

## JONATHAN EDWARDS AND "WHAT REASON TEACHES"

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As scholarly work on the Jonathan Edwards manuscript collection has expanded in recent years, the complexity and range of the unpublished sermons have become increasingly apparent. Wilson Kimnach asserts that the astonishingly consistent "specificity, unity, and intensity"<sup>1</sup> of the sermonic messages mark Edwards as a master writer and thinker for whom the sermon was "the pre-eminent genre and the primary vehicle for the articulation of his thought."<sup>2</sup> The sermons' thousands of manuscript pages, the great majority unpublished, offer a largely untapped and lively source of light on the pastoral preoccupations and regular public declarations of one of America's foremost eighteenth-century religious leaders.

Among the sermons Edwards delivered during his thirty-six years of preaching (1722-1758) are at least ten ordination and installation sermons celebrating the authority and eternal significance of the office of gospel minister.<sup>3</sup> One of these unpublished manuscripts is an exhortation based on 1 Cor 2:11-13 and delivered on May 7, 1740, at the Congregational Church of Cold Spring (now Belchertown), Massachusetts, for the ordination of Edward Billing. Remarkable as a homily with polemical overtones much more akin to the philosophical treatises than to the celebrative and honorific preaching Edwards generally delivered for ordinations, this little-known sermon aims throughout to attack what Edwards considered the "unjust and fallacious practices . . . so much insisted upon by many of late viz. to determine by our own reason what is agreeable to the moral perfection of God and then interpret the scriptures by this."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Kimnach, "Jonathan Edwards's Pursuit of Reality," in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (ed. N. Hatch and H. A. Stout; New York: Oxford University, 1988) 111. The approximately twelve hundred Edwards manuscript sermons housed at the Yale Beinecke Library and supplemented by the Edwards collection from Andover Newton are presently being prepared under the editorial direction of Kimnach for publication in the Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kimnach, *The Literary Techniques of Jonathan Edwards* (dissertation; University of Pennsylvania, 1971) 1.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed list of these sermons, including dates, occasions and texts, see H. Westra, *The Minister's Task and Calling in the Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Lewistown: Edwin Mellen, 1986) 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> The sermon manuscripts in the Edwards collection at Yale are catalogued according to the Biblical text upon which the sermon doctrine is formulated. In this essay all passages from the May 7, 1740, sermon on 1 Cor 2:11-13 are my transcriptions from Edwards' holograph sermon.

Indeed, if Edwards' manuscript sermons are, as some scholars claim, of all his many works "the most revealing of his innermost thought,"<sup>5</sup> this ordination message composed in 1740 amply demonstrates that its author, at the outset of the Great Awakening, was using every available opportunity to restrain rationalist and Arminian views that he feared detrimental to the orthodox Protestant position that humans cannot attain salvation through their own capabilities. Edwards' May 1740 sermon, hidden from the public eye and ear for two hundred and fifty years, remains a vigorous apologia of divine revelation as the sole rule of faith and religion, a defense bolstered by abstract metaphysical analysis, examination of empirical evidence, and theological disputation.

As Edwards crafts a message to underscore the ordained clergy's responsibility to resist relying on their own intelligence, he formulates a sermon doctrine that is both warning and mandate: "Ministers are not to preach those things which their own wisdom or reason suggest, but the things that are already dictated to them by the superior wisdom and knowledge of God." A vital ingredient in the sermon's content and exegesis as well as its construction and revision is Edwards' careful use of what he termed "sanctified" reason as his "greatest friend"<sup>6</sup> to serve in vigorously warning laity and fellow ministers alike against the dangers inherent in self-indulgent or self-serving ratiocination.

The sermon's historical context provides important clues to its highly argumentative edge. Edwards' protests against Arminianism had become public by 1734 as he led the Hampshire [Ministerial] Association in opposing what he believed to be evidences of creeping heterodoxy among New England clergymen, particularly Robert Breck of Springfield and William Rand of Sunderland. Additionally, in 1734–35 Edwards preached a sermon series on justification by faith, a series striking forcefully against the notion of justification by means of human virtue or intelligence, an adverse scheme, said Edwards, that can only be believed if "we reject the Scriptures themselves as perplexed and absurd, and make ourselves wiser than God, and pretend to know his mind better than himself."<sup>7</sup> In Edwards' estimation the sermons on justification had been "remarkably blessed" and had borne fruit as "God's work wonderfully broke forth amongst us, and souls began to flock to Christ."<sup>8</sup> But he also claimed that for delivering these sermons and then for publishing them he had been

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Where words are undecipherable or require interpolation I have placed my insertions in brackets. Only where necessary or helpful I have added punctuation to Edwards' notoriously punctuationless prose.

<sup>5</sup> Kinnach, *Edwards and the American Experience* 9.

<sup>6</sup> J. Edwards, "The Peace Which Christ Gives," in *Jonathan Edwards: Selections* (ed. C. H. Faust and T. H. Johnson; rev. ed.; New York: Hill and Wang, 1962) 139.

<sup>7</sup> J. Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. E. Hickman; London: William Tegg, 1879), 1. 620–621. The sermon series on justification was consolidated into one discourse called "Justification by Faith Alone" and grouped with four other related sermons under the publication title *Discourse on Various Important Subjects* in 1738.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 620.

painfully ridiculed and "greatly reproached."<sup>9</sup> Thus when in December 1739 Charles Chauncy, articulate clergyman of Boston's First Church and friend of William Rand, published ("at the desire of many who heard it")<sup>10</sup> a sermon arguing unequivocally that "as men are rational, free agents, they can't be religious but with the free consent of their wills; and this can be gain'd in no way, but that of reason and persuasion,"<sup>11</sup> Edwards read this as another threatening voice spreading abroad the presumption that humans could "gain" a way to God through their own thinking, understanding, or virtue.

In the face of these mounting challenges to theological orthodoxy and to divine revelation as final authority, Edwards no doubt viewed his invitation to officiate at Edward Billing's ordination as an opportune public occasion to speak against what he considered extremely dangerous ideas being broadcast among colonial churches. The ordination offered Edwards the chance to speak not only to the Cold Spring congregation and pastor about to be ordained but also to numerous ministerial representatives from surrounding churches who would attend the special ecclesiastical celebration.

Certainly, as the sermon demonstrates clearly throughout, it was especially to the attending clergy that Edwards most intently aimed his admonitions and pleas not to reject Biblical doctrines (such as justification by faith) that might contain "difficulties and seeming inconsistencies that their reason can't solve." Human reason must always bow to divine revelation and the authority of Scripture when presented with "the high and abstract mysteries of the Deity, the prime and most abstract of all beings."<sup>12</sup> Ministers as God's messengers and ambassadors must always subordinate their imperfect and finite thought to the wisdom of the Bible:

[Ministers] ought to rely on what [is] revealed and discovered to their minds by [divine] understanding infinitely superior to theirs and this revelation they are to make the rule in their preaching. . . . Ministers are not to make those things that seem right to their own reason a rule in their interpreting a revelation but the revelation is to be the rule of its own interpretation. The way that they must interpret scriptures is not to compare the dictates of the Spirit of God in his revelation with what their own reason says and then to seek such an interpretation as shall be agreeable to their understanding.

Repeatedly Edwards asserts that limited human reason is incapable in its own power to comprehend fully the mind of God: "If God will give us a revelation from heaven of the very truth concerning his own nature and acts, counsels, and ways, and of the scriptural and invisible world, 'tis unreasonable to expect any other than that there should be many things

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> C. Chauncy, *The Only Compulsion Proper to Be Made Use of in the Affairs of Conscience and Religion: A Sermon Preached at the Old Brick Meeting House, Boston, September 2nd, 1739* (Boston: J. Draper, 1739), title page.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>12</sup> J. Edwards, "The Mind," number 35, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (ed. W. I. Anderson; New Haven: Yale University, 1980) 335.

in such revelation that should be entirely beyond our understanding and seem impossible." No matter how intently someone might strain to understand the very mind of God, these divine mysteries are, Edwards asserts, beyond the grasp of mortals. Faithful ministers must therefore remain undaunted by the fact that the gospel will "seem unintelligible and absurd to the wise men of the world," for the apostle Paul himself observed that "philosophers with all their boasted words or reason could never discern the truth in the things of God."

Noteworthy in this sermon, however, is that once Edwards sets forth the sermon text and doctrine, his manuscript of thirty-seven pages makes almost no use of Scripture texts for proof, support, or reference. Instead he uses sanctified reasoning to reinforce his repeated claims that "it is unreasonable to expect any other in a divine revelation than that it should contain mysteries." These mysteries, however incomprehensible, must be wholeheartedly accepted, must not be twisted to suit human theories or schemes. The comfort Edwards holds before his audience is that someday these mysteries will be revealed, when this world has passed away and seekers will see clearly and fully with the eyes of the soul.

In marshaling evidence to support the sermon doctrine and thesis that human reasoning is by nature incapable of understanding divine mysteries, Edwards gives examples from the kinds of questions that children (with their obviously limited powers of reasoning) ask as well as the questions posed by the "Greek philosophers" seeking something "agreeable to their own reason." All these illustrations and references he uses as proofs that it is endemic to the human condition to be baffled by natural and philosophical mysteries as well as religious ones. He describes, for example, the great contrast between early, primitive stages of human knowledge and the more advanced philosophical achievements of the eighteenth century and suggests this as a faint analogy between finite human knowledge and divine knowledge. Edwards poses the comparison rhetorically:

When was there a time when if there had been a revelation from heaven of the very truth of philosophical matters and concerning the nature of created things which must be supposed to lie more level with our understanding than divine things, but that there would have been things in such a revelation that would have appeared not only to the vulgar but also to the learned men of that age as absurd and unacceptable? If many of those positions in philosophy which are now received by the learned world as understood truths had been revealed from heaven to be truths in past ages, they would have been looked upon as mysterious and difficult and would seem as impossible as the most mysterious Christian doctrines do now.

Often Edwards appeals directly to the listeners' personal experience: "No doubt . . . there are learned men here present that do now receive principles in philosophy" that at an earlier time in their lives they would have viewed "as difficult as any mystery that is commonly supposed to be in the Bible." Pushing his empirical argument further, Edwards reminds his audience that there are many things such as "mathematical theorems that relate to Quantity and Nature" that adults understand but that "if

told to children appear very absurd and seem to imply great and evident contradictions." He then suggests that compared to God, however, all of us are very small children.

At this point Edwards draws upon ideas and experiences he had recorded previously in his miscellaneous notebooks. He borrows a short excerpt from his "Miscellanies" entry number 652, which is an extensive notation titled "Mysteries of Religion" and which includes a homespun anecdote about a young boy baffled by a mathematical problem.<sup>13</sup> In the 1740 ordination sermon, Edwards states: "The best of us are but children of God. There is vastly a greater proportion between God's understanding [and that] of the oldest philosopher or mathematician than between [the philosopher or mathematician] and that of the smallest child." Although it is unlikely that Edwards would have used informal stories extemporaneously in his sermon, the full text of "Miscellanies" 652 gives a lively account of Edwards explaining and then concretely proving to a very skeptical youngster "that a piece of any matter two inches square was eight times as large as one of but one inch square." Edwards concludes "Miscellanies" 652 with the assertion that much as a mathematical truth appears mysterious to a child, so the mysteries and truths of religion (such as the Trinity or God's sovereign will or justification by faith) may appear contradictory or baffling to adults.

Edwards borrows further arguments from earlier notebook writings. One sermon passage, evoking images of divine and supernatural light, closely parallels "Miscellanies" 765.<sup>14</sup> Weaving sentences from "Miscellanies" 765 into the ordination message, Edwards illustrates limited human insight that cannot accept "the sublime nature of divine things" because it cannot comprehend them. Only the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit can shed the light that enables a person to accept these divine mysteries:

If one seeks for any thing in the dark by so low a faculty as the sense of feeling or by seeing with a dim light, sometimes we cannot find it and it will seem impossible that it should be there. But yet when a clear light comes to shine into the place and we discern by a better faculty or the same faculty under a better advantage, the thing that before was irrefrangible appears very plain to us.

In explaining that even the redeemed in this world will not be fully able to see the full truth of divine mysteries, Edwards once again stresses—for parishioners and ecclesiastical leaders alike—the limitations and child-likeness of human reason compared to the sovereign mind of God.

Throughout the sermon, Edwards works methodically and logically to convince his listeners that it is not orthodox Christianity but rather rationalistic thinking and Arminianism that are guilty of intellectual arrogance and "absurdities," one of the chief absurdities being the notion that salvation can

<sup>13</sup> In using this passage I am indebted to T. Schafer's transcript copy in the Edwards Collection at Beinecke Library.

<sup>14</sup> Schafer typescript at Beinecke Library.

come through one's own virtue or by accepting the gospel on one's own intellectual terms. Protesting against what he sees as virulent heresy, Edwards contends that those who minimize the authority of Scripture or those for

whom difficulty and seeming inconsistencies [in the Bible] are a weighty objection against doctrines of revelation don't make suitable allowances for the vast disproportion there is between God's understanding and ours.

For Edwards the nonnegotiable principle in reading and interpreting God's Word is this: "Revelation was given to be a rule to reason, a guide to our understanding, and not our understanding to be a rule and guide to that [revelation]." Implicit in this principle is the proper "modesty and humility and reverence to God" that "requires that we allow that God is better able to declare to us what is agreeable to His perfection than we are to declare to Him in our Selves." Echoing the earlier descriptions of human wisdom as fledgling or juvenile in contrast to God's wisdom, Edwards considers that before the sovereign God all persons are children, and God like "the supreme legislative authority of a nation don't ask children what laws are just . . . to make or what rules are just . . . to proceed by."

For the clergy in his audience, Edwards' sermon application urges an imperative: Ministers, being God's chosen and ordained messengers, are to declare God's Word as God himself declares it, in the very "style in which [God's] revelations are often given forth. . . . Thus saith the Lord.' . . . God hasn't left it to ministers' discretion what doctrines they had best to teach their people. . . . Ministers are only sent on His errand."

But even as the sermon firmly underscores the sacredness of the minister's authority and errand, it stresses also that the Word of God is available for all God's people, not only for ministers, "or else we must return to the tenet . . . [that] the scriptures were given only for learned men and that there are so many things that are mysterious in it that are not fit to be in the hands of common people, and therefore don't bother even to have the scriptures in a known tongue." Such statements, with their anti-Catholic undertones, place Edwards firmly in the Reformation tradition in which the laity no less than their spiritual leaders bear the responsibility to hear, read, study and accept the Word. Each person will be held fully accountable for his or her response to it while the preacher, the specially appointed ambassador and steward of Christ, is uniquely delegated to "declare the whole counsel of God," communicating authoritatively, plainly and truly the redemptive Word's beauty and mystery.

Sometime after the May 1740 ordination Edwards again preached this sermon on 1 Cor 2:11-13. Some obvious revisions and changes in the manuscript pages are indicative of Edwards' sensitivity to audience and the challenges of presenting God's mind and will clearly and precisely to different hearers. The modifications in the sermon's proposition 2, which speaks specifically "to the duty incumbent on gospel ministers," amply illustrate this sensitivity. The first time Edwards preaches the sermon (for the ordination of Billing) he develops the initial point under proposition 2 in prose that is abstruse and recondite:

'Tis their [ministerial] duty not to reject any doctrine that is taught by divine revelation tho men's reason don't teach it. If men are to receive no doctrine of revelation but what their reason can reach and teach 'em in the first place is to render a revelation wholly useless and indeed makes it in effect to be no revelation, for nothing is revealed by God but because it is taught by men's own reason and then there is no need of its being revealed in order to its being revealed. If no doctrine is to be received but what reason teaches them, men must first see whether their reason teaches it before they receive it. And in this rule 'tis impossible that God's revelation should ever really be the ground of our receiving any one doctrine whatsoever because no doctrine is received till we have first consulted reason to know whether that teaches it. So then our receiving it is always in this way prior to our hearing the word of revelation. So then the foundation of faith is men's reason or word and not divine revelation, in direct opposition to the rule of the apostle in the fifth verse of the context.

For subsequent preaching, however, probably to a less learned audience, Edwards modifies the sermon to use a more succinct, particularized and personalized statement for his first point:

'Tis their [ministerial] duty not to reject any doctrine that by comparing one scripture with another appears truly to be held forth by the voice of revelation though it contains difficulties and seeming inconsistencies that their reason can't solve. We ought to receive doctrines that thus appear to be taught in scripture, tho they are mysterious to us still. If the thing still contains what we can't comprehend and still have difficulties remaining in them that we can't solve, we are not to wait [until] they cease to be mysterious to us before we receive them for truth.

The above material, even when revised, remains dense and complicated stuff for a sermon incorporating the essence of paradox—to be reasonable and plain spoken in explaining spiritual concepts whose ineffable heights and depths, Edwards would insist, transcend human reason and language. The revisions are noteworthy because they show the author, with different audiences and occasions in mind, in the midst of the difficult task of searching for the most appropriate language to express the "things in the mind of the incomprehensible Deity."<sup>15</sup>

Also of interest is the fact that elements in this 1740 sermon exploring the relationship between human reason and divine reason foreshadow Edwards' 1742–43 sermon series published in 1746 as *Religious Affections*, in which he elaborates on reason and asserts that it is only grace that "sanctifies reason" and so makes it able to see that the gospel "has its highest and most proper evidence in itself."<sup>16</sup> The person whose reason is illuminated by supernatural grace "has his judgment thus directly convinced and assured of the divinity of the things of the gospel, . . . [and] his belief and assurance is altogether agreeable to reason."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately this gracious suprarational work of the Holy Spirit results in a "kind of intuitive

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, "The Mind," number 8, 341.

<sup>16</sup> J. Edwards, *Religious Affections* (ed. J. E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University, 1959) 307.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 298.

knowledge of the divinity of the things exhibited in the gospel. . . . Without any long chain of arguments . . . the mind ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory."<sup>18</sup> Thus in *Religious Affections* and in other sermons we see Edwards moving beyond the narrow focus he chose for the May 1740 sermon and giving a fuller place to reason as "the noblest faculty of man, . . . which ought to bear rule over the other powers, being given for that end, that it might govern the soul."<sup>19</sup>

Edwards, believing himself sanctified and graciously grounded upon God's superior mind and reason, uses the 1740 ordination sermon pointedly to battle against rationalistic thinking by arguing that it is "unreasonable" to expect God's word to be judged by its consistency with natural or finite reason. Yet the sermon insists that the minister must discover and speak words consistent with divine wisdom by apprehending through divine and supernatural grace what is "the sublime nature of divine things." The burden of Edwards' sermon is that God's ministers must hear and preach only the words "which God bids," not which they themselves or others desire, and that faithful messengers must never forget the great and "reasonable" truth that "divine revelation . . . don't go begging for credit and validity by approbation of [human] understanding."

The sermon's final words forthrightly and optimistically address clergy and people and, by extension, all who are touched by the "sacred work of the ministry." As in most of his other ordination sermons, Edwards' peroration beams a strong eschatological light intended to comfort and inspire: "Adhering to the word of God rather than your own mind, both pastor and people shall hereafter shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of your Father and shall appear to be some of those truly wise that shall shine as the brightness of the firmament."

In speaking these hopeful words, Edwards could little know the difficult path his own ministry would take: through the ecclesiastical controversies and divisions that would plague the Great Awakening, through published debates with Charles Chauncy and others, through deep disagreements within his own church on qualifications for church membership and communion, through the painful events of his own dismissal from the Northampton church, and through the subsequent move to the Stockbridge mission station in western Massachusetts where he would produce the sinewy theological treatises earning him the reputation as America's last great defender of Puritan Calvinism.

Following the May 1740 ordination there would indeed be difficult times ahead for Edwards as he tried to maintain the orthodox positions of the Church in the midst of the eighteenth century's great social and ecclesiastical changes. Indeed it is one of the ironies of Church history that this man who had often celebrated the relation between a pastor and his people would be removed from the fellowship of his own congregation.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 298–299.

<sup>19</sup> J. Edwards, "The Portion of the Righteous" (December 1740 sermon on Rom 2:10), in *Works* (ed. Hickman), 2, 908.

Even so, it should be noted of Edwards that throughout the discussions and controversies surrounding him in the 1740s and 1750s he sought rigorously to adhere to the mandate he had expressed in the doctrine of the May 1740 ordination sermon: not to cling to or preach those things that his own keen reason suggested, but rather "the things that are already dictated . . . by the superior wisdom and knowledge of God." On the one hand, for these efforts he was accused of intellectual arrogance and stubbornness. On the other hand, he was never without loyal supporters and friends. Indeed, as Edwards' notations on his Acts 20:28 sermon indicate, when Billing, whom he had ordained in 1740, moved to another parish he asked Edwards as his friend and mentor to preach the installation sermon on May 28, 1754.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Manuscript sermon in Beinecke Library.