

JONATHAN EDWARDS: HISTORY AND THE COVENANT

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Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century minister generally acclaimed as one of America's greatest theologians, constructed a system in which grace was the determining factor in both individual and cosmic salvation. In doing so, he departed from the scheme worked out by his sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forebears, and articulated a perception of God's design for the world in which grace was the sole determining factor governing the universe. Historically, he represented a return to the Calvinist insistence on the absolute controlling power of divine grace,¹ effectually eliminating the structures that Puritanism had carefully raised to allow a terrain in which human free choice could function. In his theology, although he explained the controlling power in terms quite different from Calvin, he carefully expounded a view of the relationship between God and the universe under both individual and collective aspects in which divine grace alone determined human deeds through divine indwelling in the souls of the just, and through control of the minutest detail of the historical process. In a very real sense, Edwards represented an absolute "triumph of grace" in theology. This essay focuses on his theological efforts in this respect, viewed within their historical context.

1. *Edward's View of Grace*

In order to establish this "triumph of grace," Edwards modified Puritan ideas both of the individual's and the whole human race's

¹ For Edward's own assessment of the application of the term "Calvinist" to his thought, see his author's Preface to *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, 1957), pp. 131-132.

relationship to God. Because Edward's vision of God's cosmic plan was only an extension of his understanding of God's action in the individual, it would seem useful first to consider briefly how Edwards apprehended grace in the individual.

The Puritans themselves had modified Luther's and Calvin's notion of the justified man as *simul justus et peccator* into a scheme whereby the individual's justification by God is one temporal act in which the human being is passive and as a result of which man is given sanctifying grace. This sanctifying grace is a quality in the soul by which the individual is himself enabled to do good works and thus perform works which are meritorious before God. In all this, God always remains, of course, the principal mover; nevertheless, man is a subordinate but real participant.

Edwards reacted against this kind of understanding of grace in man's soul. He wrote:

The Spirit of God is given to the true saints to dwell in them as his proper lasting abode; and to influence their hearts, as a principle of new nature, or as a divine supernatural spring of life and action.²

That is, grace is the Holy Spirit himself dwelling in the saints, acting to move their wills. Grace is the only possible source of virtue. For Edwards, virtue and indwelling by the Spirit were one. Thus the soul is the sphere in which the Holy Spirit immediately acts, and the saints' acts are the acts of the Spirit in the soul. Edwards reiterated on many occasions the notion that it is the Spirit acting in the soul who is the principle of grace producing all good acts of man.³

Instead of allowing any intermediate level of activity, Edwards transformed his Puritan forebears' theology into a view of grace in the soul in which God was the one true actor and the immediate cause of man's deeds. Thus from Luther's and Calvin's notion

² Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John Smith (New Haven, 1959), p. 200.

³ E.g., *Charity and Its Fruits*, photolith of the 1852 ed., edited by Tryon Edwards (London, 1969), pp. 36-37.

of grace as God's acceptance of man, the sinner, Edwards had moved through a Puritan view which allowed man some scope for choice in doing genuinely good deeds under the covenant relationship, to an understanding of grace which made it the transforming action of God alone, moving and changing men.

Accepting the principle of God as the sole actor in the salvation of the individual, Edwards also insisted that history was the sphere of God's activity in which God's initiative and movement, rather than man's good deeds, were the sole determining forces. In this respect, too, Edward's theological analysis departed from that of the Puritans, who wanted to allow some sphere for human responsibility. He did not distinguish, as had the Puritans before him, between personal salvation and the process of temporal history. For him, both were aspects of the one Spirit acting in the soul to integrate it into the one great manifestation of God's glory which is the creation and salvation of the world. History, for Edwards, was the process in time of grace moving through rational souls to unite all creation to God. There was no room for human initiative or novelty; God was the sole agent of history.

2. *The Puritan View of History*

In order to appreciate more fully Edwards's view of the movement of the universe in terms of the context from which this view emerged and against which it reacted, one must keep in mind the Puritan view of history. Both English and American Puritans shared what James Spalding has designated as the "Deuteronomic" view, after that theological view underlying the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, and whereby disaster was seen as "a judgment of God upon Israel's idolatries" and prosperity was seen to be "God's blessing upon a nation whose people and leaders had 'returned to the Lord.'"⁴ For the Puritans such a view did not attempt to interfere with God's decree of election or

⁴ James C. Spalding, "Sermons Before Parliament (1640-1649) as a Public Puritan Diary," *Church History*, 36 (March 1967): 5.

reprobation for an individual, which decree man could only accept in unquestioning humility. It asserted, however, that the material well-being of both the old Israel and the new Israel (England) in their religious, political, and social spheres depended on obedience to the covenant. Disobedience resulted in God's punishment. Only by repentance and renewed obedience to the covenant law could prosperity be restored.⁵

Deep in its religious traditions, England possessed a self-understanding of itself as God's chosen people, called to obey his law as his covenant nation. This perspective, which can be documented as far back as William Tyndale in the first three decades of the sixteenth century, was accepted by the Puritans.⁶ In their view, England was God's chosen nation, a new Israel, and the people were God's instruments to guide England into the right observance of her national covenant relationship with God.⁷ As John Winthrop, their great lay leader, proclaimed in his "Model of Christian Charity," delivered to the Puritans coming to settle Massachusetts, the colony was intended to be a "city upon a hill," which God would reward if it obeyed him and punish if it disobeyed his covenant.⁸ This interpretation of New England's temporal state as being dependent on her obedience to God continued among Puritan thinkers from Michael Wigglesworth in

⁵ Perry Miller observed the existence of this view in New England Puritans in his "Declension in a Biblical Commonwealth," in *The New England Puritans*, ed. Sidney James, Interpretations of American History (New York, 1968), p. 131.

⁶ E.g., William Tyndale, *Expositions and Notes on Sundry Portions of the Holy Scriptures . . .*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge, 1849), 42: 457-459.

⁷ Spalding, "Sermons Before Parliament," pp. 4-7. Edmund Calamy's sermon "Trembling for the Ark of God," preached in 1662, illustrates how one Puritan view of the great ejection of Puritan ministers and the prevailing disinterest of the people expressed itself in terms of a Deuteronomic "English Saga." See *Sermons of the Great Ejection* (London, 1962), pp. 21-34, esp. pp. 29-32.

⁸ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *The Puritans*, ed. Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 1: 198-199.

the 1660s⁹ to Cotton Mather in the 1690s.¹⁰

On this point, the Puritans were good Aristotelians, focusing on a humanly perceptible cause-effect relationship. In the human sphere of history, they affirmed that God had given man power to act or refuse to act, to accept or refuse the Covenant. God was ultimately responsible for all, but in this human realm, man could make real choices which would have effects for good or ill on him. He could not bring about his eternal salvation, but he could change the course of history with its human benefits or curses. Man's action had genuine effectiveness in the human realm.

3. *Edwards's Understanding of History*

Edwards also accepted as axiomatic the importance of history as God's revelation to the elect. He did not, however, understand history from a Deuteronomic perspective, in which human history, as distinct from election to salvation, was controlled by human response to or rejection of God's covenant. Rather, Edwards defined history purely in terms of the action of God's Spirit. Both the actions and responses of history and election were all one in God's design of salvation. In his *History of Redemption*, a series of sermons which provided a preliminary idea of the greater dogmatic work that he had planned, but which death prevented him from working out, Edwards says that the whole work of redemption, in individual and historical manifestations, was

but one Design that is formed, to which all the offices of Christ do directly tend, and in which all the persons of the Trinity do conspire, and all the various dispensations that belong to it are united; and the several wheels are one machine, to answer one end, and produce one effect.¹¹

⁹ Michael Wigglesworth, "God's Controversy with New England," in *Seventeenth Century American Poetry*, ed. Harrison T. Meserole (New York, 1968), pp. 42-54.

¹⁰ Cotton Mather, "The Serviceable Man . . .," in *Puritan Political Ideas*, ed. Edmund Morgan, American Heritage Series (Indianapolis, 1965), pp. 240-249.

¹¹ *History of Redemption*, photolith of Jonathan Edwards, Jr.'s, 1773 ed. (Marshallton, Delaware, n.d.), pp. 17, 19.

The machine metaphor is a recurring one in Edwards's thought. For instance, in his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, he spoke of God as the end of all, and of creation as a huge machine moving towards God, in which "every wheel, in all its rotations," would move towards him "as if the whole system were animated and directed by one common soul."¹² From the point of view of the metaphor, one element was noted as common to the working of a machine and the operations of the world, including rational beings: Both unswervingly move towards their appointed end under a common overarching design according to which all the parts move and are moved. In another sense, however, the metaphor has an organic dimension, because the universe which is indicated is compared to the Platonic notion of the world as animated by a world soul. In the case of Edwards's perception of the universe, the "world soul," in the sense of governing principle ordering the world, was not any created entity but the divine activity itself. The glory of God was the controlling factor which moved the world, and no other reality shared in its task.

For Edwards the whole purpose of universal history is the accomplishment of God's work of grace. In his *History of Redemption* he states, for example, that the "design of God was to restore the soul of man, to restore life to it, and the image of God, in conversion, and to carry on the restoration in sanctification, and to perfect it in glory."¹³

If, then, history is the work of God's grace, Edwards's metaphysical version of that statement is to affirm that creation is an outcome of God's necessary activity. As he observes in his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, the creation of the world is the "necessary consequence" of God's "delighting in the glory of his nature, that he delights in the emanation and effulgence."¹⁴ The fullness of God's glory is

¹² In *Works of President Edwards* (Leeds, 1806), 1: 455.

¹³ *History of Redemption*, p. 23.

¹⁴ In *Works*, 1: 468.

both internal, of his own essence, and external, the glory of creation praising him in his justice or mercy.¹⁵ To have the fullness of his being, God needs both internal and external glory. Thus the emanation of creation is more than simply the activity of a God *totaliter aliter* to whom it may be a matter of love or concern, but not a matter of real necessity as to whether a creation responds by loving and glorifying him. God's attributes must be exercised, and he must be known and praised by created beings.¹⁶ Not by external compulsion, but because of inward metaphysical necessity God created the world so that all creation through rational creation, might praise him in his mercy or his justice. Thus no part of this design could be left to chance or the whim of the lesser being. All must be directed by God. Edwards quite specifically indicated God's glory as the reason why all the dimensions of history were immediately under the control of the divine Spirit:

In all this [the progress of history] God designed to accomplish the glory of the blessed Trinity in an exceeding degree. God has a design of glorifying himself from all eternity: to glorify each person in the Godhead. The end must be considered as first in the order of nature, and then the means; and therefore we must conceive, that God having professed this end, had then the means to choose; and the principal mean that he pitched upon was this great work of redemption that we are speaking of.¹⁷

The glory of God was the key reality which determined history, the movement of creatures; and the movement of creatures according to the divine plan was the means to the end of God's glory. Thus, Edwards concluded, all creatures were moved according to this end. Even God's sovereignty, the term normally used to indicate the subordination of all creatures to the divine will, was for Edwards an aspect of the all-encompassing notion of the divine glory.¹⁸ God's glory was the reason for his sovereignty.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 460, 501.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 458-459, 516-517.

¹⁷ *History of Redemption*, p. 25.

¹⁸ "God's Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men," in *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London, 1965), 1: 238-240.

To Edwards the pattern of history was not, as for earlier Puritans, a series of events in which the chosen people were called by God, pledged themselves to the covenant, fell, were punished, repented, and so on until God's kingdom was brought about on earth. Rather, God from the beginning had envisaged one great end for the whole course of history, and had so designed each piece within that history as to best manifest his glory. God's purposes are served in history in each detail and are directly under his control. God's designs, not human endeavors or responses, are what determine each of God's actions towards man. Edwards continued the line of thought first cited above:

The work that was the appointed means of this [the glorification of the persons of the Trinity] was begun immediately after the fall, and is carried on until, and finished at, the end of the world, when all this intended glory shall be fully accomplished in all things.¹⁹

Just as an individual acts only as moved by God,²⁰ so the whole universe is also moved as an organic unity: God in one simple, unchangeable, perpetual action comprehends all existence as an immediately present unity.²¹ In his emanation of creation, as he had eternally planned it, God intends his own glory as creation's end. Among rational creatures he selects the saints and angels as the rational instruments through which all creation glorifies him. God's own glory, actualized as he sees fit, is the end of creation, redemption, and the consummation of the world.²²

The process of the world's history was understood by Edwards as a unity, encompassing a rational pattern of beginning, middle, and end — the emanation and return of all creation to God, in which God's glory, internal and external, was manifest.²³ Each and every episode, just as each and every individual, was part of God's eternal plan. This plan, in all of its details, was directly

¹⁹ *History of Redemption*, p. 25.

²⁰ *Freedom of the Will*, pp. 171-174.

²¹ From the "Miscellanies" in *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. H. G. Townsend (Eugene, Oregon, 1955), p. 146.

²² *Dissertation Concerning the End . . .*, pp. 477-479, 492-500, 530-531.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 526-529.

brought into reality by God's direct action in all aspects of human history, moving towards the final consumation in which God's fullness would be manifest.

4. *Edwards's View of the Contemporary Scene*

Edwards interpreted the Great Awakening, the eighteenth-century revival of popular religious interest and enthusiasm, as a manifestation of God's grace poured out upon New England, with its own specific place in the pattern of divine activity. Where previous Puritan ministers had interpreted renewed dedication after a period of moral decline as stemming from people's renewed covenant loyalty to God, Edwards saw this "outpouring of the Spirit" with its improved conduct of the people as due totally to divine action and purpose in history.

In his own arena of history in New England, Edwards understood the events of the great revival as the direct action of God directing history in his own pattern. God's work was perceived in both the conversions themselves and the way in which the conversions happened.²⁴ In his *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, he placed the events of New England history and its revival of religion in the dispensation of the Gospel, as part of the process of perfecting of God's covenant plan for humanity.²⁵ For Edwards, covenant is understood as God's plan, not an invitation to human response. Thus even his use of the common Puritan term was modified from the old view.

Because he saw these historical events as part of a pattern which was governed by the primacy of the glorification of God, Edwards tried to place these events in that part of the plan of emanation and return which seemed to make the most sense to him. On the basis of that premise he perceived his own time as being the end time. Edwards's own hopes for the revival of religion in the Great Awakening were not that individual salvation would be proclaimed, but that this glorious outpouring of the

²⁴ "A Narrative of Surprising Conversions," in *Select Works*, 1: 20-21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-88, 146-147.

Spirit of God over the greater community was a sign that God was drawing the world closer and closer to himself, for establishment of God's kingdom on earth and a closer union in glory. His lamentations about the decay of piety followed this same pattern of awareness about the world's movement towards God and the eschatological expectations for the increased union of God with the world, which would first bring about God's kingdom on earth and the rule of the covenanted saints, and would finally eventuate in the full establishment of God's rule everywhere.²⁶

As had his predecessors, Edwards viewed New England as "the principal nation of the Reformation." But he saw the role of New England as totally determined by God:

When those times come, then doubtless the Gospel, which is already brought over into America, shall have glorious success, and all the inhabitants of this new discovered world shall become subjects of the kingdom of Christ, as well as all the other ends of the earth: and in all probability Providence has so ordered it, that the mariner's compass, which is an invention of later times . . . should prove a preparation for what God intends to bring to pass, the glorious times of the church, viz, the sending forth the gospel wherever any of the children of men dwell, how far so ever off. . . .²⁷

Edwards even understood the current revival of learning as a manifestation of God's determining purpose in history:

But yet, when God has sufficiently shown men the insufficiency of human wisdom and learning for the purposes of religion, and when the appointed time comes for that glorious outpouring of the Spirit of God, when he will himself by his own immediate influence enlighten men's minds; then he may hope that God will make use of the great increase of learning as an handmaid to religion, as a means of the glorious advancement of the kingdom of his Son.²⁸

No detail of history, whether it was the invention of the mariner's compass, or the advancement of learning, was, for Edwards, a purely human deed or simply related to temporal

²⁶ "A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth," in Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1974), 1: 284-287.

²⁷ *History of Redemption*, p. 284.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-290.

welfare. Everything was part of God's great design which men exist to execute. The coming of the millennium, which Edwards foresaw for the end of human history before the final judgment, was always presented by him as the "work of God's Spirit." For instance, he remarked: "This great work of the revival of religion inaugurating the final days shall be accomplished, not by the authority of princes, or by the wisdom of learned men, but by God's Holy Spirit. . . ." ²⁹ Each act of biblical or later history was understood by him as a part of God's process of redemption, directed by God's Spirit to the glorification of God apart from any notion of human freedom in any realm of God's dealing with man.

When speaking of the vicissitudes of true religion, and the "decay of vital piety" in New England, instead of preaching diatribes against those who were disobeying God's covenant, Edwards tried to discern the workings of God's gracious providence guiding the world, so that "the work of God will be wrought."³⁰ For him the fullness of God's glory was the understanding of the immediate action of grace on the soul and also pushed him into a vision of God's action in history which saw all that happened as God's working out of his redemptive scheme. He acknowledged no distinction between the divine election of a soul for salvation and the human course-offering relationship in God's covenant with man. The initiative, the execution, and the goal of the movement of history were divine. Human beings existed as the instruments of God's plan. The pattern of history did not hang on human response, but on divine design.³¹

5. *Edwards's Concept of Ethical Action*

When Edwards considered human ethical acts within the course of history as abstractions (as good acts generally), he also emphasized the element of divine design. In his *Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue*, he wrote:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 282-304.

³¹ *Dissertation Concerning the End . . .*, pp. 477-479.

God is not only infinitely greater and more excellent than all other beings, but he is the head of the universal system of existence; the fountain of all being and all beauty; from whom all is perfectly derived, and on whom all is most absolutely and perfectly dependent. . . .³²

For Edwards, the dependence of creatures on God was absolute; God wove their lives, individually and collectively, into a pattern which was directly and completely controlled by him. Virtue (and indeed all human activity) was part of that system of which God was the head, and to which both the being and act of all the members of the system was directed. Just as Edwards found God's sovereignty and glory absolute in the realm of metaphysics (*Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*), so they were also absolute in the realm of human ethical action.

6. Conclusion

By erasing distinctions that his forebearers had made, Edwards eliminated the careful construction whereby the Puritans had reserved a space for some kind of human autonomy in man's dealings with God. For Edwards there was no such autonomy, either in relation to the course of individual salvation or to that of human history. Both were aspects of the divine activity in which human beings, individually and as a group were recipients of God's saving guidance which immediately directed all dimensions of human life to God's purpose. Human beings were reflections of divine intention, passive receivers of the divine energy which harmoniously moved them. Thus for Edwards the triumph of grace and divine purpose was not simply an individual experience, but an all-encompassing event in universal history.

³² *Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue*, ed. William K. Frankena (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960), p. 15. Written in 1755, at the same time as the *Dissertation Concerning the End*, this work is the counterpart of the other dissertation, which deals with metaphysical issues. Together they form an outline of Edwards's systematic thought, and are bound together as one system by their fundamental notion that God is the immediate controlling influence directing all levels of existence as one harmonious whole.