

The Theology of Jonathan Edwards

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- [0 : 00] Welcome back. Today I am going to be reviewing this book, The Theology of Jonathan Edwards by Michael McClymond and Gerald McDermott.
- A bit of background first, I had the opportunity of staying with the McDermott's and it was a real blessing during my time in Birmingham, Alabama two months ago. And I'm not sure exactly how it was, but we got onto the subject of his work on Jonathan Edwards.
- I think it might have been in seeing the big portrait of Jonathan Edwards, the portrait that is used as the cover for this book, on their living room wall. It's a very striking portrait of a vigorous mind and a character who has spirit and determination.
- And it really captures something of the character of Edwards as it comes across within this book. And after expressing my interest in Edwards and my desire at some point to do a deep dive on his work, because I've never really done that deep dive.
- I've read odd pieces of Edwards here and there over the years and found him very helpful and stimulating, but I've never really explored his work in much depth. And I wanted to have a guide and Professor McDermott very kindly gave me a copy of his book on the subject.
- [1 : 17] Now, this is a fairly hefty book. It's about 750 pages long. It's Oxford University Press and it was published in 2012.
- It's a very accessible book, though. It's written in a way that makes it suitable for use as a reference volume, not just as a book you can read through from cover to cover. I read it through from cover to cover.
- But if you wanted to just focus upon a particular aspect of Edwards' theology, to find your bearings on just one particular detail of his work or upon a few areas, his ecclesiology or his soteriology or something like that, or his anthropology, something a bit broader.
- It's well organised for that sort of thing. You can dip in at various points and they describe it as akin to various vista points upon a vast terrain. So you have all the thought of Edwards and then you have these particular topics and themes that are picked out.
- And from each one of those, you have a specific vista upon the broader terrain. And so things appear at multiple points from different aspects. And that is very helpful for those who are just using this as a reference volume.
- [2 : 31] I'd highly recommend it for that purpose. Now, being given a book, I should give the warning that this does come with the natural pressures of friendship and other things like that.
- But I was not expected, I was not pressured to give any review of this. And also, when you are given a book of this length, it is not necessarily a great thing if the book is not worth your time.
- Because it requires a considerable investment of your time. And if that time is not well paid with insight, then that gift can actually come at considerable cost.

So the question is, was this book a really good gift? Yes, it was. And it amply rewarded the time that I devoted to it. And I'd highly recommend it to anyone else who wants to get into the work of Edwards.

Now, it's all very well for me to say this. I could say this under the pressures of friendship and that sort of thing. But I want to give you some sense of why this book is helpful. And I should also say that I introduced my dad to this book.

[3 : 37] I showed him the book and he kept asking for it back without staying with them for a few days. And it ended up getting a copy for himself. So this is a book that's, it's not just me that can see the appeal of this.

There are a number of different topics that are treated within this. I'll give a sense of it by reading out some of the contents. So it gives a background to his life, his intellectual content, context, his spirituality, and the question of his development.

Then it gets into beauty and aesthetics, metaphysics, typology, revelation, apologetics, exegesis, his history of redemption. And then his understanding of triune God, angels, and heaven, the trinity, end of God in creation, providence and history, the personal work of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels in the plan of salvation and heaven.

And then theological anthropology and divine grace, affections in the human person, his Calvinism and his theology of the covenants, free will and original sin, salvation, grace and faith, conversion, justification and sanctification, divinization, theology of revival.

And then into church and other issues like that. Church, ministry, sacraments, preaching, public theology, virtue, mission, eschatology, and relationship to other religions.

[4 : 59] Church, ministry, and then finally a lengthy section devoted to the reception of Edwards' work in various quarters and contexts and in different areas of his work.

Now, Edwards is an incredibly interesting figure for a number of reasons. I think one of the most interesting facts about him is just the cast of his mind.

So it has a very helpful section upon this in the introduction to the work. Edwards' intellectual style was venturesome, unfettered, self-critical, and developmental.

By developmental, we mean something akin to what Whitney Oates, in his introduction to the basic works, writings of St. Augustine, referred to as an open system approach. The open system thinker approaches most intellectual issues as works in progress and hence returns again and again to the same perennial themes.

And this is in contrast to a closed system thinker who focuses very much upon systematicity. And he, in this respect, compares Edwards to someone like Plato or Augustine as distinct from someone like Aristotle.

[6 : 12] And then this open system allows for a lot of room for development and new insight. And yet the danger is that people might only imitate that sort of more open system rather than and leave behind the warning he makes is the danger of imitating only the experimental method and leaving behind the foundational principles.

And this, he argues, is one of the things that happened with Edwards' followers. Also, Edwards had a mode of investigation and discovery by writing.

He talks about two of his chief intellectual strategies might be described as concatenation and subsumption. Subsumption. The former refers to Edwards' search for connections among ideas that might ordinarily be thought of as disconnected.

And then subsumption refers to the ways in which Edwards' insights were absorbed into ever-expanding and more general categories. And so, it gives a number of examples of this.

For instance, the concept of communication that enabled him to bring together human happiness and divine end in creation and God's glory.

[7 : 31] And so, these concepts are these processes enable him to develop his thought in very interesting ways. It says, Later on, And beyond this, Edwards is not primarily a confessionalist nor an originalist trying to get back to Calvin or some other fundamental thinker within the world.

In the tradition. Rather, he's a very developmental thinker. He's moving forward. He's got this open system and he's exploring new possibilities and bringing in new insights and making novel and original arguments for traditional positions.

He's also empirical and metaphysical in ways that are unusual within much of the Reformed tradition. So, his metaphysical thought is quite profoundly developed in various places. His thinking is idealist in many respects, but not idealist in the regular sense that privileges the mind and its ideas over the body, but in a way that prioritises the mind of God and its communication.

Now, this allows for him to approach subjects that many people would approach purely from a biblical angle or theological angle, from a far broader and often more illuminating angle.

But there's also the speculative element that leads to interesting results, sometimes less convincing, sometimes more so. Also, the empiricism in his thought is fascinating. The influence of his experience of revival and learning to read these experiences, see what is true, what is false.

[10 : 06] That is another aspect of his thought that is distinctive, that's something that gives his cast of mind an unusual and a particularly worthwhile character to engage with.

If you want to expand beyond a narrow theological frame and to move into engagement with broader realms of reality and thought, then Edwards is not a bad place to start.

He's someone who has those interests in areas of metaphysics and empirical reality and trying to read that in a theological and a Christian manner, interests in those areas that enable us to expand and to build out our theology.

So it's not just narrowly focused. His context is also one of the things that makes him interesting. He's a colonial Englishman in North America and exposed to non-Christian religion firsthand.

He's someone who takes on board and really feels the impact of Newtonian science in a welcoming way. He's someone who is open to new ideas and to learning from them and to including and knitting them into his structure of thought.

[11 : 16] He's someone who experiences firsthand revival and reflects deeply upon it, upon ways to read revival, not just in a bare theological way, but one that's very attentive to the actual form of these things.

So he's someone who has a more empirical focus than many of the other writers upon conversion, upon revival and these sorts of subjects. He brings together the empirical and the theological in a way that continues to reward people who come to Edwards' work on those subjects in the present day.

He's someone who has firsthand involvement in missions, again a very important writer in influencing the Protestant tradition of missions, someone who had an immense influence upon people like Carey and others.

And it's important to recognise just how seminal his influence in writing the biography of David Brainerd and other things like that have been for the Reformed tradition of missions.

He has a mind open to relating the historic Christian faith to new realities in science, in nature, in foreign religions that he encounters, and in the experience of just reading the works of God in history, revival and things like that.

[12 : 38] And so just as one example, his approach to foreign religions is fascinating. The later miscellanies remove any doubt.

Edwards was setting out to write a comprehensive account of redemptive history that was to include ancient Greece and Rome, China, India, and other heathen or non-Christian traditions.

Continuing the so-called Prisker Theologia of the ancient church fathers and Renaissance humanists, Edwards held that beyond the written revelation of scripture, there were also oral and unwritten traditions among the various peoples of earth.

Immediate instructions came to the patriarchs and ancients in visions, miracles, and inspiration of his spirit to men such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and Melchizedek. These messages were passed on to later generations by oral traditions.

This primeval revelation, though later distorted by human sin and pressed into the service of idolatry, contained genuine anticipations of later Christian teachings. Those in China and India held to something like the doctrine of the Trinity, while notions of propitiatory sacrifice, indwelling by spirits or the spirits, and other doctrines were widely diffused.

[13 : 51] Pagan religions were thus a preparation for and foreshadowing of the Christian gospel. Within his theology, one of the areas that may be familiar to people, but they've never actually looked into it with the breadth that this book offers, is the emphasis upon beauty within the theology of Jonathan Edwards.

Beauty is the first principle of reality, first seen in the Trinity, and focused upon the harmony of the life of the triune God. And we see that overflowing into the secondary beauty of the world, a beauty that's seen in a typological structure, the analogical structures of reality that point beyond themselves to a greater beauty that is original within God.

And there's a significance to aesthetic perception within his theology that comes out in interesting and surprising ways, at points you might not expect. The objective and subjective poles of, on the first hand, beauty as the objective pole, and then sensibility as the subjective pole, and the significance of tasting and knowledge that we must have a sense of God's reality and beauty.

And that corresponds to his actual beauty. This is a very important theme within his work, and it gives his work, more generally, a very different cast.

Because when you focus upon the notion of beauty rather than merely knowledge, a lot of further things can come out. So there's the sense comes into a greater clarity, the sense of beauty, the transformation of beauty.

[15 : 30] Beauty transforms us. It can transfigure us. When we see something beautiful, really beautiful, we can be dumbstruck, we can be awestruck, we can be amazed and transformed in our faces just by seeing something that is truly beautiful.

There's something glorious about it, and glory transfigures. It's reflected upon people's countenance. And so when you think about beauty as a paradigm, for thinking about theology more generally, it opens up new possibilities beyond those offered merely by knowledge.

It also gives a deeper understanding of communication between the triune God and humanity, and an understanding of creation as it relates to God's glory that can often be missed out.

So next to Augustine and people like von Balthasar, Edwards is one of the Christian theologians who has given the most and the closest attention to the subject of beauty within theology.

And for this reason alone, he merits close attention. And I think people will find this particular aspect of the work very thought-provoking. In a number of areas, I will be taking some of Edwards' insights about beauty and thinking and reflecting upon them and seeking to integrate them into my own thinking.

[16 : 52] His understanding of typology is also closely related to this. Reality is typological. It's something about the very nature of reality. And I'll maybe make a few comments about that later on.

That gives him a very typological reading of scripture, but also of the wider world. His theology is very God-centered, but not just in a narrow way that's focused upon divine sovereignty.

It's focused upon God's beauty. It's focused upon God's ordering of his creation. It's focused upon God's presence. All these sorts of themes, not just narrowly upon divine sovereignty, which it can be within certain reform contexts.

His understanding of God is also very important in the fact that God is Trinity. And his understanding of Trinity is one that might unsettle people in various ways.

It's not exactly... At certain points, it would seem to raise questions about its orthodoxy relative to the tradition. So he challenges things like...

[17 : 58] Or it's argued that he challenges things like divine simplicity. He departed from the Western Trinitarian tradition by rejecting its emphasis upon divine simplicity, which was one of the ways in which Augustine and his successors guarded the faith against recurring Arianism.

So he takes the psychological analogy for the Trinity, but then holds it alongside a social analogy, which he gives slightly more weight to. He also believes that we can reason to the Trinity, which is a striking and quite controversial statement.

But I am not afraid to say 20 things about the Trinity, which the scripture never said. There may be deductions of reason from what has been said of the most mysterious matters besides what has been said, and safe and certain deductions too, as well as about the most obvious and easy matters.

I think that it is within the reach of naked reason to perceive certainly that there are three distinct in God. Now again, these are striking statements, and it's worth thinking about these.

Do they actually hold as an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity? He also makes very striking statements about the monarchy of the Father, things that we would associate more with the Eastern tradition at certain points.

[19 : 16] So God's perfect idea of himself, this is MacDermott and McClymond. So God's perfect idea of himself is so real and substantial that it generates a person, the Son.

The mutual delight that the Father and the Son take in each other is also perfect, and therefore is another person, the Spirit. So there are only three, God, the idea of God, and delighting God.

All other things said about God, even what are called his attributes, are not distinct real things, but just as in created spirits, only mere modes and relations of the three divine persons.

And this is Edwards. The Father is the deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner, or the deity in its direct existence. The Son is the deity generated by God's understanding, or having an idea of himself, and subsisting in that idea.

The Holy Ghost is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth, in God's infinite love to and delight in himself. The divine idea and divine love, each of them are properly distinct persons.

[20 : 25] Now, there are areas to be concerned about, I think, with Edwards' Trinitarian theology. On the other hand, there are promising aspects. I think that there are areas here that could be adapted in a more orthodox form.

But as it finds its form within Edwards' theology, I have a number of concerns about his understanding of the Trinity. His understanding of the monarchy of the Father, his emphasis upon the social trinity, his more social model for the trinity, his emphasis upon participation and divinization through God's light, love and power going forth, and his emphasis upon the spirits pouring himself into the human soul and operating within it, could be seen as relating to having some similarities with the tradition of St. Gregory Palamas and people like that within the Eastern tradition.

I think it's worth exploring some of the connections that they suggest at that point. Not that Edwards was primarily influenced by direct engagement with that tradition, but there are convergent developments here.

And it's interesting to see how Edwards arrived at that point, what ideas led him in that direction, and particularly the idea of beauty. Beauty as a paradigmatic root principle for his theology really enables him to come to these sorts of insights and to move beyond some of the frameworks that were more prevalent within the Reformed tradition.

Without leaving behind their fundamental insights, he is able to integrate those insights into a more capacious system or framework.

[22 : 10] And his understanding of the end of God in creation is an important discussion. That's something that comes out within, there's a lengthy chapter discussion, and then it appears at various other points, that the end of creation is nothing but God's self.

But again, as in the issue of the example of subsumption, that he can bring together those ideas of divine creation for the end of God's glory with divine creation for the end of human goodness.

That there is, God can pursue his own glory because it's not a limited good, but it's the good of all creatures. And so there is no, we don't need to oppose the idea of creation for the good of humanity and creation for the glory of God.

Both of those things come together. And the notion of communication helps us to understand this, uniting those two principles in a greater one. And the principle of ontic enlargement is an interesting one here.

Page 260, they write. Yet at the same time, God ad extra, God's actions by the sun and spirit in creation in history, is the external repetition of his own being, and therefore a kind of ontic self-enlargement, just as the beams of light from the sun are an increase, repetition, or multiplication of its glory.

[23 : 34] God from his goodness, as it were, enlarges himself in a more excellent and divine manner, this is Edwards at this point, by flowing forth and expressing himself in his creatures and making them to partake of him and rejoice in himself expressed in them and communicated to them.

Now Edwards' account of creation and its relationship to the end of God does raise significant questions about whether God can be complete apart from his creation.

And some have seen a sort of panentheist move within Edwards' understanding of creation, not least in his understanding of continuous creation. Charles Hodge and others made this sort of criticism, that in that idea there's a sort of immediacy of God's will in its relationship to human action that raises questions also about God's relationship to sin, sinful actions within the life of history, but also it raises questions about the goodness of creation relative to God's goodness.

Can God exist and be truly good apart from the goodness of creation? And it does raise important questions on that front. I think Edwards can give at least the beginnings of an answer to that, but I don't think that he gives a completely satisfactory answer that puts those concerns to rest.

Once again, you see the emphasis of his metaphysics coming into his theology here and the way that the metaphysical insights that he brings can deepen his theological understanding, but also lead him into some choppy waters.

[25 : 09] And in both of those respects, it's worth paying attention to what metaphysics can bring to theology more generally. There's a great benefit in philosophical theology, I think, that is often neglected by certain quarters of the reformed tradition.

But Edwards really brings that into play in ways that have benefits and limitations too. His emphasis upon...

Let's see if there's another passage I was meaning to read out. This is a quote from Edwards that raises, kind of throws into sharp relief some of the questions that were raised about creation.

This propensity in God to diffuse himself may be considered as a propensity to himself diffused, or to his own glory existing in its emanation.

Thus that nature in a tree, by which it puts forth buds, shoots out branches and brings forth leaves and fruit, is a disposition that terminates in its own complete self.

[26 : 18] And so the disposition in the sun to shine, or abundantly to diffuse its fullness, warmth and brightness, is only a tendency to its own most glorious and complete state. So God looks on the communication of himself and the emanation of infinite glory and good that are in himself to belong to the fullness and completeness of himself, as though he were not in his most complete and glorious state without it.

Thus the church of Christ, toward whom and in whom are the emanations of his glory and communications of his fullness, is called the fullness of Christ, as though he were not in his complete state without her, as Adam was in a defective state without Eve.

Now that's a very daring statement. And it's not surprising that people like Robert Jensen and others have found a lot of appeal within the theology of Jonathan Edwards in their own theological endeavours, which have emphasised the relationship between creation and God in a way that really accents it's God's choosing himself as creator, God's determination to be creator, and that God's full realisation of his being in being creator.

Now, there are dangers there. There are ways that those problems can be mitigated, ways that we can retain the contingency of the creation, but there are problems and difficulties to be wrestled with.

It's not to say that these questions aren't important ones or ones that can lead us in orthodox directions, in addition to many unorthodox ways that they could lead us down.

[27 : 54] So it's worth engaging with Edwards at this point. He's throwing up important questions that would come to greater prominence within the 20th century in theologies like that of Jensen or Barth.

And so he anticipates many of these moves. And I've found thinking about this, again, challenging, difficult, but also rewarding.

He gives attention, again, with the more speculative and metaphysical cast to his theology. He gives attention to issues like the angels to a degree that many other theologians don't.

So he has very interesting reflections upon their part within the story of redemption. I'll read out some statements. His general interest lay in the missions and functions of the angels within redemptive history.

And at almost every point, his references to angels occur alongside references to Christ. Angelology for Edwards was a corollary of Christology. This focus on Christ did not mean, though, that Edwards' approach to angels was free from speculation.

[28 : 59] Within the miscellaneous, one finds many unexpected statements. For example, that Lucifer is a type of Christ, that Christ replaced Lucifer as the head of the angels, that some angels rebelled when they first learned of God's plan for his son to become incarnate as a human, that the very idea of the incarnation brought temptation to the angels, that fallen humans were elected for salvation to take the place of fallen angels, and so on.

More than other theologians, Edwards highlighted Christ's ascension and his enthronisation in heaven as a decisive event in the unfolding of redemptive history. For Edwards, Christ's ascension was the point at which Christ became the head of the angels, and the unfallen angels were for the first time confirmed in grace, confirmed in grace, so that they would forever be removed from the danger of sinning.

And in many respects he's traditional, but he makes these speculative moves, speculative moves that I think have good reason for being probable reasons, readings of the text, that Christ replaces Lucifer, is not a crazy reading at all.

There are good reasons to believe that that reading holds water, but it goes beyond the very clear words of the text to speculate that a bit further.

And so I'd put forward arguments for this as we look at Lucifer as the morning star, as we look for Lucifer before God's presence in accusation, for instance, and Michael as related to Lucifer.

[30 : 41] These sorts of questions are interesting. These sorts of texts are interesting, and they provide pointers that might lead us in some of the directions that Edwards goes at this point. His emphasis upon beauty and the sense is also something that seems to be related to his emphasis upon the affections.

They mediate between mind and feeling. So ideas relate to the affections, not just the mind, that we have a sense of things and a feel for the truth, that the truth is something that we taste and we must take it into ourselves.

It's not just something that is known out there in the world, but we must have a sense of God's goodness, a sense of God's truth, a sense of God's glory and holiness. And all these things are not just known in the mind, but they are known in the heart and they are felt.

It's a felt faith, not just an intellectualised faith. And that's one of the ways in which Edwards' theology takes some of his aesthetic framework on board.

And it's also one of the ways, I think, that you can see the influence of his reflections upon revival, upon the work of God in the human soul, and his deep reflection upon those questions coming into the deeper areas of his theology, into his understanding of soteriology and anthropology more generally.

[32 : 06] Faith is a disposition. It's not just an exercise of the mind. Our judgement, but also our inclinations are involved. It's something that is a matter of the heart.

It allows, and this allows for very interesting reflections upon pagans, children, Old Testament saints, et cetera, that they can have this disposition even before they actually have a clear knowledge of faith.

And that's a very striking statement that allows for some speculative thoughts to develop. He doesn't settle on these issues in the way that he does on some others, but it's interesting to think about how that can take us in specific directions.

A lower emphasis upon the cognitive focus upon faith, that there is this cognitive dimension to faith, but in Edwards, there's far more of an emphasis upon the affections.

And that is something that, the idea is something that is related to that, that there must be some sort of idea that corresponds. But there can be this very inchoate disposition that has yet to grow out of the idea as it comes into relationship with that.

[33 : 24] That allows for some interesting thoughts to develop. Love is also included in faith. And true faith includes perseverance. And without perseverance, we will not receive the final salvation that is promised.

And when God judges and justifies in accordance with faith, there is perseverance coming into view there. That even in the initial moment of faith, God sees perseverance as constitutive of true faith.

This is one of the reasons why Edwards makes arguments, again, with an aesthetic flavour to them, that there's something fitting about being saved by faith. Faith unites us to Christ and to what he has done.

And it also, it means that what is real is the foundation of what is legal. So this is not just a legal fiction. Saving faith doesn't stand alone.

And God's declaration of justification over our initial faith sees perseverance within it. Another passage I'll read out. To Edwards, justification necessarily involved both faith and works because of his distinctive idea of gracious dispositions.

[34 : 35] When God calls someone to be joined to his son by virtue of his son's righteousness, that person received through the spirit a new disposition that produced all the virtues of the spirit. This consenting disposition is called by different names.

When exerted towards a saviour, it is called faith or trust. When toward good things promised, it is called hope. When towards excellent persons, love. When towards commands, obedience.

Therefore, the graces are all the same in principle. When one is exercised, there is something of the other exercised with it. Like strings in consort. If one is struck, others sound with it.

Or like links in a chain, if one is drawn, others follow. And so this leads to very surprising formulations when it comes to issues like justification and sanctification.

He can move beyond much of the Reformation tradition while keeping on board its fundamental emphasis upon justification by grace alone and the emphasis upon God's prior work of grace, the priority of grace at each point and God's sovereignty involved in salvation.

[35 : 45] So he can maintain all of those emphases, but his particular understanding of faith and its relationship to disposition enables him to say things that others can't.

And in some respects, there are parallels to be drawn with, particularly the earlier Luther, on these sorts of areas. Faith is also something that leads into some of his works in the areas of revival, ministry, the church, the sacraments and public theology.

His attention to revival and his attention to the testing hearts is significant.

He doesn't go as far as some think in this area, but one area where Edwards' work has always been of interest to me and I've always had some degree of concern is the way that he treats the question of the scrutability of God's work in history and in human hearts.

So whether he's talking about God's judgments in disasters or how those relate to the national covenant or the history of redemption, how we read events in history beyond scripture or how we read the marks of true religion in human hearts, there's a certain movement in Edwards' theology that draws attention away from focusing upon false signs and resting unendued weight upon things that are not in themselves unambiguous or unambivalent evidence of God's work of grace.

[37 : 24] But then there's a danger of actually replacing for that a very strong series of statements about how scrutable God's work and God's work is within these situations, within human hearts.

And by that, displacing confidence from its proper object, which is Christ. And so the more that our confidence becomes based upon understanding whether we have a true work of God within us, there is a danger there that faith can become turned in on itself.

Now Edwards, in many ways, resists that tendency and he pushes back against it. But at points, his emphasis upon the scrutability of God's work, whether that's in judgments in history, whether it's about history more generally as a phenomenon that we can read events and their significance, or whether it's about marks of true religion in the human soul.

In each of these cases, I think he pushes too far and there are problems in those areas. I'll read a couple of quotes that are interesting here.

One area that he does talk about, and the scrutability of history, is that it's scrutable from a more divine eye, God's eye view. He talks about, The postulated observer was not standing on earth, looking up into heaven, but lifted up into heaven, glancing down towards the earth.

[38 : 53] The object of vision was not God, rather the vantage point was God's. Human beings became aware of God's design and history, and the pattern of the whole, inasmuch as they were, so to speak, raised off the ground and enabled to see the world through the eyes of God.

Never mind that the events of history fade away, the past is gone, and the future is not yet, and only the present is visible to us. Edwards' river required a point of view that people caught in time's flow could not fully attain, a vision of the whole of history under the aspect of eternity.

And then this leads to, describes an aesthetic understanding of the problem of evil, and also an emphasis upon the saints in heaven, that they can enjoy this perspective upon history to a degree that we cannot.

Now at this point, what you see Edwards doing is making some moves that are very helpful in helping us talk about how God can genuinely work in history in a way that is scrutable without us being able to read it directly from our position within that history.

And that is helpful, but at points I think he goes too far. Likewise with his understanding of the religious affections and how we understand what is true, a true work of God within the human soul or not.

[40 : 07] There is so much that is helpful, he says, but then at other points I think that he might go too far. A further quotation. In his theologising, Edwards also tended to look for rational reasons where other reformed divines had been content with mystery.

For example, he said that God's reasons for choosing some and not others were not arbitrary, but rational. Calvin wrote that God's wonderful method of governing the universe is rightly called an abyss.

Occasionally, said Calvin, when we can discern God's purposes as when God topples a cruel kingdom, but most of the time we cannot understand God's providence and we ought reverently to adore and hold God in reverence.

In contrast, Edwards devoted his history of the work of redemption to an exploration of God's purposes in history and filled his notebooks with reflections on the providential meanings of current events around the world.

In an effort to make the reformed doctrine of predestination more comprehensible, he took an infralapsarian approach. God's decrees of eternal damnation come only after his permission of freedom and hence the fall.

[41 : 22] In those sorts of points, I think Edwards is going too far. I would side more with Calvin on these issues. I think that they, we can read history to a very limited extent, particularly as it presented to us, is presented to us in scripture.

But there are so many dangers of going too far. And Edwards, I think, at these points does go too far. His account of virtue is also fascinating.

Being, for Edwards, is active and relational and by its very nature tends towards union. Regeneration gives us a new spiritual disposition that impels us towards, out into loving relationship with others.

And so, also, created beings, mutually, created beings have mutual consent as an image of God's own Trinitarian mutual consent and unity.

And so, our glory, our understanding of virtue is related to the reflected glory of humanity or the reflected glory of God in humanity.

[42 : 26] That, this again shows an aesthetic cast. his emphasis upon vision and the transformation of the human soul through its development of a disposition and a sense through the work of the spirit within it.

These again show that aesthetic element in his thought and prove very helpful, I think. He has an account of something similar to natural law that pushes back against some of the dangers of natural law, which, read out some of the, he has a creation ethic based on a conviction that God has created every person with self-love, conscience, a capacity for relative justice and a range of affections and instincts such as gratitude, pity and familial love.

So, self-love is not an entirely bad thing. It's something that is compromised in those who do not love their own souls, who do not take concern for their eternal well-being.

It's the mainspring of that natural affection by which parents love their children and the love which near relations have one to another. And then there's conscience, that's another aspect of natural morality.

It falls short of virtue but it can approve of true virtue and it also is something that can approve of benevolence and have a sense of our need to repay the creator who has given us life.

[44 : 03] It does not yet taste the goodness of God though in its proper sense. There's a sense of justice that we all have in creation there's different instincts that we have that again are for human preservation and the comfort of the human race.

It says here these instincts include pity, parental affection for children, the natural appetites for food and sex, romantic attraction between the sexes, kindnesses of diverse sorts and even the passion of jealousy between the sexes especially in the male toward the female.

And one of the things that we'll see in hell is the loss of these natural affections. that when people are without natural affections there's something that is compromised in their humanity.

And these things provide a natural orientation and drive of human nature towards things that are good. It's an incipient movement towards the reflection and participation in God's glory.

For Edwards the natural virtues are God-ordained images of divine virtues. And so these are intrinsic structures in creation.

[45 : 13] So this is not just a divine law that is imposed upon a creation without any form, without any intrinsic structure or ordering or drive. Rather this is something that already shows within creation these good structures that God has established, that creation has this impulse within it.

But yet he's aware of the danger of a certain secularization of ethics that can occur with certain natural law approaches that dismiss the foundation in creation and treat these sorts of things as just inherent within a world that is detached from its creator.

creator. And so his social theory resists privatization by its notion of the ontological interrelatedness of all people and its stipulation that believers share with unbelievers moral awareness, aesthetic perception, elementary religious knowledge and instinctual kind affections.

For this reason Christians can and must cooperate with non-Christians on projects with an ethical aim, sharing common goals if not the reasons for pursuing those goals. Christians are called not to new and separate political communities but to work for the common good of existing communities.

And this I find a very salutary and welcome emphasis upon what I would refer to as a sort of natural law. This provides us with a framework within which we can talk with strength and clarity about the more general goodness of God's creation.

[46 : 47] and the common ground that can be found between Christians and non-Christians. And the structures that exist within creation that are not just eradicated by the fall.

His emphasis upon beauty as a root of virtue, again, the seeing of beauty as a root of virtue. It's not just a response to commands nor is it just practicing of habits but there needs to be a seeing of virtue and that leads to true ethics.

That's a very profound insight. It pushes back against certain Aristotelian emphases but it also pushes back against many of the emphases that you'll see within typical evangelical approaches.

Once again, I think Edwards has a lot to give here, a lot of things that we can benefit from. This book ends with a lengthy discussion of the reception and the influence of Edwards' theology.

It focuses very much upon Edwards as a thinker who appeals to a great number of different traditions and contexts. He's someone who can build bridges across groups that would otherwise be detached from each other between Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Protestants, between Pentecostals and Charismatics and Non-Charismatics.

[48 : 05] He can build these connections because he's someone who speaks beyond the limited categories that often can be found within the reformed tradition.

He's someone who's a more expansive, open, creative and developmental thinker, someone who allows our thoughts to be rooted within the traditional foundational doctrines, but also to expand outwards and to become more capacious and within a greater imaginative framework to be able to include insights from other traditions that might otherwise be excluded or dismissed unnecessarily.

His, or MacLymond and McDermott's presentation of Edwards is one that also moves in the direction of an ecumenical emphasis that Edwards has promised within the current context, not just as helping us to expand our conceptual frameworks, but also as helping us to bring about a degree of unity.

People see many different things in Edwards. There is an Edwards for each particular movement, but that's not just that everyone's seeing an illusion, something that they're supposed to be there.

Rather, Edwards is such a rich and multifaceted thinker that the insights and the emphases of different traditions can all find their home legitimately within a theological framework that is a lot more welcoming and expansive than those which employ more limited categories.

[49 : 40] And in many respects, I'd agree with them here. I think there is a lot that can be done with a theology like Edwards that is creatively rooted within the tradition, that is rooted within the tradition but has moved out in ways that enable it to take on board insights from the natural sciences, insights from other contexts!

of the church, insights from empirical experience, and insights from foreign religions. Edwards, and in these respects there's something bracing and exciting about Edwards' theology.

He's not just a hidebound traditionalist but nor is he someone who's abandoned all moorings and has no anchor left anymore and is going off on the wild waves of the sea into who knows where.

He's someone who has bearings and he's someone who has a clear anchor and yet he's someone who's able to explore areas that others cannot because he has a different cast of theology.

And so I would very highly recommend this book. There's so much within it that I found rewarding. I spent a long time reading through it and there are lengthy notes and annotations and considerable underlining throughout.

[51 : 00] It's about 750 pages but very worthwhile. If you're not going to read all the way through it but just wanted to the reference volume it will be equally worthwhile. There is so much that you can resort to in this book.

If you're looking through a particular area you can just dip in at a particular point. His doctrine of creation, his understanding of justification by faith, his understanding of the end of creation, his understanding of the trinity, all of these sorts of areas or his deeper account of beauty.

All of these have so much to give to contemporary reflection. creation and some of the areas where he's really fascinating are the areas where he's deeply creative, going out and thinking about how can we have an account of the history of redemption that takes into account all of these pagan religions, all of these people who've never heard the gospel.

That is something that most theologians are not daring or creative or imaginative enough to do. Edwards has that sort of mind. He has a theology that inspires you to think in more creative ways too.

I found his discussion of the angels, again, a very stimulating and encouraging one. I'd never actually thought about the question of the confirmation of the angels in righteousness and when did that take place.

[52 : 22] And his suggestion that it takes place at the time of the ascension is a promising and quite probable one. And so I'd suggest reading it even just for insights like that.

There's so much here and I would like to tell you a lot more about it but I'll just recommend that you buy the book yourself and read it in depth ideally or if you can't do that just dip into it from time to time as a reference volume.

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