

NOT FROM OURSELVES: HOLY LOVE IN THE THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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Abstract: *In modern discourse, few words have become as debased as the word “love.” Jonathan Edwards defined Christian love very differently from popular ideas about love. Before the prevalence of current Romantic and therapeutic concepts, “holy love” was in widespread use in Christendom to distinguish divine love from mundane loves, and Edwards also embraced the concept. To Edwards the word “holy” especially meant divine moral transcendence. As the sign of sincere faith, holy love stands in contrast to narcissistic religious love, the mark of hypocrisy. Holy love exalts God, pursues ethical purity, values truth, embraces rationality, produces deep humility, and fixes its attention on heavenly realities. For one thing, holy love produces an exile mentality in regard to this world. Edwards also associated holy love with “humble love,” showing that an attitude of rude familiarity toward God goes contrary to holy love. Significantly, holy love leads to moral purity and even induces a hatred of evil, so it is very far from the modern psychotherapeutic notion of “unconditional acceptance.” Furthermore, such love encompasses adherence to scriptural truth and reasonable faith, since “holy affections are not heat without light.” Finally, holy love challenges the credibility of spirituality marked by self-indulgent, emotional excess. This prominent idea in Edwards’s thought makes clear the danger of blending Christian and non-Christian concepts of love and merits a revival of usage in the contemporary Christian world.*

Key Words: *Jonathan Edwards, divine love, holy love, Christian love, unconditional acceptance, unconditional love, virtue, ethics*

Perhaps few words are heard more frequently these days than the word “love.” As a result, unfortunately, the word has also been considerably cheapened and debased. It often means little more than romantic infatuation or friendly affirmation. Unqualified support for love drives people to approve of any sexual expressions of it. Moreover, to the modern mind, love is often equated with politically correct notions such as tolerance, meaning complete, non-judgmental acceptance. Polls by organizations such as the Pew Research Center indicate that sex outside of marriage and homosexuality are increasingly accepted even among those who identify themselves as evangelical Christians.

In ethical controversy, making an appeal to love allows one to take the moral high ground in any dispute. Therefore, we commonly see political and moral discourse appealing to love and hate. The highest commendation for an idea is to associate it with a loving stance, while the most effective way to banish an idea is to label it “hate speech.” Love has been used as a justification for almost every behav-

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ior imaginable, including acts that in other ages have been considered the very opposite of loving. Even practices such as assisted suicide and euthanasia are now usually justified as loving responses to human suffering. Along with that, hating is considered something that only black-hat villains do. Love is the ultimate virtue, while hate is an emotion intrinsically evil. Consequently, the concept of a God who hates evil and punishes it eternally becomes incomprehensible. A character in an episode of a popular television drama declared, “I don’t believe in a God who punishes. I believe in a God of love,” a remark often heard.

Jonathan Edwards would agree with many that love is the highest virtue but would also define it very differently. Significantly, Edwards often attaches another word to love, which is the term “holy.” Calling it “holy” distinguishes it from the more mundane loves we see around us. Grounded in Scripture, his concept appears in a remark on 1 Thess 5:26: “‘Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.’ The meaning is, that they should love all the brethren with holy love.”¹ In his theology, unbelievers have no access to such love. Because of its peculiar, transcendent nature, the presence of holy love becomes the sign of authentic conversion for Edwards: “How can the saint doubt but that he stands in a childlike relation to God, when he plainly sees a childlike union between God and his soul? He that has such strong exercise of a divine and holy love to God, he knows at the same time that this is not from himself.”² Such love cannot be produced naturally, so it must be the result of the operation of divine power. Edwards maintained that holy love is pure and powerful in a way that the world’s love is not. Since it is the product of divine power in the heart, holy love manifests a character all its own. It unites believing hearts to the true God, causing people to be like him. As the mark of sincerity, it stands in contrast to religious narcissism, the mark of insincerity.³ Holy love exalts God, insists on ethical purity, values truth, embraces rationality, produces humility, and fixes its attention above all on heavenly realities.

I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOLY LOVE

The term “holy love” has been in widespread use in church history and is not unique to Edwards. However, before proceeding to a consideration of holy love, it is worthwhile to look at its predecessor, unholy love. In contrast to contemporary people, who frequently appear to think that love can do no wrong, the ancient Greeks knew better; they believed that love sins. They were wise enough to acknowledge the obvious reality that love is not an unqualified boon. In their mythology, the gods Aphrodite and Eros embodied the capricious, destructive power of erotic love, as the classical scholar Thornton explains. Greek tragedies such as *Medea* often trace the trajectory of erotic love in its destructive effects. Many know

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25: *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758* (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 395.

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19: *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738* (ed. M. X. Lesser; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 488.

³ Bruce W. Davidson, “Narcissism: The Root of All Hypocrisy in the Theological Psychology of Jonathan Edwards,” *JETS* 57 (2014): 136.

the story of Helen, a daughter of Aphrodite, in which the whole city of Troy was brought to destruction by sexual passion. Therefore, the Greeks viewed this force as something that needed to be socially controlled in institutions such as the family. Thornton provides numerous examples of the ancient Greeks' "overwhelmingly dark view of sexuality" and remarks that "our own Romantic-inspired idealizations of sexuality as a force of personal liberation and self-fulfillment would strike most Greeks as a dangerous folly and delusion."⁴

The advent of Christianity brought a fresh, ethically elevated conception of love, especially as manifested in the life and teaching of Jesus. As a fruit of divine power in the soul, this love showed itself to be redeeming and uplifting rather than obsessive and destructive. Augustine of Hippo was one early church father to call this "holy love." In *The City of God*, he declared that "the happy life which all men desire cannot be reached by any who does not cleave with a pure and holy love to that one supreme good, the unchangeable God."⁵ Later in the same book he writes that "it was from the profoundest sentiment of ardent and holy love that the Psalmist cried, 'O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Thy house.'⁶ He speaks of holy love as a sanctifying, God-centered power in much the same way that Edwards does. Likewise, Puritan thinkers such as Richard Baxter and John Bunyan frequently used the term "holy love," as did the nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon. Edwards's contemporary John Wesley is another notable example. He wrote, "What is holiness? Is it not essentially love? The love of God, and of all mankind? . . . Love is holiness wherever it exists."⁷ Interestingly, here Wesley even equates love and holiness, as Edwards also did.

Nevertheless, during the last century thinkers within professing Christendom have often blurred the distinction between holy and unholy love. For example, C. S. Lewis tried to redeem the capricious, destructive Greek god Eros and bring him within the Christian fold in his book *The Four Loves: Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity*.⁸ Other writers strongly influenced by Lewis such as Rob Bell have followed suit. In regard to Lewis and Bell, Beasley remarks that "this form of thinking leads both men into fields of reasoning not at all dissimilar to that of humanism."⁹

Humanistic psychological perspectives on love have exacerbated this trend. A sea-change in thinking about love occurred when humanistic psychologists took it upon themselves to redefine love in non-biblical terms. For example, Erich Fromm made many sweeping claims about what love is, including the assertion that loving is a kind of "art."¹⁰ Similarly, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers often discoursed

⁴ Bruce S. Thornton, *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 46–47.

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, NPNI² 2:180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁷ Quoted in Richard B. Steele, *Gracious Affections and True Virtue according to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley* (London: Scarecrow, 1994), 287.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves: Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1960).

⁹ Michael John Beasley, *Altar to an Unknown Love: Rob Bell, C. S. Lewis, and the Legacy of the Art and Thought of Man* (Kindle ed.; Pfafftown, NC: The Armoury Ministries, 2014), loc. 1930.

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

on the nature of love, along with rehabilitating self-love and self-esteem as wholesome attitudes. The term “unconditional love” became one of their favorite mantras, along with “unconditional acceptance.” However, the ideas of humanistic psychologists about love were idealistic and utopian, since they failed to take into account the problem of human depravity. Much of the ethos of the so-called “sexual revolution” stemmed from the influence of humanistic psychology. Psychologists like Maslow and Rogers believed sexual expression should not be restricted by traditional ethical norms. Ultimately, such ideas led to rampant narcissism and sexually irresponsible behavior.¹¹ Despite being widely discredited by contemporary psychological research, humanistic psychological ideas about love and other subjects continue to pervade popular culture, academia, and the religious world.¹²

In the words of one critic, syncretistic use of the humanistic psychological notion of “unconditional love” among Christians tends to “confuse people by using words that are already loaded with humanistic connotations and systems of thought.”¹³ Getting back to the older idea, the theologian David Wells has revived the idea of holy love in his book *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World*. His book presents a concept very similar to the traditional view, even though he does not really reference earlier Christian writers. However, unlike them, he treats the idea of holy love as a kind of “paradox,” since he views divine love and wrathful holiness as “two extremes.”¹⁴ In doing so, Wells also seems a little influenced by modern notions about love. Edwards and the writers cited above did not perceive any tension between love and holiness. They considered divine love and holiness, even in wrath, to be of a piece, not antagonistic.

II. THE BASIC NATURE OF HOLY LOVE

To distinguish Christian love from worldly, mundane affection, more recent writers have tended to focus a lot of attention on the Greek word *agapē*. Many discussions of Christian love centering on *agapē* have equated Christian love with self-sacrifice. In contrast, as Danaher notes, Edwards shows little interest in the Greek

¹¹ Interestingly, Joyce Milton traces much of the thinking of Rogers and Maslow to their mentors, who were the anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Meade. All made a practice of attacking traditional Western, biblical ideas about love and sexuality. Maslow and Rogers also naively believed that humanistic psychology would one day replace Judeo-Christian monotheism and usher in a utopia of mental health and happiness. Maslow named this fantasy future world “Eupsychia.” Nevertheless, many within evangelicalism have appropriated the ideas of these men, which are so obviously at odds with Christianity (Joyce Milton, *The Road to Malpsychia: Humanistic Psychology and Our Discontents* [San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002]).

¹² At least 50 pop-psychological myths spawned largely by Freudian and humanistic psychology have been debunked by research but continue to be widely believed among many, including Christians (Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Beyerstein, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior* [Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010]).

¹³ Martin and Deidre Bobgan, “Unconditional Love and Acceptance” (Psychoheresy Awareness Ministries), <http://www.psychoheresy-aware.org/unconlov.html>.

¹⁴ David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

terms for love used in Scripture.¹⁵ In that regard, recent NT scholarship has emphasized that *agapē* was really less significant and unique than had been previously thought.¹⁶ Furthermore, Fiering notes that Edwards rejected the notion of godly love as some kind of Stoic virtue or monkish ascetism that sought to get rid of everything but spiritual love.¹⁷ So his holy love is not to be conceived of as antagonistic to natural loves. Edwards opposed any attempt to “root out and abolish all natural affection or respect to . . . near relations, under a notion that no other love ought to be allowed but spiritual love.”¹⁸ Edwards mentions *agapē* in the very beginning of *Charity and Its Fruits*, where he explains that it simply means love for God and humankind. Since this word is translated “charity” in the King James Bible, Edwards uses the same word to mean love in that book.¹⁹

Everyday human loves Edwards traced to the influence of natural instincts such as sexual attraction and parental affection or else to the social outgrowth of wholesome self-love. In general, he saw this social self-love not as an evil but as a benefit to mankind, a result of God’s common grace in a sinful world. Social self-love binds people to their families and communities and restrains the power of narcissistic, fallen self-love, which otherwise tends to pull people apart and to destroy.²⁰ Just as he viewed self-love as either helpful or harmful depending on the circumstances, Edwards also acknowledged the malignant character of the wrong kind of love.

Edwards defined love more as affectionate union with others than as self-sacrifice and self-giving. Love includes both “benevolence,” which means devotion to the wellbeing of the object, and also “complacency,” which means delight in the object itself.²¹ Of the two aspects, Edwards perhaps discoursed more on benevolence. The term “benevolence” is basically just a stand-in for “love” in *The Nature of True Virtue*. When love originates in God himself, it becomes “holy love.” Moreover, its main object is God, since “a holy love has a holy object.”²² Interestingly, in many passages Edwards intermingles holiness and Christian love and even equates the two. He viewed them as inseparable and perhaps even identical entities. Consider this passage from Sermon 1 of *Charity and Its Fruits*:

¹⁵ William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 232.

¹⁶ Mark Allan Powell, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 15.

¹⁷ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 197.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening* (ed. C. C. Goen; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 469.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 129.

²⁰ I have dealt more fully with Edwards’s general concept of love and self-love in a previous article. This discussion will concentrate on holy love (“The Four Faces of Self-love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” *JETS* 51 [2008]: 93–94).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89–91.

²² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 260.

It is not with that holy love which is in the hearts of Christians as it is with other men's love. . . . The nature of the Holy Spirit is love. . . . When God and men are loved with a truly Christian love, they are both loved from the same motives. . . . When God is loved aright he is loved for his excellency. . . . especially the holiness. . . . saints are loved for holiness's sake.²³

Here we clearly see the mingling of love and holiness in Edwards's thought. In *The End of Creation*, Edwards makes the same point:

And then it must be considered wherein this holiness in the creature consists; viz. in love, which is the comprehension of all true virtue; and primarily in love to God, which is exercised in an high esteem of God, admiration of his perfections. . . . the love of God is that wherein all virtue and holiness does primarily and chiefly consist.²⁴

Far from Edwards's conception is any Christian love that does not include holiness or any holiness not characterized by love.

This concept of love has clear devotional and ethical implications. For one thing, the central thing that attracts real believers to God is his holiness:

"The true beauty and loveliness of all intelligent beings primarily and most essentially consist in their moral excellency or holiness. . . . Natural qualifications are either excellent or otherwise, according as they are joined with moral excellency or not. . . . A true love to God must begin with a delight in his holiness, and not with a delight in any other attribute; for no other attribute is truly lovely without this."²⁵

In the same passage, Edwards explains that none of God's characteristics would be praiseworthy if they did not connect to holiness. For example, his wisdom would just be deviousness, and his power would be only brute force.

Along with the biblical writers, to Edwards the word "holy" includes the notion of divine moral transcendence. Much of Edwards's thought is infused with divine transcendence, and his concept of love is no exception.²⁶ As such, it is the polar opposite of narcissistic love, which is the principal love of hypocrites. According to Edwards, hypocritical religious love originates from self-centeredness, with the result that the devotee loves God only because he believes that God can advance his interests or otherwise gratify him in some way. So the religious hypocrite is only interested in making use of God for personal ends.²⁷ In contrast to narcissistic religious love and natural loves, the origin and principal object of holy love are transcendent: "As God has given the saints and angels love, so their love is chiefly exercised towards God, the fountain of it, as is most reasonable. They all

²³ Edwards, *Works*, 8:132–33.

²⁴ Edwards, *Works*, 8:442, 455.

²⁵ Edwards, *Works*, 2:257.

²⁶ Bruce W. Davidson, "Glorious Damnation: Hell as an Essential Element in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *JETS* 54 (2011): 814–16.

²⁷ Davidson, "Narcissism," 137–39.

love God with a supreme love.”²⁸ In fact, in *The Nature of True Virtue* Edwards even argues that limited affection for created things that excludes God actually amounts to enmity against God.²⁹ Holy love is specifically what humanity lost in the Fall and can only be restored by God himself through his salvation in Christ. The worship of the angels crying “holy, holy, holy” before the throne of God exemplifies this love. Consequently, this transcendent, holy love appears in its greatest intensity only in heaven.³⁰ In contrast, human love cannot now be judged by its intensity but by its character.

III. PARTICULAR CHARACTERISTICS OF HOLY LOVE

1. *Heavenly-minded.* Distinct Christian qualities naturally flow from such a conception of love. To begin with, being heavenly-minded, holy love puts eternal realities at the forefront. Appealing to the language and ideas of passages such as Heb 11:13, Edwards affirmed that the holy love of true Christians produces an exile mentality in regard to this world. In one text he discourses on “the religion of heaven, consisting chiefly in holy love and joy . . . where there is true religion, and nothing but true religion. . . . All who are truly religious are not of this world, they are strangers here.”³¹ The heavenly-mindedness of holy love would appear to imply limited concern for promoting this-worldly social justice schemes.

2. *Humble.* Subject above all to the God in heaven, holy love places the believer in an attitude of profound submission. In other words, it produces genuine humility. Along with “holy love,” Edwards often used the expression “humble love”: “True divine love is an humble love.”³² Holiness is closely linked to humility in his thought, since humility is the appropriate response to God’s holiness. As Ramsey puts it, believers in Christ become conscious of “their comparative moral meanness before God’s goodness.”³³ Therefore, a lack of reverence reveals a lack of holy love. True saints “don’t talk of things of religion . . . with an air of lightness and laughter.”³⁴ To Edwards the crude spectacle of a “laughing revival” would be abhorrent, as would many other irreverent expressions of love for God currently commonplace. The close connection between self-abasing humility and love shows that any offhand, rude familiarity toward God goes contrary to the nature of holy love, according to Edwards. Therefore, those who express affection for God in the same superficial terms that they use to communicate affection for friends or romantic others do not manifest this spirit.

3. *Intolerant of evil.* This humble love does not dispose people to be any more tolerant of evil: “Holy love and hope are principles vastly more efficacious upon the heart, to make it tender, and to fill it with a dread of sin, or whatever might

²⁸ Edwards, *Works*, 8:374.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 554–55.

³⁰ Edwards, *Works*, 2:261.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

³² Edwards, *Works*, 8:243.

³³ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁴ Edwards, *Works*, 19:95.

displease and offend God.”³⁵ Both love and humility have in recent times become linked to an attitude of moral laxity very far from Edwards’s thinking. So holy love certainly cannot be called “unconditional” in the sense of being “unconditional acceptance” of things ethically tainted. Holy love to God and men includes concern for moral purity. In *Charity and Its Fruits*, he explains that this is one way we can ascertain sincerity: “By this therefore all may try their affections, and particularly their love and joy. . . . natural men have no sense of the goodness and excellency of holy things.”³⁶

In fact, Edwards even asserts that holy love will induce a hatred of evil: “From love arises hatred of those things which are contrary to what we love, or which oppose and thwart us in those things that we delight in. . . . From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God, will necessarily arise other religious affections: hence will arise an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin.”³⁷ Here he builds on the everyday observation that people naturally strongly oppose anything that goes against something or someone that they love. Clearly, he does not hold to the modern concept of love as unconditional acceptance. Moreover, Edwards contended that holy love will entail hatred of intelligent creatures, since “we may hate those that we know God hates; as ‘tis lawful to hate the Devil, and as the saints at the Day of Judgment will hate the wicked.”³⁸ Nevertheless, he often cautioned against a judgmental, censorious spirit that was too quick to judge a person’s character and eternal state.

Furthermore, holy divine love expressed in a holy hatred of evil led to the creation of hell. In a sense, hell results from God’s holy love: “One way that the excellency of God’s nature appears is in loving himself. . . . Thus, ‘tis an excellent thing that infinite justice should shine forth, and be expressed in infinitely just and righteous acts.”³⁹ In Edwards’s thought, unending punishment expresses God’s love for his own justice and his limitless hatred of evil.⁴⁰

4. *Rational, doctrinal, and scriptural.* Just as opposition to moral impurity inheres in the nature of holy love, such love also encompasses an adherence to Scriptural truth and reasonable faith. In previous articles I have touched on how Edwards explodes false dilemmas invented by modern reinterpretations of the Christian faith. He put no stock in spirituality that supersedes accurate doctrinal understanding, seeing it rather as a sign of hypocrisy.⁴¹ Moreover, he had no sympathy for the idea that faith requires irrationality.⁴² Holy love does not declare that it cares little about truth and doctrines.

³⁵ Edwards, *Works*, 2:360.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁸ Edwards, *Works*, 4:476.

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18: *The “Miscellanies” 501–832* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 282.

⁴⁰ Davidson, “Glorious,” 817–18.

⁴¹ Davidson, “Narcissism,” 141.

⁴² Bruce W. Davidson, “Does Religious Faith Mean Uncritical Thinking?: Exploration of a False Dilemma,” *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 16 (1996): 59.

In line with Scripture, according to Edwards the mind loves God as well as the heart. Therefore, holy love includes a high regard for revealed truth. As Smith emphasizes, any opposition between mental understanding and religious devotion was totally alien to Edwards's thought.⁴³ On the contrary, Edwards maintained, "There is a sensation of the mind which loves and rejoices."⁴⁴ Commenting on Paul's famous description of the characteristics of love in 1 Corinthians 13, he elaborates further on this topic:

Indeed it cannot be supposed, when this affection of love is here, and in other scriptures, spoken of as the sum of all religion, that hereby is meant the act, exclusive of the habit, or that the exercise of the understanding is excluded, which is implied in all reasonable affection. But it is doubtless true, and evident from these Scriptures, that the essence of all true religion lies in holy love; and that in this divine affection, and an habitual disposition to it, and that light which is the foundation of it.⁴⁵

Edwards speaks here of the necessity of "the exercise of the understanding" and the expectation of "reasonable affection" as aspects of holy love. When he mentions "the light which is the foundation of it," he refers to illumination by the Holy Spirit to embrace the truth of the Gospel accurately.

Drawing again on everyday experience, Edwards explores the relation between love and saving faith: "They who love God will be disposed to give credit to his work and to put confidence in him. Men are not apt to suspect the veracity of those for whom they have entire friendship."⁴⁶ Indeed, people tend to trust and believe the words of those whom they love. Edwards saw a great deal of significance in the Scriptural linkage of faith and love. So holy love leads inevitably to a high estimation of the truthfulness of written divine revelation and a desire for a thoroughgoing understanding of its doctrines. Edwards frequently insisted, "Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding."⁴⁷

5. *Not self-indulgent emotion or sensual enjoyment.* The rational, doctrinal facet of holy love undermines the credibility of religious romanticism and Christian mysticism. It also challenges spirituality marked by sentimentality or unrestrained emotion. Any of these things would indeed be "heat without light."

Generally speaking, Edwards considered passion to be a characteristic of carnal, spurious religious devotion. He preferred instead the term *affection* to describe an attitude of heart and mind toward divine things—a settled disposition, not a sudden surge of feeling. In contrast, the word "passion" in English often denotes irrationality and heat-of-the-moment impulsiveness, which Edwards considered a

⁴³ John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 31.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Works*, 2:113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Works*, 8:134.

⁴⁷ Edwards, *Works*, 2:266.

sign of counterfeit piety. He viewed “passions” as distinct from “affections” and also as dangerously volatile, as Smith explains:

“The *affections* and *passions*,” he says, “are frequently spoken of as the same,” but there are grounds for distinguishing them. Passions he describes as those inclinations whose “effects on the animal spirits are more violent” and in them the mind is overpowered and “less in its own command.” The self becomes literally a “patient,” seized by the object of a passion. With the affections, however, the situation stands quite otherwise. These require instead a clear understanding and sufficient control of the self to make choice possible.⁴⁸

Smith captures Edwards’s thinking well when he writes, “False piety is, however, spectacular, evanescent and cannot endure; true piety, the sense of the heart, is an abiding foundation in the soul.”⁴⁹ In regard to religious emotions, Edwards rejected the Romantic notion that the authenticity of love can be judged by its intensity, observing that people will sometimes weep over fictional stories that they know to be untrue.⁵⁰

When Edwards makes use of the word “passion,” it is usually in a negative context. He attributes some of the sins of the saints, such as David’s adultery, to the sudden onslaught of carnal passion. Examples abound, such as one sermon where he remarks, “Men in the heat of their passion don’t keep themselves within the bounds of decency and good order.”⁵¹ Describing the crowd clamoring for Jesus to be crucified, he writes that “now they were deaf to everything but the clamor of passion.”⁵² In his writing, “passion” most often refers to wild, overpowering, sinful emotion.

Nevertheless, in recent years some popularizers of Edwards such as John Piper have made a practice of describing Christian experience in terms of “Christian hedonism,” “pleasure,” and “passion.”⁵³ The frequent use of such words communicates the mistaken impression that intense, pleasurable feelings are the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Jonathan Edwards*, 33.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables*, vol. 1: *True and False Christians (On the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins)* (ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, Adriaan C. Neele, and Brian McCarthy; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 153.

⁵¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17: *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733* (ed. Mark Valeri; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 109–10.

⁵² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 24: *The Blank Bible* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 875.

⁵³ See John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986). In recasting the Christian message in terms of hedonism, Piper seems to be reacting to a kind of dour, mirthless Christianity he believes he countered in his own early experiences, a type of “dead orthodoxy.” No doubt his intention is to save the gospel from irrelevance in a hedonistic culture and to promote heartfelt Christian devotion; however, the net result may well be subsuming the Christian message under the prevalent worldly concept of living for narcissistic, pleasurable sensations. Edwards did not make enjoyment of God the foundational principle of the Christian life, though in his early works he did criticize lifeless formality, especially among those who set themselves against the revivals of the day because of the strong emotions that were on display. However, in his later works Edwards became much more concerned about the flamboyant, highly emotional hyper-spirituality in evidence among many. In my view, inveighing against soulless orthodoxy in this day and age is beating a dead horse.

essence of Christian experience. Furthermore, nowadays such words are frequently infected with romantic overtones and sexual connotations. Beasley makes the important point that “lust” would be an inappropriate word to describe Christian devotion.⁵⁴ The same criticism applies to the repeated use of words commonly connected with pleasurable sensation and carnal feelings. In particular, it is difficult to redeem the word “hedonism” from its connotation of decadent, self-indulgent sensuality. “Holy love” is a much better choice to express a Christian’s devotion. A focus on passion and desire tends to obscure the strong moral element in Edwards’s concept of love, and putting enjoyment at the forefront inevitably relegates holy love to a secondary place. Certainly Edwards wrote frequently about delighting in God, but the modern emphasis on pleasurable feelings tends to encourage religious romanticism and a devaluation of truth.

The most significant problem here is that the enjoyment of religious things is not unique to genuine believers. Edwards observed that hypocrites also often seem to enjoy God—at least, their own distorted understanding of God—but not because they have holy love.⁵⁵ They take pleasure basking in their own false sense of divine approval and the attention of others. Edwards himself reported experiencing self-righteous pleasure in delusional religiosity before his genuine conversion.⁵⁶ In Edwards’s outlook, the enjoyment of God is not the most prominent feature of the Christian walk; holy love for God is.

Even further removed from Edwards’s concept of holy love is the kind of religious sensuality described in Voskamp’s *One Thousand Gifts*. This book narrates the author’s supposed encounters with God, which are depicted in starkly romantic, erotic terms.⁵⁷ Her encounters with God differ little from a romantic novel’s description of love trysts. In addition, such descriptions fail to show real reverence and “humble love” toward a transcendent deity. This way of depicting divine love dramatically differs from the elevated nature of holy love we find in Edwards’s writings.

IV: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Before the prevalence of romantic and therapeutic concepts, “holy love” was a common way of referring to divine love in its otherness, its distinction from human love, which often tends to be debased and self-serving. “Holy love” was not considered an inducement to moral accommodation but an empowerment for pure living in all realms of life, despite the surrounding evil. When Edwards used the term “holy love,” he was referring not only to Christian love’s moral purity but also to its fundamentally alien nature in a sinful world. Fallen people cannot be imbued with such love through any ordinary means. Beasley puts it well: “God’s love is an

⁵⁴ Beasley, *Altar to an Unknown Love*, loc. 2819.

⁵⁵ Davidson, “The Four Faces of Self-love,” 96.

⁵⁶ Davidson, “Narcissism,” 136.

⁵⁷ Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

alien affection [italics in original] such that it is impossible to know such love by personal experience or effort. Ultimately, the natural man cannot know such an alien love."⁵⁸ Blending Christian love with non-Christian ideas about love compromises the basic otherness of divine love. In contrast to other loves, holy love manages to be heavenly-minded, self-abasing, ethically elevated, truthful, and sober. Obviously, Edwards's idea of holy love has profound, far-reaching significance.

Especially in an era in which the mass media and social elites dress up ethical laxity as loving and liberated, Christians badly need Edwards's perspective on holy love. Unfortunately, many religious voices have brought the secular perspective into professing Christendom. When Dan Kimball wrote, "I have met gay people who are the most kind, loving, solid, and supportive people I have ever met," he both jettisoned the biblical concept of love and denigrated all the Christians of his acquaintance.⁵⁹ His concept of love appears to be seriously deficient and culturally conditioned.

For some time now contemporary Christianity has been suffering from a corruption of its idea of love. This equivocation and confusion calls for a resurrection of the idea of holy Christian love. More than anything else, the modern concept of love has often been exposed as shallow, ineffectual, and ethically complacent. Challenging this idea is the much more insightful, vigorous, biblical one of holy love. Holy love is not a concept antithetical to moral purity or tolerant of evil. Though Bell, Kimball, and others like them attract attention as radical innovators, their thinking about love is merely commonplace. It is Edwards, his predecessors, and the Bible that stand apart. Theirs is not the love on offer among the romantics, those preoccupied with sex, the sentimentalists, and the followers of therapy.

Edwards's concept of love especially calls into question the widespread religious sentimentality and shallow emotionalism of our day. Theodore Dalrymple has written of the "toxic sentimentality" currently engulfing the secular English-speaking world. He amasses abundant proof that many are more impressed by tears than by truth. For instance, in criminal cases innocent people, who were suspects in murder cases, have been condemned because they failed to shed tears on camera, while real murderers have been exonerated of guilt when they made public displays of emotion.⁶⁰ Much the same phenomenon can be observed in the modern church, judging by the syrupy piety on display in many current religious bestsellers. In many respects, the contemporary professing Christian world has also often become a "cult of sentimentality." As one instance of this shameless emotionalism, we can consider the current rage of "heaven-tourism" books such as *The Boy Who Came*

⁵⁸ Beasley, *Altar to an Unknown Love*, loc. 1007.

⁵⁹ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from the Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 138.

⁶⁰ Beginning in the nineteenth century, this phenomenon can be observed in hymns that present divine love in a maudlin, subjective fashion. This process gained momentum in modern times as a result of the therapeutic notion that faith is mainly about healing emotional wounds (Theodore Dalrymple, *Spoilt Rotten: The Toxic Cult of Sentimentality* [London: Gibson Square, 2010]).

Back from Heaven, later exposed as a fraud.⁶¹ The popularity of these books probably owes a lot to their inclusion of maudlin accounts of reunions with deceased relatives and other heart-tugging material. Unsurprisingly, one such book reveals its god to be “unconditional love” and “unconditional acceptance.”⁶²

Understanding Edwards’s concept of holy love also helps to illuminate troublesome aspects of Christian theology and ethics. For one thing, the perceived tension between divine love and wrath disappears. Along with a great many others, a number of Edwards scholars see a basic inconsistency between Edwards’s glowing descriptions of divine love in Christ on the one hand and his thundering declarations of wrath against the unrepentant on the other.⁶³ However, Edwards’s concept of holy love reveals that there is no real inconsistency here. Instead, the difficulty may often be that many have simply imbibed the widespread modern concept of love. Furthermore, if Edwards’s views are self-contradictory, then so are the Bible’s, since it also presents a God of love who is also a God of wrath. It is the humanistic concept of love as “unconditional acceptance” that cannot be squared with a God of wrath. In Edwards’s thought, love and wrath both spring from God’s holiness, his absolute moral perfection.

Another important implication pertains to the exercise of critical discernment. Holy love’s devotion to truth means that Edwards would never accede to the popular modern practice of accusing heresy whistle-blowers of being “unloving.” Many employ the epithet “unloving” as a cudgel to silence those who bring unwanted criticism concerning doctrine and behavior. Probably those who assail others with this charge have never considered the holy nature of Christian love. What many call “love” is often nothing more than an aversion to conflict or a desire to please people. On top of that, calling criticism “unloving” amounts to slurring the people doing the criticism as hateful. By that standard Edwards himself would have to be considered unloving, since he engaged in doctrinal and moral controversy. The same can be said of the apostle Paul and a great many others who have seen no conflict between Christian love and zeal for purity of doctrine and life. For that matter, Jesus himself had the same zeal. In Edwards’s view, loving God’s revealed truth will naturally lead a person to react negatively to the perversion of it. Holy love does not lead to apathy about theology or bland tolerance of error. On the contrary, a lack of concern about such matters may indicate the absence of holy love.

⁶¹ Kevin Malarkey and Alex Malarkey, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life beyond This World* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2010).

⁶² Jim Osman has written an excellent critique of such books: *Selling the Stairway to Heaven: Critiquing the Claims of the Heaven Tourists* (Kootenai, ID: Kootenai Community Church, 2015). Osman points out the inconsistencies in such books as well as in the “unconditional acceptance” idea itself. According to Eben Alexander, some things are actually not accepted in the afterlife that he supposedly experienced. Humanistic psychologists such as Maslow and Rogers were also guilty of failing to accept many things unconditionally, such as traditional monotheism (Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012]).

⁶³ Davidson, “Glorious,” 810–12.

Edwards reminds us that the world is not the place to find a viable model of Christian love. Promoting the traditional, scripturally-rooted idea of holy love would likely do much more toward sanctifying believers than offering them therapy, mystical contemplation, motivational advice, or other techniques. In light of Edwards's insistence on holy love as a sign of genuine conversion, we cannot expect that somehow people can manifest this love apart from radical transformation. When a saint loves in the Christian way, "this is not from himself."⁶⁴ Telling people to "be more loving" will not help much, especially when that love is poorly defined and presented in shallow, worldly terms. It is impossible for people to conjure up holy love from within themselves. No one has any ability to love in this way except those whom God has powerfully redeemed by his grace in Christ. Only his gospel confers this transcendent, unique love, the same love which led God the Father to do the unthinkable for his Son's glory and our salvation.

⁶⁴ Edwards, *Works*, 19:488.