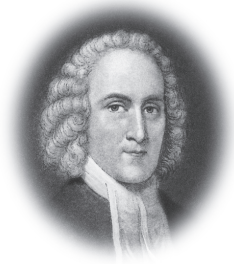


A Model of Faith and Thought



Jonathan Edwards
AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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INTRODUCTION

The Word in Edwards' World

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

HEBREWS 4:12¹

The more I teach Jonathan Edwards to my seminary students, the more I realize it is impossible to duplicate his ministry. Not that I have tried. I have never been so foolish as to think that I could make Edwards clones of the people in my classes, sending them out in periwigs to preach demanding, lengthy sermons, loaded with biblical theology and detailed application, to congregations raised on Power-Point and praise songs. I must admit, however, that I am so compelled by Edwards' devotion to the reality of the divine, the divinity of the Bible, and the Bible's importance for life, that I have found myself attempting to make it contagious. So many of my students, moreover, have caught the Edwards bug that they feel guilty, all too often, for failing to minister as he did.

Our world is vastly different from Edwards' eighteenth-century New England. Many Americans, at least, still go to church and read

¹All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Bible (1611), the translation used most often by Edwards himself.

the Bible. The Barna Group reports that 59 percent of the Protestants they asked in 2004 had read the Bible in the past week, while 88 percent of evangelicals surveyed in 2005 had read the Bible during the past several days. The Gallup Poll confirms that Americans take their Bibles seriously. In November 2004, 34 percent of the people whom they asked about its authority said that “the Bible is the actual word of God.” Another 48 percent called it “the inspired word of God,” while merely 15 percent preferred to characterize the Bible as “an ancient book of fables and legends.”²

Still, despite our apparent esteem for the Bible’s status and authority, few believers living today know as much about its contents as they do about Hollywood movies, popular music or athletics. Even within the United States, whence these survey data derive, most church members lack rudimentary biblical literacy. As anyone who teaches in our churches can attest, few today know the ten commandments (I mean all ten, in proper order), the twelve apostles, the letters of Paul or even the titles of the books included within the biblical canon. A basic grasp of Bible doctrine is also hard to find today. How many Christians do you know who can articulate what Scripture teaches about our Lord’s two natures, or the ministry of the Spirit, or the nature of the church? Even first-year seminarians have trouble with these things. Indeed, our lives are so full of busyness, our world so full of distractions, that sustained attention to God and his Word requires a rare sort of countercultural tenacity.³

Edwards’ world was far from perfect, as will be seen in the chapters that follow. Our own is much more equitable, resourceful, ecumenical. But Edwards dwelled in a preindustrial, “Protestant” civili-

²See the Barna Group’s topical link on “The Bible,” viewed March 30, 2006, at <http://www.barna.org>; and Albert L. Winseman, “Teens’ Stance on the Word of God: Protestant, Catholic Teens Disagree About Bible’s Origins,” posted March 22, 2005, <http://poll.gallup.com>. Significantly, Winseman notes that in another survey taken at the beginning of 2005, American teens reported even higher views of the Bible’s authority.

³For more on these realities, see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

zation, one that, on the surface at least, proved more conducive to the ministry of words—and of the Word.

Edwards lived his entire life in small-town, Puritan New England, which had been settled a century before mainly by Christians who were dissatisfied with the progress of the Reformation in England. These so-called Puritan⁴ predecessors sought to purify their national church by means of biblical teaching, bold liturgical reforms, as well as an emphasis on genuine conversion. Suffering persecution at home, many fled to the “new world,” where they established “Bible commonwealths” to carry out their plan. They hoped to set an attractive example for their loved ones back in Britain that would lead to the purification of the Church of England everywhere. They often spoke of themselves in terms of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), as “a city set on a hill,” a shining “light” for all to see. And while they failed, ultimately, to win control of the Church of England, their New England colonists developed a host of new congregations and a “New England Way” of life that served to embody, however imperfectly, their religious aspirations.

Let me invite you to travel with me into the thick of Edwards’ world, using your mind’s eye (and nose and ear) to imagine its major features and their bearing on the ministry of the Word. First of all, some demographics: In the year of Edwards’ birth (1703), New England was populated by fewer than 100,000 English subjects. By

⁴Roman Catholic critics first labeled these ardent Protestants “Puritans” amid the struggles for control of the English Church in the 1570s. During the 1580s and 1590s, many others adopted the term. Some of the Puritans themselves claimed it as a badge of honor beginning in roughly 1605. On the vagaries of the term and its varied uses in church history, see the pithy summary in David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. xvii–xix. Cf. Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 60–61, who suggests that the term may have been coined during the mid-1560s as the Church of England’s ministers debated the wearing of vestments (special liturgical clothes). I employ the term here not to suggest that all Puritans were the same, or easy to spot, but as a convenient way of referring to Edwards’ nearest spiritual forebears: those who worked to purify the Church of England from within by calling its members to personal faith based on a detailed knowledge of Scripture, to genuine conversion by the power of the Spirit, and to rid their Church’s liturgy of most of its Catholic remnants—thereby paving the way for modern evangelicalism.

the time of his death (1758) this number had surged, but the region still boasted only 450,000. At the height of Edwards' ministry, or the time of the Great Awakening (c. 1740), America's three largest cities—Boston, New York and Philadelphia—each contained about 10,000-15,000 inhabitants; England's North American colonies held over 900,000 people; Edwards' Northampton had about 1,400 residents. To put these numbers in perspective, it is useful to remember that there are more people today living in Naperville, Illinois, than there were in all New England at the time of Edwards' birth. The combined populations of Boston, New York and Philadelphia during the height of the Great Awakening could fit with ease inside our largest sporting arenas. And the total population of British America at the time was less than that of San Jose, California, today.

Perhaps the first thing you would notice as you entered one of the small towns that structured Edwards' world is the quietness of the daily lives of its residents. To be sure, you would hear noises—people talking and working with tools, the rhythmic clapping of horses' hooves, the lowing of cows and bleating of sheep. But you would not hear any engines, whether of cars or heavy machinery. You might well hear a town crier making announcements to the community with the help of a hand bell, a conch shell or even a drum. But you would not hear any planes, trains, automobiles or trucks. Nor would you hear the steady humming, beeping, honking and general wailing of industrial equipment. In fact, the loudest sound to be heard in many early New England towns was the ringing, by the sexton, of the church bell.⁵

As you traversed the town green, you would notice the smell of dung. (In early New England these spaces were often used for grazing.) But once you became inured to it, and learned to watch your step, your gaze would likely be fixed on the most important building on the green, the local church, or "meeting house," as the Puri-

⁵For more on the sound of Edwards' world, see Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

tans usually called it. You would not find it impressive. England's neogothic churches were aesthetically far more pleasing. From cavernous, cross-shaped naves, they attracted attention heavenward with their massive, vaulted ceilings, then to the altar, richly adorned and set in the center of the chancel. Worshipers walked forward reverently at the height of the liturgy to kneel at the rail (which divided nave and chancel very clearly), meet the priest, and then receive the body of Christ.

Walking into a meeting house in Puritan New England, by comparison, was like walking into a barn. In Edwards' day, many churches sought to improve their meeting houses, adding pew cushions, arched windows, bell towers and spires. But the whitewashed, neoclassical, picture-perfect churches featured in regional tourist guides are the results of nineteenth-century nostalgia.⁶ In colonial New England, churches were plain and sided with clapboard that was often left unpainted. As members entered them for worship, their gaze was not drawn toward the heavens or toward the Lord's table. Ceilings were low. Most of the time members went without the Eucharist, and when they did commune, they usually sat at portable tables.

The center of attention in the Puritan meeting house was the pulpit, or "the desk," as New Englanders commonly dubbed it for its importance as the locus of biblical scholarship in their midst. As discussed in chapter two, from start to finish Puritan worship services centered on the Scriptures. Most of the liturgy was abandoned, as were visual and musical arts. Puritans called their churches meeting houses in order to mark this change.⁷ They ruled out crosses, stained glass windows, indeed all manner of "graven images"—everything they thought would distract attention from the Word. They sang the Psalms a cappella, banning the use of musical instruments and

⁶On this theme, see Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁷Their opponents called them meeting houses because they would not stoop to call the Puritan buildings churches.

resisting the use of hymnody in worship.⁸ (As we will see later, Edwards and others would come to favor the use of hymns, causing a stir among traditionalists in the region.) Their clergy shed their vestments (ornate liturgical clothes), preaching instead in academic gowns that symbolized their calling to learned, biblical ministry (rather than sacramental priesthood). In short, they organized their towns, built their churches and planned their services to fix people's attention on the Word.⁹

Though the Puritans in New England eschewed the Catholic church calendar, they also kept time in a manner conducive to biblical thought. In fact, they left behind the hundreds of holy days of the church year in order to organize their schedules much more simply around the Lord's Day. Sunday, for the Puritans, was observed as a Christian sabbath, a day of worship, rest and meditation on Scripture. As the day of the resurrection, it outshone the numerous red-letter days that cluttered the Anglican calendar. Indeed, its sacredness was eternal, tied to God's decision to rest upon the seventh day of creation and to the sabbatarian practices of ancient Israel. The Christian sabbath, in fact, was to culminate, according to most Puritans, in the saints' everlasting rest in the New Jerusalem.¹⁰

⁸The Puritans did at times perform songs from other parts of Scripture. On this underappreciated fact, see especially Rowland Ward's discussion in Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Public Worship*, The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2007), p. 136.

⁹The most accessible introduction to Puritan worship is Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629–1730* (New York: P. Lang, 1990), which is built upon Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Westminster [London]: Dacre Press, 1948). On early Reformed worship generally, see James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968); and Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). The most accessible introductions to the Puritans written for Christians are Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986); and J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990).

¹⁰For more on Puritan sabbatarianism, see Winton U. Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath: A Study of Doctrine and Discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and John H. Primus, *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989). On British Protestants and the church calendar generally in this period, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National*

Until 1752, New England also shared in the use of the ancient Julian calendar, which had been introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. and later Christianized in the early Middle Ages. Its new year began on March 25, Annunciation Day, the day when the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary in Nazareth and Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb.¹¹ In Christian tradition, this event was dated nine months prior to Christmas. Many believed (for symbolic reasons) that it should also be known as the first day of creation (so that the first day of each year would be associated both with God's creation and redemption of the world). Beginning in roughly 525, a Russian monk named Dionysius Exiguus ("the small") began to modify the church's use of the Julian calendar by distinguishing the years that had transpired since Jesus' birth, or the years of the "Christian era," with the prefix *anno Domini* (A.D., "the year of the Lord")—never mind that he miscalculated the year of the Savior's birth. Not until 1752 did England correct the astronomical errors of Julius Caesar's men, adopt our current, Gregorian calendar and push the first day of the new year back to January 1. Even then, New England retained the use of A.D., B.C. ("before Christ") and their sabbath day traditions, marking time—now much more accurately—with biblical concerns.¹²

Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹¹Despite the fact that Edwards lived for most of his life with the ancient calendar, marking time in the "old style," I have rendered the dates in this book in the Gregorian "new style" (for the convenience of the reader), as if the new year had always begun on January 1.

¹²Significantly, our current calendar is named for Pope Gregory XIII, who introduced its reforms in 1582. (Gregory's astronomers determined that the solar year is 11 minutes and 14 seconds shorter than Julius Caesar's men had calculated in 46 B.C., and thus that ten days must be added to their previous calendar if it was to track the solar/seasonal cycles accurately.) Anti-Catholic sentiment slowed the adoption of the new calendar in England. As explained by Jennifer Powell McNutt, "Protestant rejection of the Gregorian calendar is best understood as a reaction to the reform or counter-reform agenda of the Council of Trent and to a perceived papal plot for religious and political domination. The belief that the pope was seeking to dictate even time itself was spurred on when the decree for calendar reform was pronounced through a papal bull, a medium that asserted the authority of the pope and rendered the reform of the calendar an issue of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical rule." Jennifer Powell McNutt, "Hesitant Steps: Acceptance of the Gregorian Calendar in Eighteenth-Century Geneva," *Church History* 75 (Sep-

The Puritans also organized their laws according to Scripture, building their civic life on the teachings of the Bible. The laws of the Bible commonwealths were liberalized somewhat by the time of Edwards' ministry. Still, in most of early New England, no one could vote or hold office who was not a church member, and no one could join the church without a public testimony (that is, regarding conversion). Legislators and magistrates were viewed as God's servants, making and executing laws on the basis of the Bible. Sins against the ten commandments proved to be punishable offenses, as did related acts like fornication and cross-dressing. Church attendance was mandatory (though exceptions were often made for nursing mothers, men at war, the aged, ailing and infirm). So was the payment of local taxes in support of the churches' ministries. In early Massachusetts children had to be taught to read (most were taught to read the Bible). Towns with more than fifty households had to hire a reading teacher. Towns with more than a hundred families had to found a grammar school—that is, a school where boys learned Latin in order to ready themselves for college.¹³ Parents could be fined for failing to teach their children English. Fathers could be punished for failing to catechize their families.

In sum, Puritan New England may have been the most biblically oriented and literate society in the world before the time of Edwards' ministry. Its inhabitants owned no televisions, went without the Internet, and had no access to cell phones or video games. Their skies were dark at night, pitch-dark on cloudy nights. They had no light

tember 2006): 547-48. Cf. Robert Poole, *Time's Alteration: Calendar Reform in Early Modern England* (London: UCL Press, 1998); and G. V. Coyne, M. S. Hoskin and O. Pedersen, *Gregorian Reform of the Calendar: Proceedings of the Vatican Conference to Commemorate its 400th Anniversary, 1582-1982* (Vatican City: Specola Vaticana, 1983).

¹³The General Court of Massachusetts included these rules as part of its famous Ould Deluder Satan law, passed in 1647. Most of New England's other colonies followed Massachusetts' lead. Similar laws were passed in Connecticut (1650), Plymouth Colony (1658) and New Haven (1657). On the teaching of basic literacy in colonial America, see especially E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

bulbs, gas lights or even the means to power them.¹⁴ Most would spend their evenings reading or socializing by candlelight, or huddling round the fire, ruminating about the things that mattered most. Moreover, even during the day, while working hard to make ends meet, Puritans thought about the Bible and the challenges of faith. In the words of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of one of New England's best known nineteenth-century ministers, "it is impossible to write a story of New England life and manners for superficial thought or shallow feeling. They who would fully understand the springs which moved the characters [there] must go down with us to the very depths."¹⁵

Other testimonies survive regarding the spiritual characteristics of New England's early Protestants, but Stowe's historical novels—such as *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), *Oldtown Folks* (1869) and *Pogonuc People* (1878)—offer the most vivid depictions. The region's sermons, Stowe attested in the first and best of these novels, were

discussed by every farmer, in intervals of plough and hoe, by every woman and girl, at loom, spinning-wheel, or wash-tub. New England was one vast sea, surging from depths to heights with thought and discussion on the most insoluble of mysteries. And it is to be added, that no man or woman accepted any theory or speculation simply as theory or speculation; all was profoundly real and vital,—a foundation on which actual life was based with intensest earnestness.¹⁶

Stowe drove this point home in a piece she wrote for *Atlantic Monthly*: "nowhere in the world, unless perhaps in Scotland, have merely speculative questions excited the strong and engrossing interest among the common people that they have in New England. Every man, woman, and child was more or less a theologian."¹⁷

¹⁴A fascinating discussion of nighttime during the early modern period may be found in A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

¹⁵Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, in *Harriet Beecher Stowe: Three Novels* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p. 727.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 728.

¹⁷Harriet Beecher Stowe, "New England Ministers," *Atlantic Monthly* 1 (February 1858): 486-87.

Clearly then, Edwards' world was strikingly different from ours. Its pastors worked as theologians. Its theologians worked as pastors. People expected ordained clergy to spend the bulk of their time in study, preparing to minister the Word to them in depth and rich detail. They wanted their pastors to be learned more than flashy, therapeutic, businesslike or even approachable. They paid attention to words, biblical words most of all. Many knew their Bibles well, believing their lives depended upon it.

No wonder it is impossible to duplicate Edwards' ministry. No wonder many are tempted to despair in failing to do so. His world had much to commend it, as did its Christian ministries. But let's not kid ourselves. It was not much better than ours. It had both strengths and glaring weaknesses, much as our own world does. It seethed with violence, fear and grief. Its leaders were often publicly frustrated, like us, by spiritual lethargy. They, too, assumed that the grass was greener somewhere else in time. They, too, looked for resources that would give them needed perspective on the challenges of their day.

As Edwards fretted to one of his Scottish friends, the Rev. John Erskine, in a letter he wrote on July 7, 1752, "It now appears to be a remarkable time in the Christian world; perhaps such an one as never has been before. Things are going downhill so fast; truth and religion, both of heart and practice, are departing by such swift steps that I think it must needs be, that a crisis is not very far off."¹⁸ Where have we heard that before? In literally thousands of times and places through the history of the church, on the lips of countless Christians longing for Christ's kingdom to come. Edwards certainly never thought that his was a golden age of faith. He worried that Britain's state-church system fostered spiritual apathy, a merely nominal

¹⁸Jonathan Edwards to the Rev. John Erskine, July 7, 1752, in *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 491. The Yale edition of Edwards' *Works* is cited frequently below. For the sake of efficiency, I refer to it hereafter as *WJE*, and do not repeat the publisher's name or place of publication (though I do provide all volume numbers and years of publication).

Christianity, and rampant hypocrisy. He dreaded the rise of “infidelity” throughout Enlightenment Europe.¹⁹ Indeed, he could spread gloom and doom just as dreadfully as the most excitable, chicken-little Christian leaders today.

The task that faces those who would look to Edwards for help today is not to search for a time machine that we can use to live in his world, but to live in our own world thoughtfully, appreciatively and lovingly, and to ask ourselves how we can apply his insights in our time. What can we do *in our own world* to draw attention to the Word, enhance the ministries of the church and deepen faith in the things of God? What can be done to encourage Christians to pay attention to the divine, thinking biblically, theologically, about their daily lives? We will return to these questions later, after the summary that follows of Edwards’ life and ministry. This book will end with seven theses I have crafted for discussion by those who want to apply Edwardsian examples to their lives. But even as we survey his biography below, I hope that you will be thinking about what God would have us learn from it today.²⁰

As Edwards wrote in his bestselling book, *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749), about a student and friend well-known for his short-lived work in Indian missions,

There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other is by instance and example: Both are abundantly used in the holy Scriptures. . . . God also in his Providence has been wont to make use of both these methods to hold forth light to mankind, and inducement to their duty, in all ages: He has

¹⁹See my “Editor’s Introduction” to Jonathan Edwards, *The “Miscellanies”* (Entry Nos. 1153–1360), ed. Douglas A. Sweeney, *WJE*, vol. 23 (2004), pp. 23–29.

²⁰A helpful sourcebook was published recently for those in pastoral ministry trying faithfully to make good on the church’s historic emphases on biblical knowledge, doctrine and piety. See Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes, eds., *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church*, *Using the Bible in Pastoral Practice* (2005; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). My thanks to Professor Greg Scharf of Trinity’s Pastoral Theology department for recommending this book to me.

from time to time raised up eminent teachers, to exhibit and bear testimony to the truth in their doctrine, and oppose the errors, darkness and wickedness of the world; and also has from age to age, raised up some eminent persons that have set bright examples of that religion that is taught and prescribed in the Word of God; whole examples have in divine providence been set forth to public view. These have a great tendency to engage the attention of men to the doctrines and rules that are taught, and greatly to confirm and enforce them.²¹

Won't you pray with me that God will use this book on Jonathan Edwards, as he has used the life of Brainerd, to "engage the attention" of Christians, advancing the ministry of the Word around the world?

²¹Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, WJE, vol. 7 (1985), pp. 89-90.