of singing in parts, or what became known as “regular” singing.<sup>28</sup>

Edwards was not the first to initiate the practice of singing hymns. This innovation must be credited to Solomon Stoddard, although Edwards continued and expanded the custom both theologically and in practice. Marsden posits, “By the time Jonathan settled in Northampton in 1726 at least some of the parishioners had learned singing in parts. . . . Musical literacy was spreading so rapidly, at least in urban areas, that by 1729 one could hear public concerts in Boston. By the time Jonathan visited there in 1731 he was already an enthusiast for the beauties of regular singing.”<sup>29</sup> In his recollection of the results of the Awakening, Edwards himself asserted, “Our congregation excelled all that ever I knew in the *external* part of the duty before, the men generally carrying regularly, and well, *three parts of music*, and the *women* a part

---

<sup>27</sup>Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 117-18.

<sup>28</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 144.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

by themselves; but now they were evidently wont to sing with *unusual elevation* of heart and voice, which made the duty pleasant indeed.”<sup>30</sup>

For Edwards, hymn singing connected beauty and excellence with an understanding of the nature of God. All beauty and excellence existed in the divine consciousness, not just in the material reality. Thus, things became excellent as they stood in proper relation to each other and to the whole. He saw this excellence and harmony illustrated in music, as he often used the term “harmony” synonymously with “proportion.”<sup>31</sup> Edwards wrote, “Spiritual harmonies are of vastly larger extent; i.e., the proportions are vastly oftener redoubled, and respect more beings, and require a vastly larger view to comprehend them, as some simple notes do more affect one who has not a comprehensive understanding of music.”<sup>32</sup> He further expounds this idea in a sermon from Colossians 3:16, which is, perhaps, his most comprehensive work on singing.

Edwards taught:

there is an Excellent and Glorious Harmony in divine things of which the Harmony that is in singing seems to give some shadow and by the resemblance helps the mind the better to conceive of that sweet harmony that I s in divine things. It tends to give the mind an idea of the joyfulness and happiness that there is to be had in God and diving things for is some shadow of this joyfulness and exultation of soul and that sweet inward pleasure and pure [Illegible text] and delight that holy soul has in God in the harmoniousness of the voice of musick. And so it has a tendency to cast the soul into the same frame and disposition and to raise suitable ideas and a suitable sense of divine things.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “A Narrative of Surprising Conversions,” in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 14, emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>32</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The Mind,” in vol. 6 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 336.

<sup>33</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Public Singing an Ordinance Instituted by Christ,” [on-line], accessed 29 September 2007, available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive/documents>; internet.

One might conclude that Edwards believed that music served as more than just a performance. It provided the means for people to understand and encounter God. He would agree with Robert Webber who stated that one primary motive of Emergent is “the longing for an encounter with God’s presence.”<sup>34</sup> Music, then, serves as a relevant way for people to experience God.

**The Use of Itinerant Evangelists.** One might consider this idea to be rather archaic in light of current church innovations and common practices even by the most traditional of churches, but Edwards stepped out of the norm when he utilized and supported the likes of George Whitefield and others. A spiritual awakening had reignited New England through the preaching of George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent. Whitefield arrived in Northampton on October 17, 1740, and stayed at Edwards’s home for three nights.<sup>35</sup> He preached four times from the Northampton pulpit.<sup>36</sup> Tennent arrived in New England on December 13, 1740.<sup>37</sup>

The use of itinerant evangelists was not necessarily an unusual event. Joseph Tracy notes that, “when Whitefield first arrived at Boston, he came at the invitation of several of the

---

<sup>34</sup>Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 191.

<sup>35</sup>Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 186-87.

<sup>36</sup>Edwards recorded, “Mr. Whitefield came to town, which was about the middle of October following: he preached here four sermons in the meeting-house (besides a private lecture at my house), one on Friday, another on Saturday, and two upon the sabbath. The congregation was extraordinarily melted by every sermon; almost the whole assembly being in tears for a great part of the sermon time. . . . The revival at first appeared chiefly among professors and those that had entertained hope that they were in a state of salvation, to whom Mr. Whitefield chiefly addressed himself; but in a very short time there appeared an awakening and deep concern among some young persons, that looked upon themselves in a Christless state.” Jonathan Edwards, “An Account of the Revival in Northampton in 1740-42 in a Letter to a Minister of Boston,” in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 149.

<sup>37</sup>Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards*, 189.

leading pastors and others, to labor a few weeks with them and for them. This kind of ‘itinerancy,’ if it might be called by that name, had always been practised [*sic*] and approved in New England.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, when the revival spread, the Saybrook Platform of Connecticut was enacted to protect church fields from the preaching of the itinerants. With its origins dating back to 1708, the updated act of 1742 specifically stated, “that if any ordained minister or other person licensed as aforesaid to preach, shall enter into any parish not immediately under his charge, and shall there preach or exhort the people, he shall be denied and secluded the benefit of any law of this colony made for the support and encouragement of the ministry.”<sup>39</sup>

Edwards, however, was undaunted. He continued to use and support itinerant evangelists and maintained a healthy relationship with those in this particular ministry. While other pastors became jealous of the notoriety of the itinerants, Walter Eversley notes, “Jonathan Edwards remained in his pulpit but became the champion of the revivalists.”<sup>40</sup> Even so, he was not a blind follower of the emotion of itinerant preaching. Tracy opines:

It appears that Edwards purposely took an opportunity to converse with Whitefield, alone, about *impulses*, and told him some reasons he had for thinking that he gave too great heed to such things. Whitefield did not seem to be offended; but yet did not appear inclined to converse much on that subject, or to be convinced by any thing that Edwards said to him. He also conversed with Barber, (who appears to have accompanied Whitefield in all this journey, though never mentioned in the Journal after leaving Newport,) about some of *his*

---

<sup>38</sup>Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 352.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 304-05.

<sup>40</sup>Walter V. L. Eversley, “The Pastor as Revivalist,” in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 119.

impulses, “dealing very plainly with him, whereby he seemed to be displeased and replied with earnestness and zeal.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Edwards saw the benefit of stepping away from the norm in order to evangelize the nation, but he was also wise enough to show caution at any hint of abuse.

**The Spiritual Sense of Scripture.** A major tenant of emerging worship is what Ed Stetzer calls “valuing experiential praise.” Much of the displeasure that emergents have with traditional church arises out of the fact that “they haven’t experienced God’s presence in the past.”<sup>42</sup> Edwards faced the same dilemma. One area in which Edwards made a categorical break with his Puritan counterparts had to do with his theology of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit’s role in interpretation. The Plain Style of hermeneutics and homiletics arose out of the “prevailing rationalistic, over-intellectualized faith which it tended to engender.”<sup>43</sup> Edwards reacted to this stale form of interpretation as he further explored the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Debate surrounds Edwards as to his philosophical mentors, but he consistently moved beyond any one philosophy or philosopher.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 100, emphasis original.

<sup>42</sup>George Barna, “Worship in the Third Millennium,” in *Experience God in Worship*, ed., Michael D. Warden (Loveland, CO: Group, 2000), 15.

<sup>43</sup>Samuel T. Logan, “The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980): 91.

<sup>44</sup>Many Edwardsean scholars agree that Edwards rejected Petrus Ramus’s form of logic, although most agree that the Ramist form of logic (a logic which corresponds the exact way that things are both in the present temporal world and in the non-temporal eternal world) influenced heavily Puritan thought and led to Plain Style preaching. Perry Miller espouses that Edwards was greatly influenced by philosopher John Locke. Locke rejected the natural theory of language which informed the Plain Style. He developed a symbolic theory in which “words were taken to be artificial inventions established by social convention,” meaning that “a certain word was to be linked to a certain sense impression so that any given word refers to a discrete sense

Samuel Logan notes that “Edwards sought more than anything to make Christ a totally engaging Person for his people.”<sup>45</sup> Because of this desire, Stein opines, “Edwards began to part company with the prevailing tradition of Protestant hermeneutics.”<sup>46</sup> This fact became most evident in his work *Religious Affections*. Edwards explained:

There is such a thing, if the Scriptures are of any use to teach us anything, as a spiritual, supernatural understanding of divine things, that is peculiar to the saints, and which those who are not saints have nothing of. . . . And that there is such a thing as an understanding of divine things, which in its nature and kind is wholly different from all knowledge that natural men have, is evident from this, that there is an understanding of divine things, which the Scripture calls spiritual understanding. . . . It has already been shown, that that which is spiritual, in the ordinary use of the word in the New Testament, is entirely different in nature and kind, from all which natural men are, or can be the subjects of.<sup>47</sup>

People in their natural state possess the ability to speculate about the Bible. The spiritual understanding, though, comes only to those who have the Holy Spirit within, or as Stein

---

impression.” Perry Miller, “The Rhetoric of Sensation,” in *Errand into the Wilderness*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 171-75. See also Logan, “The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” 90.

New scholarship has developed another theory as to the influence of Locke on Edwards. This research has determined that Puritan divine John Owen significantly influenced Locke at Oxford. Edwards, being familiar with Owen’s works, quite possibly determined his philosophical stance more through Owen than just through Locke. Logan concludes that the influence on Edwards, therefore, “was Calvinistic and biblical in its ultimate origin.” See Logan, “The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” 90.

Stephen Stein argues that many individuals influenced Edwards. In his introduction to *Notes on the Scriptures*, he mentions that Edwards referenced within this volume Philip Doddridge, clergyman Moses Lowman, John Locke’s Galatians and 2 Corinthians, William Reading, and Arthur Bedford, to name a few. Edwards also was indebted to commentators Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry. See Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” 7-8.

<sup>45</sup>Logan, “The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” 91.

<sup>46</sup>Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense,” 108.

<sup>47</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 270-71.

records, quoting Edwards, “‘a new sense of the heart’ produced by the presence of the Holy Spirit and a ‘spiritual supernatural sense’ implanted by God at the time of conversion.”<sup>48</sup>

The importance of the spiritual sense, for Edwards, came in the fact that it allowed him to discover the deeper insights of the text. For Edwards, grammar, history, and prophesy were not enough. Stein comments that “. . . he seldom rested content with an explanation of the literal meaning of a passage. . . . At best the literal sense provided the materials for reflection and meditation.”<sup>49</sup> The spiritual sense, however, did not eliminate the need for a literal interpretation of the Bible, because a “person cannot obtain a spiritual sense of the excellency of Christ without such a notion being conveyed to the mind through speculative knowledge.”<sup>50</sup>

Once an individual obtains the spiritual sense as implanted in the heart, it produces a spiritual understanding. Spiritual sense and spiritual understanding occupy different perspectives, in that, the first defines the process of God’s grace, while the latter provides the product of God’s grace. For Edwards, spiritual understanding became the goal of the hermeneutical effort.

The overall purpose of the spiritual sense, and why God would communicate such an understanding, relates directly to the glory of God and specifically the Trinity. A key element within Edwards’s theology was his belief in the Trinitarian nature of God. For Edwards, the salvation of humanity involved the entire Trinity. He preached:

All the persons of the Trinity are now seeking your salvation. God the Father has sent the Son, who hath made way for your salvation, and removed all difficulties, except those

---

<sup>48</sup>Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense,” 109.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 109.

which are with your own heart. And he is waiting to be gracious to you; the door of his mercy stands open to you; he hath set a fountain open for you to wash in from sin and uncleanness. Christ is calling, inviting, and wooing you; and the Holy Ghost is striving with you by his internal motions and influences.<sup>51</sup>

God now glorifies himself as he conveys truth through his Spirit. Stephen Holmes explains how the Father, “. . . glorifies Himself by communicating truth to His intelligent creatures through the gift of His Son and communicating delight or love to His intelligent creatures through the gift of His Spirit.”<sup>52</sup> The ability to discover the spiritual sense originates out of the interaction of the Trinity, specifically in the connection of God’s word with God’s Spirit. Conrad Cherry references this Edwardsean doctrine as “the Spirited Word of God that produces faith.”<sup>53</sup> Apart from the Spirit, one cannot understand the excellency of Christ or the infinite understandings of God. The Scripture serves as nothing more than a “dead letter” without the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup> Samuel Logan explains, “The Holy Spirit is the necessary and sufficient hermeneutical principle for both the analytic and the existential elements of true Christian knowledge.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous: The Torments of the Wicked in Hell, No Occasion of Grief to the Saints in Heaven,” in vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 212.

<sup>52</sup>Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 177.

<sup>53</sup>Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 50.

<sup>54</sup>Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense,” 109.

<sup>55</sup>Logan, “The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” 92.

**Moving From the Read Manuscript to Extemporaneous Preaching.** Another area important to the Emerging church comes from one's encounter with the spoken word. Len Sweet emphasizes how emergents are drawn to the preaching of Jesus because his communication style conveyed more than just words. It sculpted mental pictures which allowed the listeners to see the deeper meanings of life.<sup>56</sup>

One need only to read a few of Jonathan Edwards's sermons to discover that he oftentimes used picturesque language in order to communicate his message. While Emergent pastors are more often inclined to preach narrative expository sermons,<sup>57</sup> Edwards followed the Plain Style preaching of his Puritan forefathers. This style was very innovative, in that, it allowed the preacher to speak in a language the people could understand. It also involved the use of analogy.<sup>58</sup>

Take, for example, Edwards most famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In the sermon, he proclaimed:

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: 'tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell: you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder, and you have not interest in any mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of

---

<sup>56</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 203.

<sup>57</sup>Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 145.

<sup>58</sup>Ola Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill, 1630-1783* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 110.

wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.<sup>59</sup>

The sermon uses very vivid language to describe the spiritual plight of those outside of Christ. Regardless of whether one likes or agrees with the sermon, Edwards communicated a strong mental picture of his subject matter.

Edwards would also encourage Emergent leaders in their attempt to “use different forms of communication.”<sup>60</sup> Edwards accomplished this task as he moved from preaching from a written manuscript to a more extemporaneous style. This change was quite an innovation for his day. Early in his ministry, he wrote manuscripts in a neat and orderly fashion. Wilson H. Kinnach substantiates this idea in his “Preface to the New York Period,” footnoting:

Given the preference of JE’s father and grandfather Stoddard for *extempore* or *memoriter* preaching, one must assume the JE made an initial effort to preach without relying upon his manuscripts, at least for some months. There are in fact a number of formal or stylistic devices in these early sermons (discussed in the appropriate places) which might have functioned as mnemonic aids also. On the other hand, there is no record that JE ever preached without his manuscript.<sup>61</sup>

Upon assuming the Northampton pastorate, however, Edwards moved to an abbreviated form of outlining his sermons. This new preparation style allowed Edwards more freedom in his delivery.<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Minkema elucidates:

---

<sup>59</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards, a Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 98.

<sup>60</sup>Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 88.

<sup>61</sup>Wilson H. Kinnach, “Preface to the New York Period,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 282, emphasis original.

<sup>62</sup>Kenneth P. Minkema, “Preface to the Period,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT:

Contrary to time-honored descriptions of Edwards as a statue-like, inflectionless speaker, his sermon manuscripts indicated that he varied his delivery, sought eye contact with his listeners, and extemporized on occasion. Having succeeded the master preacher Stoddard, who had condemned the common practice of reading sermons from the pulpit, Edwards experimented with ways to free himself from total reliance on his manuscripts. Increasingly he employed special marks or cues, which allowed him to look up from his notes and then easily locate where he had left off. . . . He even began to compose portions of his sermons in outline, undeveloped introductory statements, and fragmentary phrases for extemporaneous delivery. Switching from octavo-sized booklets to duodecimo leaves meant more frugal use of paper, but the smaller format may also have been Edwards' way of forcing himself to memorize his sermons since they were less easily read.<sup>63</sup>

Malcolm McDow and Alvin Reid add that George Whitefield<sup>64</sup> heavily influenced Edwards's preaching passion.<sup>65</sup> Speaking of Edwards, they write, "Early in his ministry, sermon

---

Yale University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>64</sup>Iain Murray believes that Edwards himself affected the preaching of Whitefield. He writes, "Firstly he had, during 1740, made close friendships with such American evangelicals as the Tennents and Jonathan Edwards; through them he was doubtless led into a deeper understanding of Puritan theology and its relevance to evangelism and revivals. He also witnessed the outstanding blessing on their preaching." Iain Murray, "Prefatory Note," in *George Whitefield's Journals* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 567. The blessing obviously references the conversions under their preaching, but Whitefield, at some point, may have heard them preach in order to see the blessings.

<sup>65</sup>In at least one sermon, Edwards made reference to Whitefield. Preached in a private meeting in December 1739, with no reference that it was ever used again, Edwards spoke of the revival occurring in England and how "God has raised up in England a number of young ministers, some of 'em of the Church, that seem in the midst of all this darkness wonderfully to have been wrought upon by the Spirit of God . . . I have heard of the news of several, particularly Mr. Wesley, and Mr. Whitefield, and Mr. Harris, a young minister that has preached in Wales. But he that has been most taken notice of, of whose success we have the greatest fame, is Mr. Whitefield. [He is a] young man [who is] a minister of the Church of England, who labors obediently [and] insists very much on the doctrines of faith in Christ and the New Birth. . . . Came over to Georgia, a place the English lately have settled in America with poor people. Has preached at Gibraltar; a place the English have in Spain. . . . Last month was in Philadelphia and New York with Mr. Seward, his companion." See Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley, "Editors' Introduction: God's Grace Carried on in Other Places," in *Sermons and Discourses 1739-1742*, vol. 22 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 104. See also

manuscripts were read; after Whitefield visited Northampton, Edwards began using outlines instead.”<sup>66</sup>

Finally, Edwards would commend the emerging church in its attempts to help people experience God through worship.<sup>67</sup> J. I. Packer elaborates concerning Edwards on worship and preaching, “Like his seventeenth-century predecessors, he preached with a threefold aim: to make men understand, feel, and respond to gospel truth.”<sup>68</sup> Edwards expressed himself this way:

God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word, in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of religion, their own misery, the necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided: to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them already.<sup>69</sup>

Edwards conveyed a perspective that moved beyond just the communication of biblical truth. He desired to speak to people’s hearts. Though his approach was distinctly

---

Jonathan Edwards, “God’s Grace Carried on in Other Places,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1739-1742*, vol. 22 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>66</sup>Malcolm McDow and Alvin L. Reid, *Firefall: How God Shaped History through Revivals* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 213. McDow and Reid offer an obvious disagreement with some of the other scholars as to when Edwards began using sermon outlines. Minkema and Ehrhard supply the most critical proof of the timetable of Edwards’s move from manuscript to outline. McDow and Reid provide an important look at the influence of Whitefield, and thus their conclusion proves helpful.

<sup>67</sup>Steve Rabey, *In Search of Authentic Faith: How Emerging Generations are Transforming the Church* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 91.

<sup>68</sup>J. I. Packer, “Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival,” in vol. 2 of *Puritan Papers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 26.

<sup>69</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Treatise on Religious Affections* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 30-31. This particular edition probably dates c. 1850.

Puritan,<sup>70</sup> Edwards offered a fresh means by which people could experience God through the preaching of the Bible.

**Conclusion.** As one examines Edwards's methods, this conclusion can be drawn. The use of means to win people to Christ and grow believers does not violate scripture, nor does it invoke an offense to the past. Edwards used means and innovation to evangelize and disciple people in the faith.

### **Engaging Culture through Contextual and Missional Thinking**

Another area of agreement and affirmation that Edwards would have with the emerging church originates out of his desire to engage his culture. The time in which Edwards lived was significantly different from today's world. This fact, though, does not diminish the principle. To reach this culture, one must be missional<sup>71</sup> and engaging.

**Bible studies with youth.** Upon his arrival at Northampton, Edwards immediately became concerned about the youth of the township. In explaining the youth culture of his day,

---

<sup>70</sup>Packer, "Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival," 26.

<sup>71</sup>In using the term missional, this paper follows the definition of Ed Stetzer, "A missional church is a church that is 'on mission' in its setting." Stetzer, *Planting New Churches*, 14. Its use does not embrace the concept of Darrell Guder's missional community. He explains, "Missional communities are called to represent the compassion, justice, and peace of the reign of God." Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 142.

Edwards wrote, “The greater part seemed to be insensible of the things of religion, and engaged in other cares and pursuits . . . it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion.”<sup>72</sup>

Edwards decided that the best way to make a difference was to begin an innovative practice of doing group Bible study with the youth. He records:

At the latter end of the year 1733, there appeared a very unusual flexibleness, and yielding to advice, in our young people. . . . The *young people* declared themselves *convinced* by what they had heard from the *pulpit*, and were willing of themselves to comply with the counsel that had been given. . . . In the fall of the year [1734] I proposed it to the *young people*, that they should agree among themselves to spend the *evenings after lectures in social religion*, and to that end divide themselves into several companies to meet in various parts of the town.<sup>73</sup>

The manner in which Edwards sought to change the lives of young people was not to embrace the culture at hand, but it was to engage the culture. Edwards did not shirk his responsibility of speaking the truth, nor was he afraid of offending those whose lives were not meeting the proper biblical standards. One should not reach the conclusion that the young people were forced to listen to Edwards, because, by this time, churches had moved away from the stringent membership requirements of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, by his own

---

<sup>72</sup>Edwards, “A Narrative of Surprising Conversion,” 9, emphasis original.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 10-11, emphasis original.

<sup>74</sup>Gura notes, “It did not come, for example, as a result of where one lives, as was the practice in the Church of England, where’s one abode in a parish guaranteed membership in the local church. Rather, the Puritans regarded a church as a group of like-minded individuals voluntarily ‘gathered’ from the corruption of the world to pursue a more pure form of worship.” Gura, *Jonathan Edwards*, 7. During the time of Stoddard and Edwards, church membership came through application. For Edwards, as he battle the issue of the Half-Way Covenant, he became more precise in his understanding that evidential conversion was a necessary requirement for membership. Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1949), 212-13, 220. See also Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984.), 53-90.

testimony, the young people spent time in ungodly activity, regardless of what they were admonished to do.

**Engaging the Culture of Death.** A primary cultural experience for people in Edwards's day was death. Death became an ever-present occurrence among the people of Northampton. Not only did the adults face the death of their children, but the prospect of death loomed especially with the women. For them, "learning to submit, to face death, and to deal with depression were constant demands."<sup>75</sup>

Addressing the threat and consequences of death was also a concern of Edwards. His own possible demise while a student at Yale led to the confirmation of his own conversion.<sup>76</sup> Edwards recognized the seriousness of this threat, even among the young people at Northampton. It allowed him the opportunity to engage the present cultural environment and to use it as a means of communicating the need for the gospel. Edwards records:

In April following *anno* 1734, there happened a very *sudden and awful death of a young man* in the bloom of his youth; who being violently seized with a *pleurisy*, and taken immediately very *delirious*, died in about *two days*; which (together with what was preached publicly on that occasion) *much affected* many young people. This was followed with another death of a young married woman, who had been considerably *exercised* in mind, about the salvation of her *soul*, before she was ill, and was in great *distress* in the beginning of her illness; but seemed to have *satisfying evidences* of God's *mercy* to her, before her death; so that she died very full of *comfort* . . . this seemed to *contribute* to render solemn the spirits of many young persons; and there began evidently to appear more of a *religious concern* on people's minds.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 245.

<sup>76</sup>Henry Bamford Parkes, *Jonathan Edwards: The Fiery Puritan* (New York: Minton, Balch, and Company, 1930), 58-60.

<sup>77</sup>Edwards, "A Narrative of Surprising Conversions," 11, emphasis original.

Critics might question this use of tragedy and surmise that it only produces a manipulated response. One must remember, though, that Edwards was no proponent of easy believism or conversion.<sup>78</sup> He looked for clear evidences that a true conversion had occurred. Yet he willingly engaged the culture of his day and searched for answers to the awful predicaments of both unexpected death and suicide. At the suicide death of his own uncle, Joseph Hawley II, Edwards saw the opportunity, not only to minister to those affected, but also to demonstrate the power, conviction, and the presence of God in the midst of tragedy. He called for a day of fasting and preached to his congregation a sermon in which he reminded them of the theological perspectives of the realities of humanity's inability, Satan's personhood, and God's restraining grace. He declared, "The wisest and greatest of men, they are but as a leaf that is driven of the wind . . . as a poor infant would be, if it should be cast out on the open field in its blood in the day it was born."<sup>79</sup> Marsden concludes, "The awful lesson was, as always, that people must not trust in the least of themselves."<sup>80</sup>

**Conclusion.** As one examines Edwards, the conclusion drawn is that he would applaud any attempt that people would make to encounter the culture in which they lived. He would admonish Christians to take advantage of the culture at hand and use it to reveal God's grace and sin's consequences. The gospel must be contextual. Edwards would not commend

---

<sup>78</sup>For a more complete understanding of Edwards's conversion theology, see John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards, Evangelist* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995).

<sup>79</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon on Romans 5:6," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, vol.19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 383-85.

<sup>80</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 168.

people who shield themselves from the world. Instead, he would call for Christians to be in and to know the world in which they resided. They must be, at all times, missional.

### **Areas of Caution**

While Edwards would find some areas of commendation for the emerging church, other evidence would point to the fact that Edwards would find several areas in which he would offer disagreement and caution. These cautions pertain to a wide-range of subject matter.

### **The Inerrancy and Primacy of Scripture**

Stephen Stein proposes that Edwards developed his thoughts about the Bible from the Protestant Reformation, extrapolating that he used the term “Word of God” as an interchangeable description of both the Bible and Scripture. Stein’s point was to highlight Edwards’s belief in the authority of the Bible over all things in life. He argues that Edwards, drawing from his *Miscellanies*, “called the Scripture ‘the only rule of our faith and practice.’”<sup>81</sup> He also interjects that Edwards “accepted the prevailing view that the biblical canon had been closed long ago and that there was no need to augment it.”<sup>82</sup>

Three of his major works provided a continual commentary on the Scriptures, containing thousands of exegetical entries. These comments ranged from just a few lines to

---

<sup>81</sup>Stephen J. Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 101.

<sup>82</sup>Stephen J. Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Notes on Scripture*, vol. 15 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 5.

entire expository treatises. They demonstrate Edwards's pursuit of biblical knowledge and his confidence in the Bible.<sup>83</sup>

**Inspiration.** Connected directly to Edwards's belief in the authority of the Bible stood his belief in the inspiration of Scripture. In entry number 358 in his *Miscellanies*, Edwards declared:

'Tis certainly necessary that in the Word of God we should have a history of the life of Christ, of his incarnation, of his death, resurrection and ascension, and of his actions in the world, and of the instructions he gave the world. If there be any history that is divine, without doubt we have some divine history of this, because we can't be Christians without it. . . . 'Tis reasonable to suppose that the Christian church should have delivered unto them that more full discovery of truth that the Holy Ghost gave the apostles when he descended, for those more full and clear revelations were given them for the Christian church, and not only for themselves, but we have not this at all, if we have it not in the epistles of the apostles.<sup>84</sup>

Edwards again wrote in the very next entry:

It was also a matter of great consequence that the church should have a book of divine songs, given by inspiration from God for the use of his church, wherein there should be a lively representation of the true spirit of devotion, of faith, of hope, of divine love, joy, resignation, humility, obedience, repentance, etc.; and that we should have from God a book of moral instructions relating to the affairs and state of mankind, and the concerns of human life, containing rules of true wisdom and prudence for our conduct in all circumstances . . .<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup>Stein, "The Quest for the Spiritual Sense," 105. The three works cited include *Notes on the Scriptures*, *Miscellaneous Observations on the Holy Scriptures*, and *Notes on the Apocalypse*.

<sup>84</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Thomas A. Shafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 430. Edwards's first volume of *The Miscellanies* spans from 1722-1731. The entries beginning with number 267 were written in Northampton. All previous entries, including those designated by letter, were written during his days at Yale and his early pastorates. See Thomas A. Shafer, "Note on the Text of the 'Miscellanies,'" in *The Miscellanies*, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Thomas A. Shafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 156-57.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 433.

In an earlier entry in the same volume, Edwards exclaimed, “So there is that wondrous universal harmony and consent and concurrence in the aim and drift . . . such stamps everywhere of the exalted and divine wisdom, majesty and holiness in matter, manner, contexture and aim; that the evidence is the same that the Scriptures are the word and work of a divine mind.”<sup>86</sup> For Edwards, the biblical writers found inspiration directly from God’s mind.

**Revelation.** Edwards’s basic perspective on the Bible proposed the necessity of revelation within Christianity. Human beings possess natural restrictions upon their knowledge of God. These limitations also define the insufficiency of all other sources that provide information about him. The only means by which people can attain certainty develops out of biblical revelation.<sup>87</sup> Edwards wrote, “‘Tis therefore unreasonable to suppose that philosophy might supply the defect of revelation; for without revelation there would be no such thing as any good philosophy: that is, except now and then in some rare instances, and those attended with abundance of darkness and imperfection.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, he surmised, “The whole of Christian divinity depends on divine revelation; for though there are many truths concerning God and our duty to him that are evident by the light of nature, yet no one truth is taught by light of nature in that manner in which it is necessary for us to know it.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, people cannot know God or properly interpret God without the divine revelation of Scripture.

---

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 410.

<sup>87</sup>Stein, “The Quest for the Biblical Sense,” 101-02.

<sup>88</sup>Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, 425.

<sup>89</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies 833-1152*, vol. 20 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 52-53.

**Accuracy.** The fact of the accuracy of the Bible provided an important aspect within Edwards's high view of Scripture. Ken Minkema notes of Edwards, “. . . in the 1740's he produced lengthy compositions on the prophetic traditions that demonstrated the necessity of revelation and the accuracy of the Bible. One ambitious project, ‘The Harmony of the Old and New Testaments,’ was to show, through comparison, the similarity of spirit, genius, and teachings between the two revelations.”<sup>90</sup>

As one examines “The Harmony of the Old and New Testaments,” several revealing perspectives concerning Edwards's belief about the Bible can be discerned. First, Edwards definitely discovered the New Testament in the Old. Edwards consistently cited Old Testament passages and demonstrated how these verses connected to the New Testament. The similarities showed the accuracy and the relationship between the two testaments. From leaf thirty-three, Edwards drew this conclusion, “I could even with my self accursed from X [Christ] for my Brethren - - - - This is my Commandment that ye love one another as I have loved ye we also ought to lay down our Lives for the Brethren.” To justify his point, Edwards referenced Psalm 32:30-32, Romans 9, and Judges 11:36.<sup>91</sup>

Second, Edwards saw a doctrinal harmony between the two testaments. On leaf 125, entry 161, he exegeted Psalm 102. Concerning verses 25-26, he wrote, “The doctrine of the old

---

<sup>90</sup>Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards: A Theological Life,” 11.

<sup>91</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The Harmony of the Genius Spirit Doctrines and Rules of the Old Testament and the New,” ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, unpublished manuscript. Ken Minkema sent this manuscript via email in its “raw” state. The total manuscript consists of 220 leaves (Minkema has not completed his transcription, completing only 194 leaves at present). Edwards began this work around 1748, but was not able to complete the project of converting his notes into prose treatise. See Robert E. Brown, “The Bible,” in *The Princeton Companion to the Bible*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 90.

Testament agreeable to the doctrine of the new with Respect to the End & dissolution of this visible T [world].”<sup>92</sup> Again, in his entry on Psalm 132, he determined concerning verses 15-16, “<Agreeable to> The Promises here recorded are the two offices appointed in the Xtian [Christian] Church the one That of deacon to feed the Poor & satisfy them with Bread the other that of Bishops the other that of Bishops [*sic*] to promote the salvation of mens [*sic*] souls.”<sup>93</sup>

Third, Edwards unmistakably discovered the doctrine of salvation in the Old Testament. At least forty-seven times in the first 142 leaves, Edwards used the phrase “Trusting in God the proper Condition of Gods [*sic*] salvation.” Its first occurrence appears in his discussion of 1 Chronicles. He cross-referenced the expression with 2 Samuel 22:2 and 2 Chronicles 14:9.<sup>94</sup> Edwards similarly utilized the designation “Faith in God the condition of his salvation” or a derivative thereof, causing one to draw the conclusion that he considered the words “faith” and “trust” to be identical. In fact, he provided this definition for faith, “In saving Faith Gods [*sic*] People Trust in God alone [-] seeing the vanity of all other things that men are wont to trust in. In saving Faith the saints have a sense & conviction of the sufficiency <mercy> & Faithfulness of their savior (v. 2, 6, 7, 12.) Ps. 71.1 - - 7. & 61.3.”<sup>95</sup>

Through some of his other writings, one discovers how Edwards demonstrated his belief in the accuracy of the Bible through his attestation of biblical authorship. In his *Notes on Scripture*, Edwards affirmed:

---

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 100.

That it was so is the voice of all antiquity, and it has been all along, even to this day the received opinion, both of Jews and Christians, that Moses, being commanded and inspired by God, wrote those books that are called the Pentateuch, excepting only some particular passages that were inserted afterwards by a divine direction for the better understanding the history.<sup>96</sup>

At the close of this entry, identified by Stein as the longest entry in this volume,<sup>97</sup> Edwards remarked, “Places in the New Testament which suppose Moses to be the penman of the Pentateuch: John 5:46-47, Mark 12:26 compared with Ex. 3:6, Acts 15:21, II Cor. 3:14-15, Heb. 12:21.”<sup>98</sup>

From a hermeneutical standpoint, Jonathan Edwards identified the accuracy of the Scripture through the perspective of infallibility. Robert Brown remarks, “Whereas philosophical critics of the Bible urged a skepticism about the reliability of historical knowledge in general and about sacred history in particular, Edwards sought to identify grounds for assurance regarding their epistemological certainty or reliability . . . it is clear that Edwards’s fundamental epistemological orientation was infallibilist in nature.”<sup>99</sup>

**Caution.** Where Edwards would caution the emerging church leaders would be in their understanding of and definition of infallibility and inerrancy. Edwards would see the Bible as static, in that the canon is closed and that the Bible is all-sufficient. Some within the emerging

---

<sup>96</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Notes on Scripture*, vol. 15 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 423.

<sup>97</sup>Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” 14.

<sup>98</sup>Edwards, *Notes on Scripture*, 469.

<sup>99</sup>Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 35-38.

church, like Mark Driscoll,<sup>100</sup> hold to a very orthodox position regarding Scripture. Driscoll says, “If Scripture does not declare to be from God, without error, or helpful, then it is foolish to attribute something to Scripture that it does not claim for itself.”<sup>101</sup> He then lists biblical passages that, in fact, make these particular claims.<sup>102</sup>

The responses in the book show, however, that not everyone holds to this strong of belief concerning the Bible. John Burke writes, “. . . the test of our theology (beliefs) must be relational, not propositional. This is why beliefs, true beliefs that are formed in the cauldron of questioning and wrestling with Scripture in community, are so important.”<sup>103</sup>

Doug Pagitt draws a similar conclusion. He says, “Placing Bible passages in and around an argument is not in and of itself a proper way of being informed by the Scriptures. . . . To really consider this a legitimate option would mean that he would be ‘correct’ on these matters, and that all who think more broadly on such issues of Scripture and atonement are in his care to correct. This is a ludicrous assumption.”<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup>Driscoll continues to distance himself from the group known as Emergent Village, identifying himself more as an evangelical and as being Reformed in theology. This statement is based upon Driscoll’s comments at Convergence, a conference at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 21-22 April 2007.

<sup>101</sup>Mark Driscoll, “The Emerging Church and Biblicist Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 22.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>103</sup>John Burke, “Response to Mark Driscoll,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 37.

<sup>104</sup>Doug Pagitt, “Response to Mark Driscoll,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 43.

Edwards, however, would agree with Driscoll. One danger of the emerging church arises from the fact that some within Emergent see the Bible as emerging. He would caution the words of and diametrically oppose the conclusion of Brian McLaren, who wrote, “People trained as I was in the context of systematic theology find it hard to see the Bible as an evolving production whose architecture reflects evolving and diverse styles, thought forms, language, genres, and assumptions of many cultures over many centuries,”<sup>105</sup> or when he says, “And we have languished and wandered when we have used the Bible as a weapon to threaten others, as a tool to intimidate others and prove them wrong, as a shortcut to being know-it-alls who believe the Bible gives us all the answers, as a defense of the status quo.”<sup>106</sup> Edwards would say that the Bible is all-sufficient and does provide the answers the world needs.

## **Theology**

One would find it difficult to argue against Edwards’s belief in the study, importance, and application of theology to daily life. Theology stood at the forefront of everything Edwards did. Samuel Hopkins notes, “His uncommon acquaintance with the Bible, appears in his sermons, in his treatises,—particularly in the treatises on the Affection, on the History of Redemption, on United and Extraordinary Prayer, on the Types of the Messiah, on the Qualifications for Communion, and on God’s Last End in the Creation,—in his Notes on the Scriptures, and in his Miscellaneous Observations and Remarks.”<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 189.

<sup>106</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 165.

<sup>107</sup>Samuel Hopkins, “The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, MA:

One need only to examine Edwards's sermons in order to discover his penchant for doctrine and theology. Stephen Holmes explains that the standard form for a Puritan sermon included:

. . . an exposition of the text [which] would lead to a statement of the 'doctrine' of the sermon, a proposition drawn from the text which the preacher sought to convince his hearers of. This would be followed by several points of discussion of the doctrine, explaining its meaning, defending it against possible criticisms, and relating it to other parts of Scripture. Finally would come several points of application, or 'improvement,' under which the doctrine would be used to urge particular actions on particular classes of people.<sup>108</sup>

Edwards followed this pattern with few exceptions. A quick look at some of Edwards's printed sermons proves this pattern to be true. In volume two of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Edward Hickman, the first one hundred twenty-eight pages contain twenty-nine sermons. All of these sermons state a specific text. They begin with an introduction which provides some type of explanation of the Scripture. Next, all of them are divided into two additional points, namely, doctrine and application.<sup>109</sup>

Edwards even went so far as to interpret society itself in light of theology. A part of his social/theological development arose out of his Puritan roots, where his understanding of a covenantal relationship with God nationally would eventually lead to the redemption of the rest of the world. Additionally, his confidence in New England's covenant "contained the seeds of

---

Hendrickson, 2003), 1:354.

<sup>108</sup>Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, 159-60.

<sup>109</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:2-129.

American messianism.”<sup>110</sup> His theology even colored his concept of the meaning of good citizenship. In his treatise *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards defined the God ordained responsibility of Christians in the public sector. True virtue reached out beyond itself in order to create community. In comparing private with public virtue, he wrote, “The former (i.e. an inclination to agree with ourselves) is a natural principle: but the latter (i.e. an agreement or union of the heart to the great system, and to God, the Head of it, who is all and all in it) is a divine principle.”<sup>111</sup> Edwards determined through theology that Christians have a social and moral responsibility in the world.

Unfortunately, many within the emergent strain downplay the role of theology and belief. With their heavy emphasis on experience and relationship, some try to distinguish between right belief and right behavior, choosing for the latter. Stanley Grenz taught that genuine theology must be “an ongoing conversation involving the interplay of Scripture, tradition, and culture.”<sup>112</sup> Grenz’s argument centered on the idea that theology must be interpreted with tradition, since tradition offered both positive and negative formations. Since one lives out theology in culture, culture, therefore, modifies theology. Mark Medley summarizes Grenz’s position saying, “. . . whereas the principle authority for theology is the Spirit speaking through Scripture to the church, the Spirit always speaks to the church in the

---

<sup>110</sup>Gerald. R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>111</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” in *Ethical Writings*, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 590.

<sup>112</sup>Stanley Grenz, “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 129.

particularity of the social, historical, and cultural context in which the listening community finds itself.” Grenz concludes that “while postfundamentalist evangelical theology has tended to take a propositionalist approach to the theological enterprise,” the emerging church model emphasizes a theology that is a “reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community.”<sup>113</sup>

Edwards would agree with Grenz in the understanding of the importance of not diminishing the need for theology and doctrine, but with “a clear understanding of, and commitment to, the doctrinal core that marks their confessional group.”<sup>114</sup> He would certainly disagree with and probably chastize the assumption of Dan Kimball who concludes that culture will eventually modify theology.<sup>115</sup> For Edwards, theology interprets culture. Culture should not change theology.

## **Preaching**

If Edwards had any passion in life, one discovers that it came through preaching. The proclamation of the Word stood at the forefront of everything Edwards did. It served as the primary means by which he taught theology, ministered to his congregation, and practiced evangelism. Seeing people saved<sup>116</sup> provided the passion and the motivation for him, and even

---

<sup>113</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 87.

<sup>114</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 341.

<sup>115</sup>Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 158.

<sup>116</sup>The term “saved” was not foreign to Edwards. He used the word in the titles of several sermons. See Jonathan Edwards, “There are Some Christians Who, Though They are Saved, Yet It is as It were by Fire [1742]” (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT).

when he preached terror and fear, his thoughts focused on conversion. In a sermon preached early in his ministry, Edwards asserted:

However great your aversion is to Jesus Christ, yet hell—one would think—should be enough [to] overcome it. . . . The consideration of hell commonly is the first thing that rouses sleeping sinners. By this means their sins are set in order before them and their conscience stares them in the face, and they begin to see their need of a priest and sacrifice to satisfy for them. . . . Consider how earnestly Jesus Christ invites you to come to him and trust in him.<sup>117</sup>

Edwards believed that preaching on eternal punishment served the purpose of awakening unregenerate persons to their lost condition. He proclaimed such truth out of a love for the lost, not a masochistic ire.

As already mentioned, Edwards followed the Plain Style of preaching, but added to it the spiritual sense of Scripture. His sermonic form was essentially Puritan. J. I. Packer asserts, “Like them, he set out the matter of his sermons according to the threefold ‘method’ of proposition, proof, and application—‘doctrine, reason, and use,’ as the Puritans called it.”<sup>118</sup>

For many emergents, their style of preaching focuses on a narrative expository message. They emphasize the power of story and draw upon Jesus’s use of narrative, story, and

---

<sup>117</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Christ’s Sacrifice,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 603. Edwards first preached the sermon in early 1723. Manuscript evidence, however, indicates that he preached it at later times, namely: the addition of a few numbered subheadings in a different ink and the crossing out of a ten line passage. See Wilson H. Kimnach, “Editor’s Introduction: Christ’s Sacrifice,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 593.

<sup>118</sup>J. I. Packer, “Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival,” in vol. 2 of *Puritan Papers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 26.

metaphor.<sup>119</sup> Edwards himself was a master at the use of metaphor and story. Many of his sermons drew vivid pictures of biblical concepts.<sup>120</sup> Where Edwards would differ comes from the style, delivery, and intent of Emergent preaching.

Doug Pagitt addresses these issues in his book *Preaching Re-Imagined*.<sup>121</sup> He correctly states, “The problem is that preaching, as we know it, suffers from a relationship problem. The issues isn’t simply how we present the information but whose information it is. The issue isn’t simply how we tell the story but the relationship between the teller and the hearers. . . . The crisis isn’t how we preach or what we preach or to whom we preach but the act of preaching itself, which has devolved into speaching.”<sup>122</sup> He then introduces his idea of what he calls “progressional dialogue.”<sup>123</sup> He explains, “Speaching sets the story of God in a prefabricated context where it all makes sense from the perspective of the person speaking. The context of others is therefore inconsequential. Speaching also creates a belief that even in the presence of dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other Christians, there are a select few who know God’s truth and who get to tell others about God.”<sup>124</sup>

The idea promulgated by Pagitt is that preaching communicates best through dialogue. Preaching is merely a conversation, not so much a proclamation. Other Emergent leaders offer a

---

<sup>119</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 425.

<sup>120</sup>See p. 18 of this paper.

<sup>121</sup>Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

paradigm shift of downplaying the role of fact and truth and emphasizing the importance of experience and dialogue. They have decentralized the proclamation of the Word from being the focal point of worship to being only a part of the worship experience.<sup>125</sup>

Edwards would diametrically disagree. He believed that preaching was the central part of worship. He utilized logic, truth, and reason in order to awaken the minds of his hearers to the gospel message. His motive, however, was not ego. He desired to see people have a real relationship with God and to experience His presence and forgiveness. Packer elaborates, “Like his seventeenth-century predecessors, he preached with a threefold aim: to make men understand, feel, and respond to gospel truth.”<sup>126</sup> Edwards expressed himself this way:

God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word, in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of religion, their own misery, the necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided: to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them already.<sup>127</sup>

Edwards conveyed a perspective that moved beyond just the communication of biblical truth. He desired to speak to people’s hearts. Though distinctly Puritan in his approach,<sup>128</sup> Edwards offered a fresh means by which people could experience God through the preaching of the Bible.

---

<sup>125</sup>Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 175-87.

<sup>126</sup>J. I. Packer, “Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival,” in vol. 2 of *Puritan Papers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 26.

<sup>127</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Treatise on Religious Affections* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 30-31. This particular edition probably dates c. 1850.

<sup>128</sup>Packer, “Jonathan Edwards and the Theology of Revival,” 26.

## Conversion and Evangelism

Edwards would hold a different view about conversion and evangelism than many in the emerging church. As with preaching, many Emergents see evangelism as a conversation. Dan Kimball writes, “Evangelism is more dialogue and listening than preaching and telling.”<sup>129</sup> One issue with Kimball stems from his apparent aversion for confrontation. At some point, a person must be confronted with the need for salvation. Emergent emphasizes the building of relationships and conversation, but they do not appear to have a clear concept of when conversion occurs. D. A. Carson, in a lecture at Cedarville University, elaborates about the conversion theology of Emergent, “. . . you don’t say that people are outside and then try to convert them, rather you try to get them to join you and participate and be included with you and they learn by osmosis and example and communal living, and demonstration, and integrity, authenticity what a Christ outlook appears like and as a result they become Christians almost subconsciously.”<sup>130</sup> This perspective also resonates in the concept of community. They believe that postmoderns experience belonging before believing. They will eventually assimilate into the community and convert if they stay connected.<sup>131</sup>

Frederica Mathewes-Green posits this position as she addresses her perspective on the incarnation, writing, “When Jesus became human, he represented, or embodied, all of us, everyone who ever has lived or ever will. That is what he carried into hades and out again; that

---

<sup>129</sup>Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 206.

<sup>130</sup>D. A. Carson, “Emerging or Submerging?: Doing Church in a Postmodern World,” Cedarville University (Feb 10-12, 2004), [CD sound recording].

<sup>131</sup>George H. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 109.

is what he raised from the dead. This means that every human being who ever has lived or ever will is going to live forever. . . . Everyone will spend eternity in the presence of God.”<sup>132</sup>

Mathewes-Green espouses a clear universalism. Though many emergents may not embrace her theology, her conclusion demonstrates the theological problems faced by the emerging church.

Edwards, however, held to a somewhat different idea of conversion and evangelism. Through the preaching of the gospel in the church setting he would affirm the idea of community as one was confronted with humanity’s moral inability and God’s sovereignty. Edwards did not follow a purely confrontational manner in his evangelism. He believed much more strongly in God’s activity in salvation than he did in humanity’s efforts. Yet Edwards appealed to the mind, the will, and the heart. Edwards declared, “Since that the will universally and most strictly follows the proportion of the soul’s sense of good, therefore the change of the disposition of the soul, in any case, is the very same as the causing that for the future the mind shall have more lively ideas of such a sort of good. *Therefore conversion is nothing but God’s causing such an alteration with respect to the mind’s ideas of spiritual good.*”<sup>133</sup> Also, by means of his preaching, he tried, “. . . in addition to offering the Word, (1) to provide the optimal conditions and circumstances within which conversion might take place, (2) to offer the logical connections between guilt and repentance so that those who have been or are being converted might better understand what is happening to them, and (3) to prevent the misinterpretation of pseudo-

---

<sup>132</sup>Frederica Mathewes-Green, “Under the Heaventree,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 169.

<sup>133</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Thomas A. Shafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 380-81, emphasis added.

religious experience, especially by those who believe they have experienced grace by have not.”<sup>134</sup>

Edwards would caution Emergent with reference to conversion as an assimilation. He taught that conversion was a distinctive act, explaining that conversion:

. . . is a work that is done at once, and not gradually. If saving grace differed only in degree from what went before, then the making a man a good man would be gradual work; it would be the increasing the grace that he has, till it comes to such a degree as to be saving. . . . But that the conversion of the heart is not a work that is ths gradually wrought, but that it is wrought at once, appears by Christ’s converting the soul being represented by his calling of it. . . . And that the work of conversion is wrought at once is further evident by its being compared to a work of creation.”<sup>135</sup>

Edwards also believed that a person would follow specific steps toward conversion.

While he did not demonstrate a legalism with this perspective, he still emphasized that conversion involved an act of the will. In his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, Edwards included a section on conversion, where he provided phrases describing his understanding of the term. In chapter two, he offered these steps:

Persons are first awakened with a sense of their miserable condition by nature, the danger they are in of perishing eternally. . . . When they begin to seek salvation, they are commonly profoundly ignorant of themselves; they are not sensible how blind they are, and how little they can do towards bringing themselves to see spiritual things aright, and towards putting forth gracious exercises in their own souls. . . . Some of those that have not had so deep a conviction of these things before their conversion, have, it may be, much more of it afterwards. God has appeared far from limiting himself to any certain method in his proceedings with sinners under legal convictions. . . . Some express themselves, that they see the glory of God would shine bright in their own condemnation. . . . And when it is thus, they commonly have some evident sense of free and all-sufficient grace.

That calm of spirit that some persons have found after their legal distresses, continues some time before any special and delightful manifestation is made to the soul, of the grace

---

<sup>134</sup>Stephen R. Yarbrough and John C. Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>135</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies 501-832*, vol. 18 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 230-31.

of God, as revealed in the gospel . . . the view is joyful to them, as it is in its own nature glorious, and gives them quite new and more delightful ideas of God and Christ, and greatly encourages them to seek conversion.

Conversion is *a great and glorious work of God's power, at once changing the heart, and infusing life into the dead soul; though that grace that is then implanted does more gradually display itself in some than in others.*<sup>136</sup>

From this narrative, one can surmise that Edwards developed his theology through a biblical foundation proven through experiential means. His theology is thus: God awakens individuals by bringing about a conviction of sin; this conviction causes them to seek God, though they recognize their own unworthiness to have salvation; God bestows his grace upon them, which then leads to conversion. Conversion, in the mind and belief system of Edwards, finds its sole source in God and not in humanity.

Finally, Edwards never referenced conversion and evangelism in terms of dialogue and conversation. One might not define his methods as confrontational, but he did not shy away from specifically inviting people to salvation. In a six part sermon series based upon Ephesians 3:10 entitled "The Wisdom of God, Displayed in the Way of Salvation," Edwards proclaimed:

I conclude with an use of exhortation to come to Christ, and accept of salvation in this way. You are invited to come to Christ, heartily to close with him, and trust in him for salvation, and if you do so, you shall gain the benefit of this glorious contrivance. . . . Salvation is ready brought to your door; and the Saviour stands, knocks, and calls that you would open to him, that he might bring it in to you. There remains nothing but your consent."<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Edwards on Revivals: Containing a Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, Massachusetts, A. D. 1735* (New York: Dunning & Spalding, 1832), 49-68, emphasis added.

<sup>137</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "The Wisdom of God, Displayed in the Way of Salvation," in vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 156.

In another message from 1735, at the height of the Awakening and entitled “When the Wicked Shall Have Filled up Themselves in Their Sin, Wrath Will Come upon Them to the Uttermost,” Marsden notes that Edwards:

. . . ended his sermon with an evangelistic appeal: “Now is the time for you to bestir yourself as you would escape wrath and would not have it come upon you to the uttermost. Now Christ is calling. . . . He hath sent me to call you. I would now call you in his name. Come to him. Fly to this refuge that you may be safe in him, welcome as anyone whatsoever. Therefore make no objection from your unworthiness nor any other way. But haste and come away.”<sup>138</sup>

These statements explicitly demonstrate Edwards’s call to conversion. They do not suggest that Edwards offered a call for people to move to the front of the church and to make an immediate decision for place their faith in Christ. Instead, evidence shows that Edwards spent a significant part of his schedule counseling with inquirers concerning their salvation.<sup>139</sup> The

---

<sup>138</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 166-67.

<sup>139</sup> Marsden notes, “Somehow his combination of transparent spirituality and unrelenting crystal-clear logic was winning the hearts of the community. People identified with this demanding young preacher who set before them an exalted spiritual condition. Every day parishioners filled his home, waiting to see him for counseling. Callow youth and callous farmers were coming under the wonderful spell.” *Ibid.*, 158.

David Bennett adds, “He [Edwards] certainly . . . made himself available for counsel to those in spiritual distress, and sometimes the number of these was considerable. His *Narrative of Conversions* makes it clear that he spent a great deal of time questioning those who sought his help, that he might verify and understand the work of God in the life of these individuals, as well as encourage their search. His detailed accounts of the spiritual quests of various individuals indicate the enormous amount of time he was prepared to spend with each person when he considered it necessary.” David Bennett, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 20. See also Jonathan Edwards, *Edwards on Revivals: Containing a Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, Massachusetts, A. D. 1735* (New York: Dunning & Spalding, 1832), 48-82, and Jonathan Edwards, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England, and the Way in Which It Ought to be Acknowledged and Promoted; Humbly Offered to the Public, in a Treatise on that Subject,” in vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 365-430.

statements also attest, while infrequent, that Edwards had no fear in confronting people about their need to accept Christ and to make their decision with urgency.

### **Morality and Character**

The principle of character provides an important concept in Edwardsean doctrine as it related to believers. As already mentioned,<sup>140</sup> Edwards faced several difficult moral issues during his pastorate in Northampton. Therefore, Edwards set moral character and separation from the world as distinguishing marks for the true believer. He believed the church to be the bride of Christ, which resulted in a clear change of lifestyle and commitment. In a sermon on having a relationship with Christ, he declared, “. . . when we cast off all others for him then may we expect that he will grant us communion with himself when Christ’s spouse is most undefiled least polluted with the defilements of the world and least polluted by other lovers then will Christ be most ready to have communion with her. Thus we see in the text when Christ calls his spouse to communion with him he gives her the character of undefiled.”<sup>141</sup>

He also expostulated the idea of moral law as being an important part of the gospel. One must understand that, while Edwards rejected salvation by works, he recognized that people must see their own moral inability in order to understand their need for Christ. Thus, he taught the necessity of an understanding of moral law and an adherence to moral law by true believers. He wrote, “The precepts of the gospel are moral rules and are virtually implied in the moral law,

---

<sup>140</sup>See pp. 4-6.

<sup>141</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Communion with Christ through Self-denial,” [on-line], accessed 29 September 2007, available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive/documents>; internet.

that is, there is the same sort of moral reason to enforce these duties as those that were expressed in the moral law.”<sup>142</sup>

The application of these entries and many others determines that a true believer lives under an obligation to God to behave in ways that exalt him. Therefore, Edwards would take issue with those within Emergent who believe that a relativity exists within morality or that morality must be interpreted culturally. Whether one condones the cussing preacher as identified in *Blue Like Jazz*,<sup>143</sup> or the concept of beer and Bible study,<sup>144</sup> Edwards would see these things as moral dilemmas. Some may try to justify the position by pointing out the fact that even the Puritans enjoyed their ale. Martin Marty records, in reference to the early Massachusetts Bay Colony, that “John Davenport used the Bible even to set prices and to measure the kegs of ale.”<sup>145</sup>

Yet Edwards gave no indication of his agreement to the likes of ale drinking or culturally adapting to the practices of others in order to reach them. Edwards would not be pleased with the idea of Heather Kirk-Davidoll, who says that she finally learned how to be an evangelist through relational evangelism one night in a bar. She writes, “But as we stood in the bar, our beers growing warm in our hands, we felt increasingly awkward. After a lot of

---

<sup>142</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “343. Moral Law. Gospel,” *Miscellanies*, [on-line], accessed 29 September 2007, available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive/documents>; internet.

<sup>143</sup>See Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003). It is my understanding, based on a conversation with Ed Stetzer, that the one identified as the “cussing preacher” has since repented of the action and regrets the identification a such.

<sup>144</sup>Holy Joes, “Metamorphic,” [on-line], accessed 29 September 2007, available from <http://www.holyjoes.com>; internet.

<sup>145</sup>Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, 65.

hesitation, I finally turned to a woman standing near me and said, ‘Can I leave my coat on the floor next to you? I’m sick of holding it.’ And to my great relief, a conversation began.”<sup>146</sup>

Edwards spoke often against drunkenness and even the use of liquor itself. He preached, “The food that men eat and the liquor they drink to sustain life and satisfy their carnal appetites often prove the means of their death and what danger are you in of it.”<sup>147</sup> Edwards also saw the devastating results of the tavern and called for his parishioners to understand the line between the secular and the sacred. Marsden notes, “Tavern culture offered an especially important alternative to the culture of piety. Taverns played prominent social and political roles in eighteenth-century New England towns. Northampton already had three.”<sup>148</sup> Edwards became concerned as he saw young people given to the practices of “*licentiousness . . . addicted to night walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices.*”<sup>149</sup> He, no doubt, desired to see the sinful converted, but he would not compromise morally. Edwards would engage culture, but he would not be influenced by it. He would take a stand against embracing culture, even for the sake of evangelism.

---

<sup>146</sup>Heather Kirk-Davidoff, “Meeting Jesus at the Bar: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Evangelism,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 34.

<sup>147</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The Creation Groans Under the Sins of the Wicked,” [on-line], accessed 29 September 2007, available from <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive/documents>; internet

<sup>148</sup>Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 131.

<sup>149</sup>Edwards, “A Narrative of Surprising Conversion,” 9, emphasis original.

## **Conclusion**

Jonathan Edwards was an innovative and creative thinker who sought the conversion of those with whom he worked and lived. He was, by no means, a recluse, who kept to himself and offered no concern for others. Preaching became his passion, as did conversion. Yet, Edwards offers the emerging church with some extremely important measures to consider. First, do not compromise theology for culture. Second, make preaching primary. Third, doctrine is important. And, fourth, God admires the virtues of morality and piety.

The emerging church offers a future for reaching the young generation. If they listen to Edwards, a biblical conversion and growth can take place.