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*Jonathan Edwards' Experimental Calvinism:
Pastors Learning Revival Harmony of Theology and
Experience from a Leader in the Great Awakening*



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Jonathan Edwards, concerned over the degradation and polarization of a beautiful harmony between Calvinistic theology and revival experience—between reformation and revival—became a pastoral leader and mediator who sought to maintain the revival harmony of these two treasured ideals during the Great Awakening. Character defects and defective revival experiences in New England's predominantly Calvinistic congregations increasingly reflected a disproportioned Calvinism. One defect involved having much discovery of God's love and grace without a proportionate discovery of his awful majesty and holiness, which tends to lead to pride and presumption. The other was that having discovered God's holy majesty, without a proportionate discovery of his love and grace, tends to unbelief and oppression.² Edwards' revival leadership, expressed in his published narratives and sermons on revival-experience, countered this polarization with an apologetic display of experimental delight in God's Excellencies, "tempered together" and "duly proportioned one to another." Herein, we may discover the Edwardsean genius of Experimental Calvinism offering today's pastors and congregation wisdom and guidance. Imagine an army of Calvinistic pastors leading many into proportional discoveries of God's Excellencies in an experimental manner!

WHAT IS EDWARDS' EXPERIMENTAL CALVINISM?

"The Right Path in the Middle"

Experimental Calvinism combines two beautiful Edwardsean emphases, which he held together in dialectic and existential tension. These two beautiful emphases are Reformation theology and revival experience, both of which magnify the symmetry between the Word and the Spirit—between knowing God and experiencing God. The spiritual battle for pastors is to consistently magnify both emphases in unity, to take what Edwards calls "the right path in the middle." "Satan leads both far out of the right way," wrote the revival leader with great concern, "driving each to great extremes, one on the right hand, and the other on the left, till the right path in the middle is almost wholly neglected."³By taking the middle path, Edwards was not advocating a compromise between two competing viewpoints. Rather, Edwards was convinced that these two emphases would only be rightly comprehended when held together in harmony. Therefore, the concept of "experimental Calvinism" can take the pastor down the "path in the middle," enabling him to avoid Satan's attempts to keep the right and middle path from being "almost wholly neglected."

The term "experimental" both commends and describes the Calvinistic interest that Edwards pursued along with others. After hearing Gilbert Tenant, for example, George Whitefield stated:

I have never before heard such a sermon. He convinced me more and more that we can preach the Gospel no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts. [H]e has learned *experimentally* to dissect the heart of natural man.⁴ (Emphasis added)

Thus, as Geoffrey F. Nuttall asserts, the Puritan "interest is primarily not dogmatic—at least not in any theoretic sense—it is experimental."⁵ If any Puritan should be selected to represent this experimental interest among the Calvinists, it would surely be fair to choose Jonathan Edwards. Dr. Martin Lloyd-

Jones said of Edwards, "He knew more about experimental religion than most men. It is essentially experimental, essentially practical. He was pre-eminently the theologian of Revival, the theologian of experience, or as some have put it 'the theologian of the heart.'"⁶

It is important to understand, however, that "Experimental" not only commends and describes the Calvinistic interest Edwards pursued, but also the Calvinistic heritage Edwards honored. The term, "experimental," was a term Edwards' generation drew from historical Calvinism. It is the *theologia pectoris* of Augustine. "Experimental" comes from the Latin word *experimentum*, which is derived from a verb meaning "try, testing, proving, or putting to the test." Calvin used experiential (*experientia*) and experimental (*experimentum*) interchangeably.⁷ "Experimental" was often used by Edwards' peers to distinguish "vital religion" from the Enlightenment's deadening and dwarfing influence upon the Reformation's sons and daughters. Calvin wrote of a "sense of sweetness" (*sensus suavitatis*), that is, the saints new and immediate sensibilities to delight in God by the Spirit and the Word.⁸ The constant use of "sense" and "sweetness" through Edwards' writings is evidence for the apt terminology: Experimental Calvinism.

Calvinists may object to my use of experimental together with Calvinism since true Calvinism is experimental in nature. Let me, therefore, have Edwards speak to this by the use of two quotations. Pondering the purpose and usefulness of doctrine, he ruminated in his early "Miscellanies" notebooks, "I know by experience how useful these doctrines be . . . the knowledge of which I have experienced how much it contributes to the *betterment of my heart*."⁹ Years later, he responded to Charles Chauncey's revival criticisms, "Spiritual experience and sound theology go together. Accordingly, the Reformers, and the Puritans after them, had attributed opposition to the doctrines of grace as evidence of spiritual ignorance."¹⁰ Experimental both commends and describes the Calvinistic interest and heritage Edwards pursued and honored as a revival leader clarifying genuine Christian experience against both revival criticism and enthusiasm.

The term *Calvinism* is used to describe Edwards because it was his "delightful conviction." Edwards was opposed to Arminianism as "a threatening noise" in New England that would hinder gospel blessings.¹¹ "I think I have found," wrote Edwards, "that no discourses have been more *remarkably blessed*, than those in which the doctrine of God's *absolute* sovereignty, with regard to the salvation of sinners."¹² One clear evidence and expression of Edwards' experimental Calvinism comes from his "Memoirs:"

From my childhood up, my mind has been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; Leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. . . . But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of the sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.¹³

Having given an explanation, let us now turn our attention to see how Edwards illustrated experimental Calvinism from his life and ministry as a pastor.

HOW DID EDWARDS ILLUSTRATE EXPERIMENTAL CALVINISM?

The following three observations of Edwards will lend themselves to three applications for pastors to put into practice for themselves. Edwards demonstrates an *immediate* acquaintance with God; Edwards practiced solitude to cultivate an inward, sweet sense of God. And he treasured narrating and interpreting life.

First, notice that the pastor has an *immediate* acquaintance with God. Edwards does not let the experimental Calvinism of other theologians, authors, and mentors substitute for his own immediate discoveries of God. For example, when seeking God for humility, he wrote:

I have greatly longed of late, for a broken heart, and to lie low before God. And when I ask for humility of God, I can't bear the thoughts of being no more humble than other Christians. It seems to me, that though their degrees of humility may be suitable for them; yet it would be a vile self-exaltation in me, not to be the lowest in humility of all mankind. . . . 'Tis an expression that has long been natural for me to use in prayer to God. I ought to lie infinitely low before God.¹⁴

Edwards carefully listened to others, paying careful attention to their words while expressing a prayer for his own humility. Experimental Calvinism precludes not only defective experience, but also experimental agnosticism. In his contemplation of Christ Edwards speaks of an experiential knowledge of Christ. While contemplating Christ and the divine glory, he found "a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns o[f] this world; and a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations, of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God."¹⁵ Since Edwards' experimental Calvinism was immediate, it gave him that "sweet sense" Calvin wrote about. And a pastor ministering with a sweet sense of God is useful to his congregation. Does an inward, sweet sense of God ever grow lesser or greater in degree? Edwards believed it did.¹⁶ If so, what did Edwards do to cultivate greater measures of this inward, sweet sense of God?

Second, Edwards practiced solitude to cultivate an inward, sweet sense of God. This does not imply that his mystical-like experiences shaped his theology. Rather his Calvinism shaped his spiritual delight, inward feel, and affections.¹⁷ After conversing with his father, Timothy Edwards, about a recent "vision" of Christ, the young Edwards retreated to a solitary place to cultivate his sense of God. Edwards recalls:

As I was walking there, and looked up on the sky and clouds; there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in sweet conjunction: majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty;

and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness. . . . Felt the doctrines of election, free grace, and our not being able to do anything without the grace of God.¹⁸

Notice that Edwards' contemplative joys and ineffable experiences came from a unitary revelation of God from both the language of creation and the words of Scripture. Like the Psalmist, Edwards could say, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the statutes of the Lord are right, bringing joy to the heart" (Psalm 19:1, 8). It seems that his immediate Calvinism gave him such a satisfying, inward and sweet sense of God that he made it a priority to cultivate this sense by practicing solitude. [I would], wrote Edwards, "spend abundance of my time, in walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy and prayer, and converse with God."¹⁹ What did he do besides contemplate, converse, and sing to God? It is evident from his writings that he spent much of this time in solitude getting an immediate and cultivated sense of God and writing out of this context.

Third, Edwards treasured narrating and interpreting his life. His interpretive lens was Calvinism: God is sovereign and actively involved in all of life and history through his works of providence. His "Personal Narrative" was an interpretive story of God's active and sovereign involvement in his life, which was incorporated within the larger, history of redemption. W. Clark Gilpin wrote in a recent article, "The spiritual disciplines of solitude were Edwards's method for halting the flow, looking backward to discern the plot of his life and forwards to imagine the shape of its end."²⁰ Discursive memory looked for redemptive themes that laced together twenty-five years of experimental Calvinism that grew more knowledgeable with time and experience. "My experience," wrote Edwards, "had not then [boyhood] taught me, as it has done since."²¹ Edwards illustrates experimental Calvinism for pastors in particularly interpreting providence in narrative genre, which was a treasured effort to narrate his life, the life of his church life in revival, and in the flow of redemptive history.

In these three ways Edwards illustrates how pastors today can express experimental Calvinism. How may pastors be characterized by this kind of experimental Calvinism?

HOW CAN MODERN PASTORS APPLY JONATHAN EDWARDS' EXPERIMENTAL CALVINISM?

Pastors can best apply Edwards' experimental Calvinism in three ways. Pastors will profit best from Edwards' genius by making it first hand, by cultivating a sweet sense of God through solitude, and by narrating their own personal stories.

First, seek immediate and proportioned discoveries of God. In this way you will avoid the loss of letting Edwards' discoveries be a substitute for your own. Pastors who do not seek God directly are not *experimental*, thus not Edwardsean in the sense that I am using this term. "When persons see a thing with their own eyes," wrote Edwards, "it gives them the greatest certainty they can have of it, greater than they can have by any information of others."²² Archibald Alexander, an admirer of Edwards' writings, advised his Princeton hearers: "Search for truth without a slavish regard for human authority."²³ We may gain wonderful truths of God indirectly, but we only discover our sweetest experiences of God immediately.

Second, practice solitude in order to cultivate an inward, sweet delight in God. Find some outdoor "solitary places" to "spend an abundance of your time" singing to, conversing with, and contemplating God. It is foolish for us to think that we will commend to our hearers any sweet, inward sense of God's Excellencies without ever cultivating the same in solitary places. Practicing solitude will cultivate an inward, sweet delight in God. This is the sense of God Edwards' practice of solitude cultivate:

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God. . . . The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an Excellency great enough to swallow up all

thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud.²⁴

One of the best discoveries a pastor may ever make in solitude is that his solitude suffers from experimental agnosticism. When he gets alone with God he discovers he has been living “a life on the side,” a life void of singing to Christ and walking with God outside of public, pastoral functions. He discovers what philosophers call ontological levity and lightness, which means there is no weight of glory or substance to his life outside of a well-crafted offering of the public functions others affirm him doing as a pastor. Practicing solitude with God, will cultivate the inward, sweet delight in him we were made to enjoy.

Third, write your own “Personal and Faithful Narratives.” Start interpreting your Christian experience and pilgrimage through the lens of divine providence.²⁵ Learn to love narrating not only your important part in redemptive history, but also learn to love the Sovereign Author of salvation whose invisible Hand of providence applies it. We are living in a culture that is in search of meaning, context, and the metanarrative, all for the purpose of finding meaning for life. Narrative is plainly the Holy Spirit’s literary genre of choice for the majority of the Bible. It is his way of giving a proper prominence to human lives in providence, and his irreducible way to express Christian experience and identity. Experimental Calvinism is bound to give expression to this transcendental genre because of the inescapable nature of expressing and interpreting Christian experience. This may be the reason why the Puritans favored the conversion narratives for reception into church membership. Could this be why Edwards’s *Life of Brainerd* continues to be so well cherished? Scholars tend to agree, after a century of Edwardsean scholarship, that Edwards’ narratives shaped his generation’s interpretation of revival and Christian experience through a Calvinistic lens.²⁶

Edwards offers a lasting legacy for new generations of pastors desiring experimental Calvinism 250 years later. The

reason for this may be because he spent “much abundance” in solitary places, not just writing out his sermons and publishing them, but writing interpretive narratives of his pastoral experiences amidst providential seasons of drought and revival. “What the *Narrative* provided,” wrote Chris Armstrong, “to the dynamic but scattered transatlantic revival of the mid-1700s was a pattern. . . . The *Faithful Narrative* was not merely an inspirational account, but a complete map, guidebook, and how-to manual covering the preparation, onset, maintenance, regulation, dangers, and effects of revival—all, of course, with the understanding that the work of conversion was finally God’s alone.”²⁷

Edwards’ experimental Calvinism invites today’s pastor to acquire first hand such inward, sweet senses of God, which are cultivated by practicing solitude and writing personal-experience narratives permeated with fresh discoveries of God. Edwardsean pastors may use different tools, like cars and post-its instead of horses and scraps of paper, but we share the same Lord of creation and redemption. When out riding, Edwards would scribble his thoughts on scraps of paper as they struck him, then pin them to his coat. One early biographer of Edwards narrated a memorable moment when Edwards arrived at his door after a fruitful trip, with his black coat a checkerboard. Pastors, what will you do with your time as an experimental Calvinist? Let’s be on the watch for an army of pastors showing up places covered with post-its!

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Notes

1. *Proportional* will be used throughout to show the relation of God’s attributes to one another—of Calvinistic theology to Christian experience and so on because Edwards used this term frequently, believing “the Spirit of God is wont to give graces and gracious affections in a

- beautiful symmetry and proportion." *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1989), xvii.
2. John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, Virginia: Berea Publications, 1992), Volume 2:1-2.
 3. Edward Hickman, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1834; reprint, 1984), Volume 1:235.
 4. George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 347-348.
 5. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, reprinted 1992), 7. When Benjamin Franklin called his "the age of experiments," he identified a central theme of the Enlightenment. See *The Democratic Enlightenment* by Donald H. Meyer (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976). To adopt the phrases of others, Edwards used "eclectic synthesis" as an "ambidextrous theologian . . . what the right hand took away, the left hand could retrieve."
 6. "Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival" in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 348-371.
 7. Terence Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards, Art, and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 1-42. For recent developments in scholarship see "Spiritual Perception in Jonathan Edwards" by Michael J. McClymond in *The Journal of Religion* (77:2, April 1997, 195-216). See also "Experimental Preaching" by Joel Beeke in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 95.
 8. Edwards called the Christian's spiritual perception of God the "new sense," "spiritual sense," or "sense of the heart." He argued that the soul in conversion comes into immediate contact with God and gains knowledge in the full sense-based on a direct encounter with God. This does not imply that Edwards gave way to his pervasive fascination in human affections, in spiritual delight and sweetness, and the inward feel of Christian experience. He insisted that the spiritual sense is our response to God as he is in his divine nature. John E. Smith makes this assertion in his introduction to *Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:30.
 9. *Works*, 13, 328 (no. 181). *Works* refers to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 22 volumes to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), Perry Miller, John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, general editors, and will be cited simply by volume number (e.g., *Works*, 13) and page.
 10. Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 19XX), 103.bv
 11. The editors, D. G. Hart and Mark A. Noll, give historical definition to Calvinism in American tradition. "The term *Calvinist*, like *Lutheran*, was initially a term of opprobrium. The Great Awakening, however, especially the work of Edwards and Whitefield, prompted a resurgence of

- commitment to and interest in Reformed theology." *Dictionary of Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America*, General Editor, D. G. Hart, and Consulting Editor Mark A. Noll, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), viii & 213. Edwards' Calvinism was representative of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* that he grew up on, the Presbyterian and Congregational churches he pastored in, and the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) he was briefly president of.
12. Edward Hickman, editor, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1:353.
 13. Hickman, xii-xiii.
 14. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, volume 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, editor George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), 803.
 15. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, volume 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, editor George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), 792-793.
 16. "After this," wrote Edwards after his initial conversion and new sense of God, "my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness." *Works*, 16:793-794. For a recent biography clarifying the chronological development of Edwards' sense of God, see *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George M. Marsden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
 17. In other words, unlike Kantian epistemology, our theology and experience conform to the object (God), not the object to the mind, theology, and experience. Whereas his opponent in revival, Charles Chauncy, would agree with Edwards that the object (God), Chauncy excluded the experimental and affections and stressed only the rational side of Calvinism. Chauncy agreed with Locke that reasonable Christianity had to be dispassionate. "One of the most essential Things," wrote Chauncy, "is the Reduction of their *Passions* to a proper Regimen . . . Reasonable Beings are not to be guided by *Passion* or *Affection*, though the Object of it should be God." Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (Boston: Rogers & Fowle, 1743), 324.
 18. *Works*, 16:793, 767.
 19. *Works* 16:794.
 20. W. Clark Gilpin, "'Inward, Sweet Delight in God': Solitude in the Career of Jonathan Edwards" in *The Journal of Religion*, (Volume 82, Number 4, October 2002).
 21. Gilpin, 796.
 22. Edward Hickman, editor, 2:907.
 23. James W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander* (New York, 1854), 465.
 24. Edward Hickman, editor, 1:47.
 25. Edwards gave permission for this as long as the Christian subordinated the "voice" of providence to the rule of the Word. Edwards wrote:

"Indeed, there is a voice of God in his providence, that may be interpreted and well understood by the rule of his Word; and providence may, to our dark minds and weak faith, confirm the Word of God as it fulfills it: but to improve divine providence thus, is quite a different thing from making a rule of providence." C. C. Goen, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), Volume 4, p. 452.

26. Since the medium of television, the "talking head" news reporters, and informational techniques are giving historical and providential information and images without context, pastors should seize this opportunity to become leading interpreters of the times, "the kairon." For the battle for truth in the America's post-everything culture is much more a battle over interpretations than a battle over observations.
27. Chris Armstrong, "Letter from the Editor" in *Christian History*, (Issue 77, Volume XXII, Number 1, 8).