

Paying attention to divine beauty: Jonathan Edwards, spiritual practices and the forming of affective disciples.

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Jonathan Edwards, the key figure in the New England 'Awakenings' of the early 18th Century, makes much of 'proportion and symmetry' within forming and *gracious* movements of the Christian life. Namely, a grateful response to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who he colourfully describes in terms of God's Gift and Beauty, yet just as significantly, a *lived* response that is similarly expressive of ascetic and creative being.

Therefore, what might it mean to be about educating and forming disciples who, through spiritual practice, pay very close attention to sources and expression of divine beauty? How could mission then be framed and enacted in more sensate or artistic ways, without impractical or romantic (naïve) results?

Arguably the language of late modernity has shifted from a sure and certain prosaic to a poetic and searching basis. It seems ironic that a theologian / pastor of the Enlightenment era might have something important to say to us. However, by virtue of Edwards' highly 'ambidextrous' mind and his foundational experience of Divine Beauty, he continues for many to be a catalyst of both thoughtful and affective discipleship in our own time and place.

Born only eighty years after the arrival of the *Mayflower* to the shores of Massachusetts, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) represented continuity yet an innovative departure from the social and religious experiment that was an exiled English Puritanism.

Schooled in Calvinist / Reformed precepts of theology and grounded in puritan piety (by age 20 he had compiled 70 (serious) 'Resolutions' for the shaping of his Christian life)¹, Edwards nevertheless displayed a high degree of theological dexterity, if not originality. Namely, his theological aesthetics, that is, an emphasis on the beauty of holiness and how God's very nature spiritually regenerates and renovates, being the core of his voluminous works and a great attraction for interpreters like me, three centuries and at least three major western cultural shifts later.

It may not be initially apparent, but such a theological focus on Divine beauty is by no means a speculative or abstract exercise. It demands keen observance and in Edwards's

¹ See, 'Resolutions' in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, edited by John E. Smith, Henry S. Stout and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 274-281.

case, a rigour of prayerful reflection resulting in renewed, *gracious* practice. George Marsden describes Edwards's theological, hermeneutical key in the following terms:

A 'blazing beauty' at the centre of the universe and this is a personal experience. Any true encounter with such personified beauty is transforming. It draws our highest love to it. It captures our most fundamental affections. Our will driven by our affections or loves, is transformed to love what God loves. Hence beauty is the source of fervent action based on love to God and all God's creatures. Beauty is not a personal refuge from the machinery of modernity. A deadening instrumentalism. Not an escape but a basis for a way of life that is both practice and exhilarating.²

At this juncture, then, it is worthwhile highlighting Edwards's late teen's conversion; this being, the substrata of his religious experience which continued to shape his preaching and writing, not simply in distinctive doctrinal terms, but in *affective*, practical expressions of life-long Christian discipleship.³

Edwards's father, Timothy was a celebrated Puritan clergyman in Connecticut. His maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard was known as the 'pope' of Northampton, a major trading town on the Connecticut River, serving the second most influential church outside of Boston. As we might imagine, certain pressures existed for the young Jonathan to not only follow in their footsteps yet to do so with a purity of doctrine and exemplary practice. And though earnest in theological study and prayer while a member of his father's church, Edwards sought for an abiding *new sense* of "God's gloriousness" in his heart, this being the puritan ideal and norm for authentic conversion. Too often, in his own experience, both conviction and affection "wore off," causing him to yearn for something more substantive and personal.⁴

² George M. Marsden, 'Jonathan Edwards in the Twenty-First Century,' in *Edwards at 300: Essays on the Tercentenary of His Birth*, edited by Harry S. Stout, Kenneth Minkema, & Caleb J. D. Maskell, (New York: University Press of America), 163.

³ Most notably his mature (1746) treatise, *Religious Affections*. (WJE 2)

⁴ 'Personal Narrative (1739), in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, edited by John E. Smith, Henry S. Stout and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

Surprisingly to him, the divine gloriousness he so desired came in non-contrived or predictable ways. Firstly through the reading of a scriptural text (1 Timothy 1:17) wherein the (KJV) doxology, “*Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God...*” spoke to him in terms of,

Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God...as be as it were swallowed up in him...*a new sort of affection* (emphasis mine). But it never came in to my thought, that there was anything spiritual, or of a saving nature in this.⁵

Reading between the lines, Edwards’s father was not enamoured with his son’s unstructured ‘regeneration’ account that seemingly by-passed normative steps of redemption – conviction of sin and a searching repentance before a final assurance - based on the teaching of Puritan divines, such as Thomas Hooker et al.⁶ Edwards wrote some 20 years later:

Not long after I first began to experience these things, I gave an account to my father, of some things that had passed in my mind. I was pretty much affected by the discourse we had together. And when the discourse was ended, I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father’s pasture, for contemplation. And as I was walking there, and looked up on the sky and the clouds; there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God that I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction: majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet and gentle holy majesty, and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness...God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees, in the water, and all nature; which used to greatly fix my mind...singing forth with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. And scarce anything, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning. Formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me...I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm.⁷

⁵ Ibid. 284.

⁶ See, Iain H. Murray, ‘Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion,’ in *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 195, December 1979, 19-29. The Puritans, by in large, understood the need for thoroughness and time in the converting process, so as to guarantee a longevity, thus virtuousness of faith. Conviction of sin and the process of repentance could ill afford to be rushed. As writes Murray, “Hooker would certainly have been appalled at the speed and ease with which evangelicals today claim to be sure that others have been converted!” 52.

⁷ ‘Personal Narrative,’ 284-285.

Not only is this a fascinating account of Edwards's prayed-for conversion, for embedded within it lie important keys to his theological, pastoral and *ethical* emphases. For our purposes, divine beauty – that which potentially reorientates the human will and desire toward the Godhead – is described in terms of a “sweet conjunction” (of seeming opposites within God); a broad and fulsome beauty that cannot be circumscribed yet remains greatly inviting by virtue of its self-giving, fecund nature.

In short, divine beauty was for Edwards, not a ‘thing’ to observe from a safe distance or an aesthetic within other aesthetic experiences but an intrinsically *relational* and *expressive* encountering of God's being, in Christ, through the Spirit; a renewed *spiritual principle* to give happy consent to and thus, participate fully within. Writes Edwards,

The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of the saints, that he is there, as a seed or spring of life, exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ, in thus having communion or participation with the Holy Ghost.⁸

This theological confession, if not Trinitarian doxology, I believe, has vital implications for Christian life in general, and ministry practice of any variety, in particular. Such is its relational or personal grounding, that it might help subvert a present over emphasis on function – productive skills, competencies and measurable outcomes – so as to potentially reinvigorate a more artful and imaginative soul for (and of) Christian practice; one that responds to the beauty received with a beauty returned. Indeed, *human* expressions of the same ‘sweet and excellent conjunctions’ of love rather than mere offerings of rationality and reason. To borrow from the Prologue of St. John, it is to bodily express the beautiful synergy of both Christ's drawing grace *and* piercing truth;⁹ a qualitative expression of being that simply cannot be reduced to an ordering of form or function.

⁸ *Religious Affections*, WJE, 2, 201.

⁹ See, *Sermon 74*, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

For Edwards in his day, and I suspect for us in 2015, a religious epistemology based on such an engaged “seeing” and “sensing” of divine beauty is radical, so far as *fruitfulness* of discipleship for the long haul is concerned. Cognition and intellect is certainly not bypassed but it is integrated within a more whole bodied, thus *affective and graced* experience of God and the world. And affection in this context does not mean a raw and unbridled emotionalism, but inner movements of Spirit that illumine and quicken the open mind, calm restless hearts and cranks an often stubborn handle of the will into divine action(s) of grace and creative good will.

The contemporary Edwards’ scholar, Klye Strobel, notes,

Faith is not the illumination of one’s mind concerning a fact about God, nor is it the unravelling of the divine mystery. Rather, faith is the illumination of a human person by God through God’s own self-giving. As such, faith is a participation in the free self-disclosure of God’s interior life and light.¹⁰

Significantly for spiritual formation, Christian education and the practices of discipleship, the essence of the Christian life, lies, therefore, not in attainment, or dare I suggest in achievements for Christ’s sake (though I suspect that seems way too obvious for a gathering of protestants like us), but rather these ‘FED’ characteristics come most fully alive in trusting *consent* to an essentially aesthetic and personal point of reference; a repeated yielding, no less, before the holy, thus ennobling gaze of the Triune God, in which one’s own beauty is both beheld and affirmed to come forward via a truly virtuous life. Many years of pastoral experience would suggest to me that such an honouring and expression of the true or real self (in Christ), in contrast to a religious persona or pretence, does make a profound difference to the people and groupings one is called to serve. All are freed to be, including the leadership.

The *Song of Songs* remains a key poetical, if not mystical text in this regard, a favourite not only of Edwards yet of Reformers such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux and John Calvin. Its recovery, so far as seeing through the imagination something of the nature of an alluring and mutually desirous love, may even help sweep

¹⁰ Kyle C. Strobel, ‘The Beauty of Christ: Edwards and Balthasar on Theological Aesthetics,’ in *The Ecumenical Edwards: Jonathan Edwards and the Theologians*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 92... He (Balthasar) continues, now turning to the example of Aquinas: “the light of faith remains for him a habituation, an assimilation, a participation in the vision of himself which God has...this could easily be said of Edwards as well.

away some obstinate modernist cobwebs of mind and heart. Listen again, through the voice of the bride, with the initiating, desirous gaze of Bridegroom fully in mind:

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention toward me was love.*

*Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.*

*O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!*

*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!*

*The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.*

*My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.*

*My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.*

The flowers appear on the earth;

*the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.*

*The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.*

Now lest we think such intoxicating lyricism of love, even a return to allegory, would divert us from a genuine Christian engagement with the world, Edwards underlines, as always, the ‘application’ of the doctrine or scriptural teaching. In this context, he writes, suggestively I think, about *responsive* marks of gracious human affections attuned to God are also to ‘possess a beautiful symmetry and proportion; that is they are steady, durable and modulated, not flashy, episodic and or wild.’¹¹

In other words, such gracious and holy affections are to be practiced with a certain artfulness, stability and joy; his working model or ‘type’ being no less than the ‘happy’ interior life of the Holy Trinity itself! The question remains, though, what key practices or disciplines open the way for such a disposition of discipleship into mission? I will briefly list two here before moving toward a more general conclusion.

For Edwards, the prayerful contemplation of divine beauty was central to all else. Indeed, and not unlike St. Augustine, he understood “complacency” or rest in God to be the wellspring of “benevolence” for God in the world. Put more simply, contemplation is a deliberate and receptive placing of oneself before and *within* the ‘operations’ of Divine grace. And rather than being viewed in a passive or separatist sense, or even consumerist, the contemplation of divine beauty – God in Godself – can be deeply formative, in and of the graces ‘seen’ and considered. That which is beautiful and freeing in the human soul is to be more fully integrated, that which is not, is to be consciously and “little by little,” detached from.

¹¹ *WJE* 2:365. *Religious Affections*.

As Edwards succinctly states, “The business of a Christian ought to be very much [in] contemplation and the improvement of the faculties in divine things.”¹² This meaning, fostering *a divine perspective and character*, as well as one might over time, without falling prey to grandiosity or abstractionism. The necessary safe guard for Edwards, being the supreme beauty he saw in Christ’s humility of self-giving, concrete love. In contemplating the Triune God, he would suggest, we open ourselves to live the expressive life of the Trinity, practically and creatively within the world.

Secondly, Edwards held strongly to the Puritan practice of Conferencing.¹³ That being, a small gathering something akin to Wesley’s Class Meetings, wherein spiritual sharing and prayer, mutual accountability and biblical/theological reflection regularly took place to not only edify its members, but to give greater clarity for the ways of discipleship. Importantly in Edwards’s mind, such a discipline not only educated and graced, but it also help protect the Christian community from a destructive, if not ugly individuality. In that regard, his day and age was no different to our own, (or to Saint Paul’s for that matter), whereby personalities of a more gnostic or narcissistic character with the figurative ‘direct line to God’ could operate out of a spiritual enthusiasm and self-absorption with little attention given over to the gleanings of corporate wisdom. On the other hand, the vulnerable and open engagement of Conferencing does seek to infuse both a synergy and proportion of faith. Many the time Edwards quotes Psalm 132 in such a context: *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard...it is like the dew of Hermon...*

To be sure, Jonathan Edwards preached and wrote to convey a potentiality of the Christian life. That was, as I have been suggesting, a consensual, *virtuous* and creative whole, whereby discipleship practices are greatly attentive and receptive to the beatific vision of God, who first beholds creation in love within the very reciprocal action of being beheld by it. And central to these ‘making each other visible’ experiences, lies a newfound ability to hold seeming opposites in tension, as occurred for Edwards in his

¹² As quoted by Kyle Strobel in *Formed for the Glory of God: Learning from the Spiritual Practices of Jonathan Edwards* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2013), 132.

¹³ *Ibid.* 149-154.

father's field, that is, so far as the broad and fulsome nature of God was concerned. In sum, a liberation from one-dimensional religious certitudes – the very opposite of what I would describe as a living synergy and proportion – and, significantly, a loosening up our protestant aversion to more sensate experiences of faith. Writes Edwards,

There is a wide difference between mere speculative, rational judging anything to be excellent, and having a sense of its sweetness, and beauty. The former rests only in the head, speculation is only concerned in it; but the heart is concerned in the latter. When the heart is sensible of the beauty and amiableness of a thing, it necessarily feels pleasure in the apprehension.¹⁴

Two hundred years before Edwards, John Calvin had used the terms *rondeur* and *integrite* to describe the perfection of God's servant, Job;¹⁵ a perfection we would probably now render in terms of personal wholeness, not an impossible perfection of being. Well-rounded, I would suggest, seems to be a helpful metaphor when we consider the characteristics, if not *character*, of the present day disciple. By that I mean, there *can* exist a multi-dimensionality of being and practice, bordered if you will, only by the vision of divine and consenting beauty; a fullness of love that celebrates paradox - Trinity and Incarnation included - thus not needing to solve God's mystery (*Mysterium Tremendum*), only to be enjoined to it. Of greater import than acquisition of faith, is the gift of encounter and creative participation within something far bigger than our limited and very often, ego-driven and diminished selves. Says Edwards in some wonderfully poetic prose,

Many hypocrites are like comets, that appear for a while with a mighty blaze; but are very unsteady and irregular in their motion (and are therefore called wandering stars Jude 13) and their blaze soon disappears, and they appear but once in a great while. But the true saints are like the fixed stars, which though they rise and set, and are often clouded, yet are steadfast in their orb, and may truly be said to shine with constant light. Hypocritical affections are like a violent motion; like that of air that is moved with winds. But gracious affections are more of a natural motion, like the stream of a river; which though it has many turns hither the thither, and may meet with obstacles, and run freely and swiftly

¹⁴ 'A Divine and Supernatural Light,' in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, edited by Wilson Kinnach, Ken Minkema & Doug Sweeney, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 127.

¹⁵ See, Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 197.

in some places than others; yet in the general, with a steady and constant course, tends the same way, till it gets to the ocean.¹⁶

If it is true that a prose-flattened age - modernity, by another name - has come to an end, it doesn't seem to be all that obvious to some influential expressions of leadership within the Christian Church. We seem to be still *conceptually* trying to worship by good order, convince by complex or simplistic reason, live by the tyranny of should's and ought's and convert by way of bible, political correctness and/or dogma. And somewhere in the midst of all this anxious static, the converting, often silent beauty of holiness – both in God and slowly forming in one another – has been overlooked, almost out of embarrassment for what is essentially the core business of the Christian faith; love of God; love of neighbour and the self *in* God's redeeming, ever operative love.

Jonathan Edwards can be rightly critiqued for many things; a limited world-view, his ready paternalism, literalism, typology, fear mongering, repetitiveness and long convoluted sentences dotted with semi-colons, just to name a few annoying characteristics of his expressive being! But if he has anything of substance to offer us across the years, I am sure it revolves around a theological aesthetic that is by no means a romantic avoidance of the real, rather an invitation to imaginatively explore Spirit imbued realities of life and faith rather than fear them. For ultimately, the vision beautiful *is* the Triune Mystery of God, not a religious ideology or an ethical blueprint for new world orders. When that startling truth is received *and practiced* for the simple wonder it is, even thunderstorms and lightning are to be welcomed and praised.

I will let Edwards have the last word from possibly his most seminal sermon, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*:

This [beautiful] light is such as effectively influences the inclination, and changes the nature of the soul. It assimilates the nature to the divine nature and changes the soul into the same glory that is beheld. (II Corinthians 3:18). This knowledge will wean from the world, and raise the inclination to heavenly things. It will turn the heart to God as a fountain of good, and to choose him for the only portion. This light, and this only, will bring the soul to a saving close with Christ.¹⁷

¹⁶WJE 2:372-3.

¹⁷ 'A Divine and Supernatural Light' from *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, Edited by Wilson Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema & Douglas A. Sweeny, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 139.