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*Jonathan Edwards and  
The Art of Effective Communication*



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In 1869 the transcontinental railroad was completed linking the extremities of a vast nation on the verge of becoming a world power in the industrial era. Laying track across the mountains from California and from the prairies of mid-America, the two were joined into one iron fabric of parallel bars at Promontory Point, Utah. Dignitaries met to drive in the last spikes in what was heralded as the greatest event in human history. One hundred years later in 1969, many of us were glued to the television watching an American walk upon the moon. The event was again heralded with an effusive array of euphoric accolades. It was "a giant leap for mankind." Were these ultimately determinative events in the history of the race? Did they significantly improve the human condition? Did they initiate changes in human nature that has made our world a kinder place? As a result of these remarkable accomplishments, has the heart of mankind shed its darker abilities? It is not my intent to answer the question of the benefit of scientific and technological advances, though I seriously question that science has tamed the beast in the human breast or lessened the mortality rate (it remains at 100%). The question that I want to raise is this: What is the most important event in human history? Of all the events of the centuries, which one is the most life-changing?

While we may have a variety of views on these matters, God does not. I think that we should ask him. If we would search his wisdom, I think that we would find that he has stated the answer in unequivocal terms. The most important event in human history is the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is the central message that God has for mankind. While scientific advances have proven to be of significant benefit, as quality and longevity of life have been greatly improved, cultural advance is not God's most important word to us. That word is "Christ" for he alone can change man from within, from the heart. If it is true that the greatest of all messages to be delivered to mankind is from God himself, then the greatest duty of mankind for mankind is found in the proclamation of that message. If true, the task is enormous; it compels us to understand that message and study the art of conveying it to the world.

This insight brings me to the topic of this article. If the greatest event of all history is the God-event of the incarnation, then Jesus Christ is the one who should dominate the thoughts and passions of those who claim to be his servants. Great preaching is not about the technique or personality of the speaker, but great preaching is about the preacher's central topic. We find ourselves in a day in which the church is dominated by the values of our culture. Personality is now more important than the message; in fact, it often is the message. Psychological effect is not the means of conveying the Word; it has become the Word. It is little wonder that our churches are growing weaker and God's people suffer from spiritual anorexia and moral inanity.

What I want to argue in this article is that the malaise that has settled over our evangelical churches and seminaries is significant and tragic. Its origins are too complex for a brief discussion, yet the symptoms are evident. There is a famine of the Word of God in the pulpits of our land and an unwillingness to give attention to it in the pew. I believe that the cause of this tragedy is that we have lost the centrality of Jesus Christ as the preacher's singular task. We have lost confidence in the power of Christ and, therefore, have perverted the pastor's

prophetic role as the mediator of the Word of God to the people of God. I am suggesting that the problem lies as much with the pastors of our land as it does with the laity. Pastors must re-envision their task. We must become convinced in our inner being that our role is to present Christ to our hearers. While I believe that we all would give lip service to what I am saying, that our people recognize there is a lack of passion and priority for these matters from our pulpits. Because the beauty of Christ does not emanate from our impassioned lips, we are sending a mixed message that has denuded the authoritative and sacred office of the preacher. I believe that Christ is missing from evangelical preaching today. This accounts for the drift that we see in so many of our churches toward a social gospel dotted with occasional verses scattered throughout and has produced an often weak, ineffectual pulpit. When our people want direction, we fail to help them to see that Christ is the answer to every question of life. I believe that many of our pastors would heartily embrace the errorlessness of Scripture, though *what* they preach and *how* they preach suggests that they have lost confidence in the sufficiency of the Word of God. Preachers find themselves on ancillary topics. I believe that our pastors need to think clearly about three things: the centrality of Christ in preaching, the nature of effective hearing by their audiences, and the manner of effective communication. We must realize that God expects of us a serious reckoning of our calling, though God is discriminatory in the extension of his benefits. He can be neither commanded nor conditioned to act.

It is with these thoughts and convictions in mind that I come to my topic, the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, American Puritan and foremost thinker. This is the figure Kenneth Minkema refers to as "colonial America's consummate preacher."<sup>1</sup>

Permit me a small personal digression before we proceed to the topic. In my academic preparation and subsequent career, I have longed for someone who would inspire me with a passion for Christ, one who would describe for me that miracle that I experienced in having been brought to Christ as a

child. There was then such a vision of the holiness of God, the beauty of God, that I was so captured in its ravishing beauty that I was given a longing to know him and to make him the center of life's activities. Subsequently, I found that the many tasks and duties that made up life dulled that original passion because my adult life was filled with marriage, children, and career. The experiences of life tell us a lot about ourselves, particularly about our empty dreams. Success and joy brought me only a longing for something that somehow got minimized over the years. Along the way I found two writers who reoriented my life: John Owen, the English Puritan, and Jonathan Edwards, the American. In the former, I found a view of the Christian life that made more sense of the Bible and life's experience than I had ever discovered. In Edwards, I found a philosophy, an orientation, to life that reinvigorated my life as a whole. At the center of his life was the overwhelming reality of the absolute sovereignty of God and a being of absolute beauty. I was captivated; at last I found a person, who in Puritan language, "spoke to my condition." I wanted to worship God with all my heart and mind, but the evangelicism of my training seemed to sacrifice mind for heart as though the two were antithetical. Edwards' greatest contribution to me was the insight that the two can and must be welded together. Mind without heart leads to a barren rationalism that plagues much of the church today; heart without mind is just as tragic, leading to a rootless professionalism. In this man that I offer to you today, I found one that took learning about God just as seriously as loving and obeying him. When a deep passion for the knowledge of God is joined with a sincere love for God through the exaltation of Jesus Christ, you not only have the key to life, but the "Rosetta stone" of preaching. Because Christ transcends times and cultures (and the fact that human nature never changes), the preaching of Christ is always the most relevant and helpful thing we can do!

*Effective preaching must take into account the content of the message communicated and the audience to whom it is presented.*

*Preaching is the art of conveying the eternal Word of God in Christ to our hearers in such a manner that they embrace the truth we preach with a vigorous and lively participation.*

#### THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING CHRIST AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

Though brought up in a pious home, his father Timothy was a prominent pastor with direct connections to the influential Stoddard clan of the Connecticut River Valley, his conversion occurred after completing Yale College and the beginning of his graduate work. Troubled by implications of the sovereignty of God, on a walk through the meadows near his home, contemplating 1 Timothy 1:17, Edwards came to experience what he describes as an "inward, sweet delight in God and divine things," "a sense of the glory of the divine being, a new sense," and "a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God." Edwards had experienced heart-felt religion, true Christianity.

Edwards described the essence of his conversion as delighting in the holiness of God and the doctrines of the gospel ("I have loved the doctrines of the gospel."). He wrote,

The holiness of God has always appeared to me the most lovely of all his attributes. The doctrines of God's absolute sovereignty, and free grace, in showing mercy to whom he would show mercy; and man's absolute dependence on the operation of God's Holy Spirit, have very much appeared to me as sweet and glorious doctrines.<sup>2</sup>

Trained for the ministry, the pulpit became Edwards' life work. According to the editors of a recent volume of his sermons:

Edwards was first and foremost a preacher and pastor leading souls to the truth as he saw it and interpreting the religious experiences of his listeners. His primary tool in achieving these goals was the sermon, the spoken word of God, which in the

Reformed tradition that shaped him was the centerpiece of worship and religious edification.<sup>3</sup>

It is not too much to say that Edwards took the task of preaching seriously, believing that the delivered sermon was the oral vehicle of the Word of God written. Accounts of Edwards' preaching give us the distinct impression that his talents were more literary than oratorical. His mind was his strength it is argued; while he was brilliant, I would argue that it was the object of his thoughts (Christ in all his beauty) and his earnest desire to use all his abilities to make him known that is the real key. I might also add that he became a student of the art of communication. The substance of his preaching was the Bible, the object of his preaching was Christ and the redemption he alone procured, and the audience was his parishioners in Northampton and Stockbridge. He noted in *A History of Redemption*, "The sum and substance of both the Old Testament and New is Christ and his redemption."<sup>4</sup> As John Smith has noted: "His weak points appear to have been in voice, gesture and rhythm; his power was in his masterful use of language."<sup>5</sup> However, though his technique may not have matched the brilliance of his mind, it must be confessed that he thought a lot about the task of preaching and applied it twice on Sunday, once on Thursdays, and in special or occasional events in the life of the community. He produced a body of sermonic material that is staggering for its quantity (over 1200 lengthy sermons) as well as several books derived from sermonic series. Kimnach makes a point that should serve as the basis for investigating Edwards' view of preaching. "After theology, Edwards thought most about expression: what is language, how it operates on the mind, and how its resources might be variously exploited."<sup>6</sup>

He seemed to have been interested in persuasion more than mere expression; the bulk of his writing is polemical. Edwards relentlessly endeavored to prove his points, but also sought to avoid wearying the audience by employing various rhetorical devices coupled with his own personal passion for the things he preached. In comparing the structure of an

Edwardsean sermon with that of this father or grandfather, it is evident that he simplified them, eliminating complex sub-headings to make the sermons easier to follow. Edwards seemed to be a student of his audience as well as of his God. He did not compromise his knowledge of God in order to keep his audience, but he was willing to be aware of how his audience came to understand oral communication.

Though Edwards crafted argument upon argument to sustain his points, he did not believe that rational explanations, nor carefully crafted sermons, inherently possessed the power to convince anyone—that was the work of the Holy Spirit. Kimnach paraphrased Edwards this way, "Though reason and logical arguments may make theological dogmas seem true, do they make them seem real?"<sup>7</sup> In the *Importance of a Future State* he stated, "The light of reason convinces the world that it is so: the Word of God puts it past doubt."<sup>8</sup>

Edwards understood that communication is only successful when the idea in the communicator's mind is possessed in a lively fashion by the audience. Preaching was not merely an exercise of rhetorical art, though communication skill is essential for conveying the meaning of concepts. The heart of his preaching had to do with his ability seriously to involve his audience in what he wanted to communicate to them. Real preaching is not so much what the preacher says; it is what the hearer receives from the communicator in such a manner that it is personally and passionately possessed and acted upon in a serious manner. It is a personalized and lively possession of what the preacher communicates (actually it is an ownership of truth beyond the words of any preacher). The task of the preacher is twofold: to explain content and to engender an active interaction with that content by the auditor. That a preacher is able to do these things does not guarantee that God will grant divine light into the soul; it simply makes it possible for God to do so. God does not act without creating a willingness on the part of the hearer for God to act. God has ordained that when he determines to act, he does so through the lively words of the preacher of his Word, the Bible. Kimnach gathers Edwards' thoughts rather succinctly this way:

A great and powerful preaching performance (or written sermon) does not, of itself, engender conversion, though it may be so good as to become a "fit" vehicle for the transmission of saving grace. God supplies the Words immediately through the Scripture and the preaching; he has also provided each person with a faculty of understanding and a sense of the heart. It is the task of the preacher to fill the understanding by clearly expounding the Scripture and to "stir up" the heart by introducing the ideas of self into the context of the Word. . . . If the logic and rhetoric of the preacher are effective, and if the auditor is attentive and earnest, it is fitting that God give his Spirit simultaneously to the words, thus making them his Word, and to the heart of the auditor, causing a gracious infusion of faith. But God's acts are never commanded or conditioned by either preacher or auditors, and the most brilliantly apt sermon may leave the most earnest auditor sitting cold and hopeless, though intellectually informed.<sup>9</sup>

Edwards viewed the manuscripting of his sermons as a utilitarian vehicle of psychological power. By carefully crafting his words, he created vivid and personal images in the minds of his hearers. The point of his manuscripting was that it helped him in the creation of communication. One has only to think of his best known sermon today, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The image of the spider crawling over a pit held by a thin thread or of the taut bow of the warrior are stark figures. Thoughts are conveyed through the creation of images in the receiver's mind so that they are personally possessed. Imagery, fused with abstract concepts, touch the mind of the hearer. Literary devices such as an image, a metaphor, repetition, or illusion cause the mind of the auditor to actively participate in discourse at an inner, reflective level. The simple image has a way of sticking in the mind as an indivisible unit of private thought. When the data of the speaker become the meditation of the hearer, communication has occurred. By such means, Kimnach is right when he says, "Edwards brought life into the word and the Word into the realm of immediate experience for his listeners."<sup>10</sup>

Scriptural allusions and stories fill his sermons and

function as mechanisms for personal identity with the abstract ideas he sought to convey. Illustrations function as means of self-discovery and ownership of ideas. He kept a separate notebook that he filled with all manner of supportive, elaborative material. Perhaps one illustration would help. In describing the impossibility of the sinner to come to Christ and the miracle of divine light entering the soul, he frequently used two illustrations. It is like asking a blind person to describe colors or like holding a jar of honey before a blind person and asking him/her to describe it. Like conversion, describing honey can only be done by the blind through experiencing its taste. True religion must be experienced to be understood.

In the early days of his preaching, Edwards read the manuals of John Edwards and Cotton Mather, as well as William Perkins (*The Art of Puritan Prophesying*). From them he learned that preaching must be affectionate and impassionate. This led him to the conclusion that sermonizing had to be based on a new psychological theory of the interrelatedness of the faculties of the soul. That is, Edwards found in the philosopher John Locke helpful hints that man is more than a rational being, or that the mind determines action. Man is an emotional being; in fact, it is at the level of the emotional or affectional that all decisions are made in life. In communication, the preacher has two vehicles: reason and feelings, mind and affection. In order to preach persuasively, John Edwards had insisted that the preacher must, first, believe and feel intensely what he preaches and, second, he must communicate his personal feelings with the message so that he preaches experience, as it were.

He believed that the primary sphere of religious experience, the affections, was hidden below the rational surface of the mind in a complexity of feelings and impulses. Entry into the affections was gained through moving the mind to reflection. The preacher works in the abstract medium of language while the artist may work in glass, stone, or clay. The preacher must preach heart-felt experience, but not his own personal experience. Passion does not determine truth or truthfulness,

but without it there is no communication of truth. Here is a key to Edwards' effectiveness.

Edwards believed decisions are made in the realm of the affections, not in the realm of the mind or reason alone. The soul, the immaterial nature of mankind, is composed of intellect or mind, affections, and will. Our affections, likes and dislikes, are the criteria of judging the ideas presented to them by the mind; the affections determine what a person wills.<sup>11</sup> Edwards described the immaterial nature of man as a dichotomy: understanding and inclination. Of the second part, he believed that it is delineated in the Scriptures by various names depending of which facet is emphasized: will if action is stressed, heart if the cause of the action is in focus.<sup>12</sup> Information pressed on the mind is important because it is a safeguard to right thinking; however, knowledge alone does not change things (neither does passion if it solicits an action apart from knowledge). Knowledge is a means of reaching the heart or the affections. He therefore relied on logic and rational exposition in great part for what might best be termed aesthetic effects, to surface feelings or values. Rational and logical argument can make theological concepts appear to be true, but it requires a special work of God to confirm that they are real. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is amazing to me that a person who did not believe that the mind determines action invested so much of his effort in the intellectual realm. This was because he firmly believed that the heart of mankind is moved to decision based upon the information presented to it. The mind is the conduit to the heart. Edwards was neither an idealist nor an empiricist, a rationalist nor a sensationalist; he blended or interrelated the two forming his theory of communication and behavior. This accounts for Edwards' unique position in the swirling currents of the Great Awakening and the widening gap of religious opinion in the 1740s over the validity of the Awakening as a movement of the Spirit of God. Edwards' view was that neither the rationalists nor the enthusiasts were safe. Rationalists neglected the affectional component of true religion while enthusiasts neglected the rational component for visions and

dreams—thus the context of Edwards' mature defense of the Awakening in spite of detractors of both sides. There were those, in Edwards' judgment, that sought to dismiss it as an evil because of the extremes of James Davenport and numerous uneducated itinerants. Others sought to defend it, but by certain actions on their part were as great a threat to a true work of God as the Bostonian Chauncy. Equally destructive in Edwards' mind were those who sought to do the work of God in "heat" without light as those who claimed light without "heat." Edwards' point is germane to the issue of his preaching. Says Edwards:

God supplies the Word immediately through the Scripture and the preaching; he has also provided each person with a faculty of understanding and a sense of the heart. It is the task of the preacher to fill the understanding by clearly expounding the Scripture and to "stir up" the heart by introducing the idea of self into the context of the Word. Then if God wills, the words of the preacher become God's Word and the auditor's heart is filled with a "divine light" which permits an immediate recognition of the truth and reality of the Word.<sup>13</sup>

To experience the holy beauty of God without the control of God's Word in one's mind is to be an enthusiast, to suffer vain imaginings. To possess only the facts of the Word of God without a sense of its true beauty is to be damned.

Edwards' sermons are rational treatises that are aimed to inform the mind and move the heart to action; these are the two essential, inseparable ingredients of the preacher's task.

#### THE METHODOLOGY OF PREACHING CHRIST AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

The structure of Edwards' sermons is tripartite: text, doctrine, and application or "improvements." The text portion is the smallest in length, setting a single text or verse of Scripture in context.

The doctrine and application sections have numbered

subheads. Every sermon has one central idea that grows out of the central text which is a single verse. For example, the central idea or big idea of the "Sinner's sermon" is Deuteronomy 32:35, "There foot shall slide in due time." All sermonic material, from whatever source (Scripture, theology, illustrative material, and application) were employed to drive home the meaning of the text.

Sermons are generally topical in nature though Edwards did preach progressively through 1 Corinthians 13—an exception. He assembled a commentary on only one book, Revelation, and preached verse-by-verse through only one chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, which was published as *Charity and Its Fruits*. He preached through the course of history, from creation to the recreation, over several months of sermons with one verse as his text.

The difference between a sermon and a lecture is that in the former the application is of greater length than the doctrine section. In the latter, you have the reverse. Edwards' preparation for sermons was done through the creation of notebooks. He recorded his basic ideas in two types. The first was a recording of his thoughts in several large notebooks ("the Mind," the "Miscellanies," "Shadow of Divine Things," "Notes on the Scriptures," and "Miscellaneous Observations on the Holy Scripture," for example). The second recorded outlines for his projects and plans of execution. The materials in the notebooks were cross-referenced and Edwards perused them to find material for his sermons. The content from the various notebooks was directly entered into the sermons. The common image of Edwards' preaching style originates from his friend and first biographer, Samuel Hopkins. He suggested in 1765 that Edwards slavishly read his sermons lifting his eyes occasionally to gaze upon the bell rope that dangled in the rear of the sanctuary. Without using vocal variety or gestures Edwards relied on the power of his words to create effect, it is argued. This image of Edwards the preacher does not appear to be sustained in recent scholarship. Though he did not memorize his sermons as his father and grandfather did before him, he appears to have been aware of his manuscript, but not a

slave to it. His sermons were composed of small 5" x 7" sheets of paper, written on both sides, stitched together with thread, and placed in the fold of an opened Bible.

There are three distinct periods of sermon-making in Edwards' career:

- (1) 1722–27 was a period of apprenticeship. This was the period of beginning including the eight months he served as pastor in a small Presbyterian church in New York City and interim stints at Bolton and Glastonbury, Connecticut. It was also the era of his tutorship at Yale. From this period, 65 sermons remain that were written fully in his hand.
- (2) 1727–42 was a period of mastery. This was his most productive and fertile period of sermon making. There are 645 sermons from this period with most written fully though in the last 140 or so outlining appears indicating that Edwards spoke more extempore as his career matured.
- (3) 1742–58 was a period of reuse. In this period Edwards preached little new material, but generally rearranged older material. From this time 510 sermons are extant with the majority in more or less outline form.

Of the twelve hundred or so sermons in his collection (about eighty percent of the total) at least four hundred are marked as having been repreached, at least in part, between one and three times. In some cases a single sermon was preached as many as five, six, or seven times. The greatest number of repreached sermons took place in the Stockbridge years where most are in outline form. Clearly he was preoccupied with writing the several works of the 1750s (*Original Sin Defended*, *Discourse on the Freedom of the Will, End for Which God Created the World, and True Virtue*) and handling Indians affairs in a turbulent time.

Most of the sermons from the Northampton era were preached in two parts, morning and afternoon. However,

when out of town, he preached them in one unit summarizing or skipping material. In the preparation of a sermon, Edwards often used portions from previous sermons (Kimnach calls this "cannibalizing"). In essence, then, previous sermons became a "notebook" of source material. Edwards often carried more than one sermon into the pulpit and read from portions of them. He used three techniques to get mileage out of his materials: revision, recasting, and cannibalism.

### THE ASSUMPTIONS IN PREACHING CHRIST AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

There are several fundamental ideas that shaped Edwards' understanding of the nature and purpose of preaching. Unlike many, he thought deeply about the task before him.

What was the mental framework as he approached the task of preaching? Edwards embraced two central concepts and applied them in preaching: "a divine and supernatural light" and "a sense of the heart." The latter is the essence of conversion and the former is its cause. The first is wrought through the Word and yet is beyond it. It is a perception of reality beyond the words of Scripture and the inadequacies of language; it is a beam of light to the soul. Kimnach describes it this way: "The moment of realization is a moment of the most intense emotion, a shock of recognition so great that the 'direct image' which replaces the old shadow is never erased, and thus the subject of the experience is never again the same."<sup>14</sup> The second, the heart, is the realm of man's deepest being and the sphere where regeneration takes place; it transforms the totality of mankind's faculties because it involves the will which predicates choices. To experience the holy beauty of God without the control of the Word of God in one's mind is to be an enthusiast; to possess only the facts about the work of God without a sense of their true beauty is to be without a true knowledge of God.

The fundamental concept behind Edwards' preaching is the all-encompassing concept of the glory of God. Like all of life, the purpose of preaching was to bring glory to God. By the phrase "the glory of God," Edwards meant that the

ultimate purpose in all that we do is to be a vehicle for the display of God's attributes. Man is, so to speak, a mirror, and the purpose that God has for all creation is to reflect the beauty of God. This is what Christ did. God is glorified, in Edwards' view, not by our activities, but by our reflecting his character in our character. Preaching, then, finds its ultimate reason in displaying God's character. This is delineated by Edwards in *The End for Which God Created the World* and is the foundation of Edwards' theory of ethics described in *True Virtue*.

If the end of all the things we do, including preaching, is to reflect God's character so that he might behold himself, the primary means of doing so is through the revelation of Christ since Christ is our truest picture of God's character. He believed that it was the task of the pastor/preacher to shepherd the flock, and the essence of the shepherding ministry was to disclose to them the Christ who is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The incarnation is the greatest event in human history; it is God's witness that mankind's greatest need is redemption. Edwards prepared a series in 1739 that we know in its published form as *The History of the Work of Redemption*; using Scripture, extra-biblical history, and prophetic texts to explain the meaning of history past, present, and future to his people. The focus of all history is the incarnation which he defined as "God's greatest work." He divided history into Redemption Promised, Redemption Purchased, and Redemption Applied. John Wilson, the editor of the volume in the Yale edition, commented: "What deserves attention is his high and conventional Christology. In this he stood securely in the Calvinist tradition, and his Christocentric position is evident."<sup>15</sup> In his own words, here is a clue to Edwards' approach to preaching, "From what has been said we may see here that Christ and his redemption are the great subject of the whole Bible."<sup>16</sup>

Edwards was convinced that redemption was a work of God, that grace finds its origin in the discriminatory actions of God and is wrought in the heart by the workings of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is the implanting of the infinite into the finite. The place where the salvation of the sinner occurs is in the inner recesses of the person, the heart. It is not in the mind,

though the mind is the vehicle to the heart. The working of God upon the heart is the Spirit's ministry through the Word of God—hence, the importance of preaching.

Because the task of the preacher is communication, Edwards thought deeply about the message that needed to be communicated and the audience of that communication. He thought about how his hearers learned and embraced what they heard to be true. Edwards put a significant emphasis on the nature of his audience, differing from his Puritan forebears in his understanding of the relationship of understanding to will—how it is that people come to make decisions. While Edwards differed from John Locke in important ways, he did follow him in that he rejected a lineal sequentialism that prioritized the rational faculty. To Edwards, nonmaterial mankind is a complexity of mind and heart (the latter possessing a complexity) that exists in an interrelational manner. The relationship of the mind to the heart is that the immaterial mind provides information to the soul. Within the immaterial being of mankind, knowledge is evaluated (decisions are made as to aversion or embrace) and actions are determined.

The issue of the freedom of the human will and its workings was central in his theory of preaching. Edwards believed that the will of man was a choosing mechanism, not a creative mechanism. That is, he believed that the will chooses between available options presented to it; it does not create the option it chooses. His basic theory went something like this: the mind presents information to the inner soul which is evaluated based upon the soul's notion of pleasure or delight or danger. The soul's nature determines what choices will be made. Unconverted people make choices according to their unredeemed nature, freely and truly. The redeemed do the same. The difference is in one's human nature.

Preaching, then, is that work of providing to the sinner a new category and object of faith. Unbelievers fail to come to Christ because they do not know him in all his beauty. Having a hatred for him because they know that God is a righteous judge, they are without a knowledge that he is equally far more. They have a free will to make choices, but they simply

do not have a proper object to choose. Preaching is the human art, though attended by divine mercy, of giving people an object to choose. Man's problem is not a lack of freedom or inability to choose Christ; it is our natural aversion to him because we have no concept of his perfect beauty (Edwards believed that the will is free and that man is free; however, the terms require a careful unpacking.). Preaching is the art of revealing Christ to people as a new category in their thinking. Our problem is not one of a moral inability to embrace Christ; it is a twisted nature that sees no beauty in him unless revealed by the Holy Spirit, according to Edwards. It is an inability to see Christ.

If free will is causeless, then you have a causeless effect—a logical absurdity. Self-caused effects are finite; they are rooted in the qualities of their cause (the flesh produces flesh and the Spirit the supernatural). Saving grace, since it is divine in nature, cannot be caused by man yet it is not caused without man.

Of crucial importance in understanding the nature of man in Edwards' thought is that he rejected the traditional distinction between will and affections. Will is not a faculty in the mind; choices are made in the realm of affections. Information provided through the mind does not determine the choices we make; our loves (our affections) determine our direction. Our loves determine our will. The basis of choice is self-interest. Without seeing Christ, we make self-oriented choices; but they are to our own destruction. Selfish choices destroy the self while the embrace of Christ is the highest expression of self interest. Once we see Christ in all his beauty, we choose Christ from self-interest (and for the first time, it is also to our true benefit). Volition is not merely determined by knowledge; it is determined by the strongest inclination for self-advance.

The problem of the lost person is not a lack of faith or the wrong kind of faith; it is the lack of a virtuous object of faith, Jesus Christ. In perhaps one of his greatest sermons, "That Every Mouth May Be Stopped [Romans 3:19]," Edwards commented to his Northampton parishioners:

I see that the problem is not man's faculty of choice, but that he has no object to embrace. It is not that man cannot, it's that he does not want to because he has no wonderful object to embrace. It seems to me that an object to want is of God and he is quite discriminatory as to whom he reveals his delights. . . . I think that the problem is two-fold: God doesn't and man cannot because he has an impaired and perverted set of desires and sensibilities.

This is what preaching is all about; it is the delivery of Christ as an object to be embraced by people. In conversion, new abilities are not given. Conrad Cherry has stated, "No new faculties are given, but the natural human powers are given exercises from a new foundation."<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Edwards believed that talk of grace as being resistible or irresistible is "altogether perfect nonsense." Because we choose the greatest potential for pleasure, when God reveals his Son to us, resistance is dispelled in a willing embrace. God becomes our highest love; humans cannot resist the highest object of their own fulfillment. Man's problem is that his notions of pleasure are selfish; they find their origins in the fallen self and its perverted, limited concept of pleasure. In one of his early sermons in New York he put the matter rather plainly:

We cannot plead impotency. We cannot plead that we are not able to take care of our souls, for we certainly can if we will. There never was a man yet that endeavored to take care for the salvation of his soul and found that he could not. . . . No, this will not do; let no man feed himself up with thoughts of making this excuse on the great day of accounts."<sup>19</sup>

In *Christian Safety* he stated it rather bluntly to his New York parishioners. "There wants nothing to make a man one of his, but his being willing."<sup>20</sup>

The essence of conversion is the implantation of the divine nature into the heart. Through preaching, God has willed to open eyes to the beauty of the Savior. In the miracle

of redemption applied, the eyes of the heart are infused with new qualities and desires; these qualities and desires are the Holy Spirit. Says Edwards, "There is something immediately and instantaneously put into their hearts at that call that they had nothing of before, that effectually disposes them to follow."<sup>21</sup> At once, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer in the form of his divine character, what we call the fruit of the Spirit. The principal characteristics of the saint are love and joy. In the enravishing vision of Christ, seen in the midst of the proclamation of the Word of God, the sinner freely embraces Christ unto salvation. Mankind does not have the freedom to act without a cause and the cause of an infinite act can only be an infinite cause (i.e., God). However, when people act freely, they want to act as they do because in it they conceive the high object of pleasure.

It is difficult to describe the miracle of preaching as it relates to the Word of God and the rebirth experience with finite language. The difficulty for the preacher is that language is not equal to what he seeks to describe. Yet, this is the medium God chose to reveal himself to people.

## CONCLUSION

The editors of the most recent volume of Edwards' sermons, the *Yale Reader*, made this comment about the role of preaching: "Whereas Edwards was well-acquainted and adept with the entire range of Reformed theology, however, his primary interest as a pastor was in shepherding souls to heaven."<sup>22</sup> The task of preaching is the duty of the preacher; however, what is so essential about the task? Preaching creates the occasion for hitherto unknown ideas and concepts to enter the mind. Without ideas in the mind, the choice of them is impossible (the reason sinners cannot come to Christ is that they do not know that God is beautiful). This is what preaching is about to Edwards. Reasoned Edwards:

For seeing that in order to the knowledge of spiritual things there must be those things in the mind, at least in order to a[c]knowledge anything clear and adequate, sinners must be

destitute even of the ideas of many spiritual and heavenly things of divine excellencies, because they don't experience them. It's impossible for them to have so much as the idea of faith, trust in God, holy resignation, divine love, Christian charity; because their mind is not possessed of those things, and therefore can't have an idea of the excellencies and beauties of God and Christ, of which those things are the image—he "knows not the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:14).<sup>23</sup>

In summary, preaching is the means of entering spiritual information into the mind. It is one of the primary means of glorifying God. Edwards argued it this way,

For God to glorify himself is to discover himself in his works, or to communicate himself in his works which is all one. . . . He loves to see himself, his own excellencies and glories, appearing in his works, loves to see himself communicated.<sup>24</sup>

Preaching is intimately connected to God's glory because it is rooted in the Bible, God's clearest word to us. The glory of preaching is that its object is God himself; it is a holy endeavor.

Preaching is difficult in that the medium of language is not equal to what we are seeking to describe; finite language is inadequate in conveying the infinite. Said Edwards:

The things of Christianity are so spiritual, so refined, so high and abstracted, and so much above the things we ordinarily converse with and our common affairs, to which we adapt our words; and language not supplying us with words completely adapted to those high and abstract ideas, we are forced to use words which do not otherwise exhibit what we would than analogically. Which words in their ordinary use do not in everything, but only in some part, exhibit what we intend they should when used in divinity.<sup>25</sup>

Preaching is the means to the redemption of the soul; it is the vehicle through which the redeemer's work is made applicable to us. Without hearing about Christ, how can a

person choose him? Can we have faith in something that is non-existent to us? Faith comes through hearing and that comes through the proclamation of the Word of God. If the unseen, the transcendent, is the permanent, every effort that we undertake for perishing souls is of paramount importance. Preaching is that activity of revealing to people the most beautiful object in all the world, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Preaching, the ultimate means of exalting Christ, requires enormous effort on our part. We must first know of the Christ that we preach. We must have a knowledge of the Word of God, the substance of our preaching. And we must know the people to whom we preach so that we can fruitfully communicate. It is not of primary importance that we know a person's social background or work experience. However, it is fundamentally crucial that we understand how people process thought and how ideas, conveyed through words, are brought into the soul. The art of communication must have a priority for the preacher. Edwards put it this way in speaking on Matthew 16:17:

The Word of God is not the proper cause of this effect [conversion, the gift of spiritual life], it does not operate by any natural force in it. The Word of God is made use of to convey to the mind the subject of this saving instruction: and this indeed doth convey to us by natural force or influence. It conveys to our minds these and those doctrines; it is the cause of the notion of them in our heads, but not of the sense of them in our hearts. Indeed, a person cannot have spiritual light without the word. But that does not argue that the word properly causes light.<sup>26</sup>

Placing the Word in the mind is the task of the preacher; it requires all the effort we can put forth to proclaim the message of the gospel and deliver it in such a manner that our hearers can understand.

This is what I have learned from Jonathan Edwards in regard to the subject of preaching. First, we must be concerned for a knowledgeable proclamation of the mind and will of God. To Edwards, this proclamation was Christ and the

great work of the redemption of the soul. Second, we must become a student not only of the art of speaking, but also the art of understanding of how people most profitably receive the Word. Language, at best, is an earthen vessel employed by earthen vessels to reach out to blighted, broken vessels with the infinite Word of God, Christ. Conrad Cherry is instructive at this point:

"The Scriptures and the language of the preacher become the Word of God only through the power of God's Spirit. . . . The power of God's grace cannot be reduced to its vehicles; the words of scriptural authority and the word of the preacher are not of themselves, as human agents, capable of divine operation."<sup>27</sup>

Third, people have the ability to receive the Word, but they labor under a debilitating ignorance of the redeeming beauty of Christ. Unwillingness caused by blindness, not inability, is the issue. The cause of this unwillingness is that all the "good" things available to one's perceptive heart are broken, empty vapors of false hope and perverted joy. Therefore, people choose many things, but only to their detriment. Preaching presents to the mind the infinite object of Christ, and if attended by the work of the Holy Spirit, enlightens the eyes. Our task is to present Christ to people; only God can give them eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart full of affection. The granting of the Christ in all his beauty to a person is one of the mysteries of God. He grants mercy to whom he will grant mercy. Our task is to preach him. How can anyone fall in love with someone they have never really met? The reason a person does not come to Christ, at least according to Edwards, is because either they have never been presented with a beautiful Christ or in the presentation of a beautiful Christ God has willed to blind their eyes lest they see and believe.

In 1750, Edwards preached his farewell sermon to his Northampton parishioners after more than twenty years among them. In his discourse, he summarized the endeavors of his pulpit ministry for all those years.

I have used my utmost endeavors to win you: I have sought out acceptable words, that if possible I might prevail upon you to forsake sin, turn to God, and accept of Christ as your Savior and Lord. I have spent my strength very much in these things."<sup>28</sup>

#### Author

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#### Notes

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23. *Miscellanies*, 13:354-55, [239].
24. *Miscellanies*, 13:360-61, [247].
25. *Miscellanies*, 13:249, [83].
26. Jonathan Edwards, "Divine and Supernatural Light."
27. *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 47.
28. *Reader*, 394.