

Introduction

The term “Calvinist” is, in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term “Arminian”; yet I should not take it all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction’s sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin . . . and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught.

—Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*¹

Every believer is ingrafted into Christ, and Christ is ingrafted into every believer. . . Christ is born in the soul of the believer . . . and every believer is a mother of Christ.

—Jonathan Edwards, *Images of Divine Things*²

A Man Out of Time

In Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, the legendary King Arthur and Hank Morgan, the time-traveling Yankee who transforms the Medieval simpletons with modern technology, find themselves on the business end of a gallows. Their rescue comes in a moment of stark contrast, the clash of two disparate worlds, and in a manner worthy of Monty Python, Morgan escapes, finds a telephone, and rings Lancelot for help. At the last possible moment, with the noose tightening around Arthur’s neck, an “endless procession” of five-hundred “mailed and belted knights” ride in fearlessly on bicycles, with Lancelot leading the charge and shouting: “On your knees, every rascal of you, and salute the king! Who fails shall sup in hell to-night!”³

1. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 131. Hereafter, all references to volumes in this series will follow the abbreviated citation, *WJE*, with volume number and page number for subsequent citations.

2. *WJE* 11:112.

3. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 381.

Like Hank Morgan (though less humorously), Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is often seen as out of his place and time. Many early modern thinkers have failed to meet the test of time, but this colonial New England minister, his Northampton, Massachusetts church, and short-lived Princeton presidency have continued to catch the interests of scholars and pastors alike for three centuries. Uneasy historians attempt to return him to his natural habitat, but disagree when pressed to identify it; and many have tagged and released him only to discover him again wandering in some other world and time. Puritan, closet Catholic, Medievalist, revivalist, pastor, missionary, philosopher, scientist, Ramist, Lockean, Calvinist, Cambridge Platonist, Newtonian, anachronism, evangelical: these are but a sampling of the labels applied to him, but he remains relatively elusive. To rely too much on categorization can obfuscate context. Historical study, as Quentin Skinner writes, is “contaminated by the unconscious application of paradigms the familiarity of which, to the historian, disguises an essential inapplicability to the past.”⁴ Yet we persist, for without classification, he remains unknown.

Edwards is as complex as he is simple, and many have missed the proverbial tree for the forest. He was a gatherer, collecting the best of knowledge wherever it could be found. For that reason, generations of Christians, especially evangelicals, rarely fail to sing his praises. To Samuel Hopkins and others of the New Divinity (his second-generation followers), Edwards is “one of the greatest of divines” and “of remarkable strength of mind, clearness of thought, and depth of penetration . . . able, above most others, to vindicate the great doctrines of Christianity.”⁵ His work portrays a seeker and a significant figure of a new Christian spirituality, later to be known as evangelicalism, which owed its ideas to the past but also looked forward to a fresh and energetic future.

Edwards was not always the stalwart theologian that he is portrayed as today. His younger years were those of a tortured soul seeking redemption; but out of that turmoil was birthed a vibrant spirituality

4. Stout, “Puritans and Jonathan Edwards,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, 142–59. Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation*; Eversley, “Pastor as Revivalist,” in *Edwards in Our Time*, 113–30; Westra, “Divinity’s Design,” in *Edwards in Our Time*, 131–57; Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*; Daniel, *Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*; Lee, *Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*; WJE 6; Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 67–70; Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 53–62; WJE 11:21; WJE 23:15–16; Johnson, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 123–33; Skinner, *Regarding Method*, 59.

5. Hopkins, *Life and Character*, preface.

that dominated his adult years. This book investigates this complex story of Edwards and the theological conclusions that resulted. According to Edwards, there is a strong, necessary connection between the converted soul and the spiritual reading of sacred Scripture, and this connection is found in the idea of deification modeled after the incarnation. In the incarnation, Christ became human, and in salvation, human beings are connected to the divine—participating in that divine nature and becoming part of it—the process of deification or theosis. In this, humans are both fully human, but progressively taking on the divine nature in a union reminiscent of the incarnation, according to Edwards.

Ancient Jews and Christians argued for a strong connection between union with the divine and the multilayered reading of the sacred text. For Christians in the East and West, this was informed by a belief in deification that resulted in a spiritual reading of the Bible. The world of Edwards is informed by this history. As a young man, Edwards struggled to experience conversion, which he understood to be accompanied by fears of the divine, but when that day finally arrived, he discovered instead a “surprising, amazing joy” and a new perspective on God and Scripture that he had never seen before. The Christian, according to Edwards, has access to the divine mind and even possesses the Trinity itself, and therefore can find in the sacred text a pleasure that is only available to those united to God. As Christ is both divine and human, the Christian experiences a second-sort of incarnation, that is, he or she is human but participating in God. Even Scripture itself is both divine and human, and therefore follows an incarnational analogy.

Becoming Divine provides a detailed account of this complex theological construction by honing in on two key theological elements of his Christian spirituality, often dryly labeled *biblicism* and *conversionism* today, and placing that thought at the intersection of the broader traditions of Christianity and his narrower New England and Calvinist context. What emerges from this exploration of his life and thought is a figure whose mind was keenly aware of the issues of his day while simultaneously finding solace in a spirituality that belongs to the past.

Out of his personal struggles he weaves together—with the help of a belief in divine participation modeled after the incarnation—a complex perspective on conversion and Scripture on which his spirituality hinges. Certain theological themes from the Christian tradition, such as union with Christ and justification by faith, show themselves to domi-

nate his ruminations as hinging doctrines. In short: Jonathan Edwards's reading of Scripture is inseparable from his understanding of conversion, and while his perspective on both finds particular meaning in his early-modern and pre-critical context, he is, nevertheless, very much indebted—though he is not always aware of it—to the long-standing and colorful traditions of his theological ancestors.

Edwards remains a complicated figure, and like Hank Morgan, his life offers plentiful moments of stark contrast in the clashes of disparate worlds. He is both a theological throwback and an ingenious inventor with an eye for the future.

Edwards and Evangelicalism

That someone is indebted to long-standing traditions is not a groundbreaking statement, but in the case of Edwards and the continued confusion over who he is as a thinker, it remains an open and necessary discussion. Over a decade and a half ago, David Bebbington wrote his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, in which he called for an understanding of evangelicalism as a movement that began out of Enlightenment ideas in the 1730s. Jonathan Edwards, as Bebbington sees it, was one of the movement's pioneers. The evangelical movement of Edwards's day was very different from the current media stereotype fueled by the outrageous sound bites of Pat Robertson. Amidst the long reign of a more clinical approach to theology, Puritan leaders with pietistic influences drew attention to a need for personal holiness. The language of transformation in this era incurred serious criticism from Reformed leaders in New England due to its highly mystical tones. The evangelical movement was unexpected and therefore potentially dangerous to established Reformed theological traditions.

Attempting to define such a movement is difficult, but Bebbington identified at least four important characteristics: *conversionism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *crucicentrism*. For Bebbington, the origins of evangelicalism have less to do with mysticism and more to do with an Enlightenment epistemology. While his thesis is still being challenged or even revised, these terms are generally accepted for the purpose of the argument found here. However, the Enlightenment premise is only a part of the picture. Two elements of Bebbington's quadrilateral, con-

versionism and biblicism, represent central themes for early evangelical development, especially for Jonathan Edwards's vibrant spirituality and theological imagination.⁶

Conversion is "the belief that lives need to be changed," as Bebbington defines it. It is a transformation of the soul. For centuries, Christians of both Eastern and Western persuasions understood the light of Scripture to be inseparable from the light in the transformed soul. The light in the soul is the result of the union of the converted individual with the incarnated Christ. This union effectually connects the human to all that is divine, shedding the light of the divine mind that wrote Scripture upon the mind of the newly changed Christian reading it. Saint Athanasius once asserted that God became human so that humans might become God. That powerful notion of incarnation and deification long has been entrenched in the imaginations of Christians and has been the basis for seeing Scripture as containing deeper layers of spiritual meaning. Ancient Christians like Origen of Alexandria and Augustine understood the literal and plain message of the Bible to be a form of divine baby talk, but the soul that participates in the divine is able to transcend the lower message to a higher message, one that is found in the mind of God and made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Edwards also sees this important connection between the illumination of the soul (and therefore the mind) and the Word illuminated by the Spirit. The spirituality of eighteenth-century colonial evangelicalism is infused with the view that one's conversion involves a transformation. For Edwards, this is made possible by the work of the Spirit in uniting the converted soul to Christ, the God-Human, thereby giving each Christian everything that belongs to the Trinity itself. The Christian "doth really possess all things," writes Edwards in his notes, and by "all things," he does mean *all*:

God three in one, all that he is, and all that he has, and all that he does, all that he has made or done—the whole universe, bodies and spirits, earth and heaven, angels, men and devil, sun moon [and] stars, land and sea, fish and fowls, all the silver and gold, kings and potentates as well as mean men—are as much the Christian's as the money in his pocket, the clothes he wears, or

6. For a critique of Bebbington's work, see Williams, "Was Evangelicalism Created by the Enlightenment?," 283–312. Sweeney and Withrow, "Jonathan Edwards," in Haykin and Stewart, *Emergence of Evangelicalism*, 278–301.

the house he dwells in, or the victuals he eats; yea more properly his, more advantageously, more *his*, than if he [could] command all those things mentioned to be just in all respects as he pleased at any time, by virtue of his union with Christ . . .⁷

With words just as bold and powerful as many of his mystical Christian ancestors, Edwards plunges into the depths of his spiritual tradition. As the Trinity consists of three persons but one nature, and as the incarnated Christ consists of two natures but one person, for Edwards, conversion is about becoming one body with Christ, with Christ as the head of that body. From this, the newly converted soul enters a vibrant spiritual life that participates in the divine being and is full of holiness and joy. In conversion, the human mind is spiritually united to the divine, and through spiritual sight, the Christian can see the divine being everywhere.

His interest is not simply academic, nor mere curiosity—though he possesses plenty of both—but the work of a tormented soul. His own spiritual journey, which began nearly from day one in the Puritan world of his youth, was fraught with disappointment and failures. He constantly sought what he considered true conversion, only to become dissatisfied with the results. In his resolution of May 26, 1723, he wrote himself this reminder: “Resolved, constantly, with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the strictest scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my soul, that I may know whether I have truly an interest in Christ or no; that when I come to die, I may not have any negligence respecting this to repent of.”⁸ As a child, Edwards thought he had experienced true conversion; later, when he came to mature faith, he dismissed his early belief as the notion of an illuminated but deceived mind. The day of what he comes to see as his actual conversion delivers a surprise both supernatural and disconcerting. For all its realness, Edwards’s transforming experience does not fit the form of conversion that his father and grandfather had told him to expect. Rather than experiencing fear and trembling, he discovers “surprising, amazing joy,” and his theology—and the theology of the new movement that will become known as evangelicalism—is transformed.

Via conversion, the biblical text becomes more than black letters on a white page; it is now the unlocked lid of the treasure chest of God. It becomes a thing of beauty and excellency that is impossible to know

7. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 3; *WJE* 13:183, 184 (“Misc.” ff.).

8. *WJE* 16:757 (Resolution 48).

outside of the transformation of conversion and divine participation. Ancient Jewish and Christian thinkers followed Plato in seeing this world as merely a shadow of the heavenly reality. Christians understood Christ's incarnation as bridging the gap between heaven and earth, providing a reading of the earthly words in the Bible with a deeper, spiritual, and often allegorical message. Edwards too understood his new connection to the divine being through the incarnation of Christ as providing a window into a deeper, spiritual message, one bathed in divine beauty. The Bible is more than human words; for Edwards, it is access to a heavenly treasure chest.

Like many in his day, he is concerned with defending Scripture's veracity from the attacks of early-modern deists. One may note his use of the term "infallible"—a popular evangelical term today nearly equaling its cousin, "inerrancy"—in his *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741). In this he writes: "we are to take Scriptures as our guide . . . this is the great and standing rule which God has given to his church, to guide them in all things relating to the great concerns of their souls; and 'tis an infallible and sufficient rule."⁹ Edwards harbors a strong trust in the words of Scripture, and this trust goes beyond the text, because, as he sees it, it is God thinking aloud. It is here that *biblicism*, defined by Bebbington as "a particular regard for the Bible," is important.¹⁰ However, what is striking is how Edwards's incarnational spirituality brings his reading of the Bible to new heights and inevitably connects him to the existing tradition.

That Edwards is a biblicist has become an "embarrassing family secret," as Douglas A. Sweeney writes, and for some, a disappointment. "Three hundred years after Edwards' birth, and half a century into what some have called the Edwards renaissance," he adds, "few have bothered to study Edwards' extensive exegetical writings." Current scholarship takes a great interest in Edwards the philosopher or Edwards the scientist, but "modern scholars have yet to come close to understanding the ways in which Edwards' life was animated by what he deemed God's Word."¹¹ Unless one reconsiders or revises Bebbington's Enlightenment premise, one may forget that Edwards's understanding of the Bible is no

9. WJE 4:227.

10. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 3.

11. Sweeney, "Longing for More and More of It," in Stout et al., *Jonathan Edwards at 300*, 25–26.

stranger than that of his spiritual ancestors. While it does carry with it early-modern concerns, his handling of the text bathes the concerns of the early-modern commentary in the mystical waters of ancient hermeneutics. Through direct and indirect contact, Edwards's intellectual commitments span the ancient, Medieval, Reformation, and contemporary generations. He is both a leader of a colonial sea change within Western American Christianity, and a chimera, benefiting from the diverse contributions of his theological ancestors. In other words, there is good reason scholars wrestle over how to label him.

Edwards's writings paint the picture of one who embraces the Protestant doctrines of the past (especially the Reformation), while harboring a conviction that he is a leader of a new generation, called to improve these ideas using the newest discoveries available—both scientific and philosophical. With this in mind, Bebbington's thesis finds some reevaluation in this book. A fresh look at Edwards from this perspective offers new light on America's early religious consciousness. In his unparalleled biography of Edwards, George Marsden writes that Edwards "has many ardent admirers, many detractors, and many who attempt to rehabilitate him by making him over in their own images." Among Marsden's goals is to "depict [Edwards] in his own time and in his own terms."¹² This is my goal here as well, and I hope Edwards's voice comes through loud and clear.

To that end, Part 1 of this book looks at the precedence for Edwards's thought within the tradition, from the time of antiquity to the time of his birth. In this section (chapters 1 and 2), I examine the various intersecting trajectories that set up the body of Christian work available to Edwards in his day. Precedence is not established by mere transmission of information, but, as will be seen, Edwards's thought evolves as the result of a web of beliefs that inform his world. From East to the West, and from Origen to Calvin, the connection between union with the God-Human and biblical interpretation is explored. Ending in the Enlightenment, we see that the world of Edwards's intellectual development challenges standard scholarly presuppositions.

Part 2 looks more closely at the world of Edwards from the time of his youth, including the many historical, cultural, and intellectual troubles that informed his own personal story and reading choices. In this section we find a young man driven to understand himself and his

12. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 2.

religion, struggling with the prospect of challenging his tradition (and by default, his parents), and suffering from depression. Not many persons whose religious experience they describe as a “surprising, amazing joy” might sink into depression, but for Edwards it required a retro-engineering of his conversion to make sense of that experience. The outcome was a hybridization of sorts, benefiting from a mind desperate to meet the expectations of his religion and keenly aware of the philosophical and scientific claims of his day. What he discovers is an understanding of union with Christ that is vibrant, incarnational, and reminiscent of many theologians before him. It is a theological perspective that restructures his understanding of salvation, and even incorporates Medieval categories into the science of Newton.

Part 3 demonstrates how this new spirituality influences Edwards’s biblical interpretation. Centuries-old methods of interpretation—based on a mystical spirituality—that engage in multilayered hermeneutics (see Part 1) are reflected in Edwards’s own approach to the biblical text. But a child of the Protestant Reformation he is, and the literal reading of the text serves as the foundation for his typological lens. Moreover, he is keenly aware of the questions raised by those skeptical of Christianity and anything spiritual. What is seen in this section, then, is an incarnational view of Scripture capable of engaging the questions of his day with the answers given to the questions of the past.

This volume will provide a detailed look at this chimera with a healthy respect for his complexity. It will show that his reading of Scripture must be understood as inseparable from his understanding of conversion; and that grasping this context requires a better reading of the web of beliefs—early modern and ancient—that inform the intellectual world of Jonathan Edwards.