

“And I will give them an heart to know me”:

Reason and Revelation in Jonathan Edwards

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REL 315: 18th Century Theology and Jonathan Edwards

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“The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the psalmist, “and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.”¹ This short psalm displays two crucial truths: God is, and God speaks.² The Almighty God communicates Himself to His creation. Other places in Scripture confirm this, including Paul in Romans: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so they are without excuse.”³ As a synthesis of these two passages, God is, God speaks, and man can understand.

How can man understand? What, then, is he to do with this God whose glory he sees in the heavens? Wonderfully, this God desires *relationship* with His created. But is he accessible? While the truths of the gospel message overwhelmingly prevail, scholars have debated “faith and understanding,” or “word and Spirit,” for years. The two sides battle against one another within the texts of several authors and philosophers, Christian and non-Christian alike. In fact, the two halves of “Western Culture,” including both its Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian influences, can be divided into the same two words—reason and revelation.

What, then, is the answer? More importantly, what can the Christian say of reason and revelation? Does he access his salvation with his own reason, or is he in desperate need of revelation from above? Jonathan Edwards, a major theologian of the eighteenth-century, would answer simply: the Christian needs both reason and revelation. By looking at Jonathan Edwards’

¹ Psalm 19.1-3. All Bible references, unless otherwise indicated, will be in the King James Version.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 0744-0760. <http://www.westblade.info/IE/Misc/0744-0760.htm> Edwards notes in his *Miscellanies*, “Corol. 2. Hence also it appears most rational to suppose, that God should make some REVELATION of himself to his intelligent creatures by his word & seeing he is properly an intelligent voluntary Being that he should maintain intercourse with them by voluntarily expressing & signifying his mind to them as intelligent voluntary agents do one to another and as they only can do, and as tis hence rational to suppose that it should be required of us that we should speak to God so tis as rational to suppose that he should speak to us.”

³ Romans 1.20.

meditations on epistemology, we can see that man’s knowledge of God is very important. God communicates Himself to the world for His glory, but He also wants an intimate relationship with His created.⁴ To achieve this, man needs a new heart in order to be united to Christ by faith – then can man understand his God. Humanity needs reason *and* revelation in order to *know* the God of the universe. Eternal life, and even salvation itself, is built on this relationship: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”⁵

In order to demonstrate this argument, I will begin by discussing Edwards’ meditations on epistemology. With Edwards’ argument in mind, I will continue into scholars’ analyses of Edwards’ works, establishing the heart as the location of true faith. Finally, I will synthesize Edwards himself and his scholars with my own interpretation.

The greater part of Jonathan Edwards’ meditations on epistemology lies within two of his sermons: “A Divine and Supernatural Light” and “The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth.”⁶ “A Divine and Supernatural Light” addresses the importance of the Holy Spirit’s work in conversion, and the “Importance of Knowledge” sermon emphasizes the necessity of the Christian’s knowledge of truth. In “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Edwards argues that it is the Holy Spirit that gives the developing Christian a “taste” for the things of heaven. The Holy Spirit acts upon the natural man to lead him to conversion, and then

⁴ While I will support this claim for the entirety of this paper, the best Scripture reference for this point in my argument is Jeremiah 32:38-40: “And they shall be my people, and I will be their God: And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good...”

⁵ John 17:3.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both Scriptural and Rational Doctrine,” 1734. I will not be citing directly from Edwards’ sermon on the importance of knowledge. McClymond and McDermott provide a better synopsis in the chapter “Revelation: Scripture, Reason, and Tradition” of their book, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (pages 130-148). I will rely more heavily on “A Divine and Supernatural Light” at this stage of my argument; later, I will discuss the other.

He indwells the man afterward.⁷ Edwards divided the human mind into two parts: the head and the heart. The head is responsible for the intellect and for understanding; the heart is responsible for the will and for the inclination.⁸ In many of his sermons, Edwards endeavored to present the reasonable to the head, in the hopes that revelation would get to the heart. For Edwards, we can know the good in two ways: first, man can speculate, and second, man must have a “sense of the heart.”⁹ The former, Edwards notes, exists only in the head. The second exists solely in the heart. While we can see here that reason is indeed a part of knowledge, it ultimately, for Edwards, falls short. Divine things are different from human things, quite simply, and thus our knowledge of Him must be by divine means.¹⁰ This light shed abroad in the heart of the Christian brings the soul closer to Christ.

The same Jonathan Edwards who argued for the intensive involvement of the Holy Spirit in conversion also argued for man’s use of reason. It will be helpful here to define reason for Edwards, which is: “the faculty of that judges the truth of a proposition either immediately by self-evidence or by inference from an intuitively self-evident proposition.” “The soul,” as Edwards notes, is “essentially rational.”¹¹ Edwards, as McDermott demonstrates, highly valued the use of reason. “Reason—when considered apart from its sinful corruption—” McDermott continues, “was capable of perceiving what is most important about God to know: his excellency and his glory...as any knowledge whatsoever.”¹² However, Edwards sees the obvious problem with reason. It will be helpful to quote McDermott’s observation:

For Edwards then, reason could arrive at some religious truths, but they would not be properly known unless seen in their relationship to Christ and his redemption. So reason

⁷ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” page 7.

⁸ Donald Westblade, “Word and Spirit in Edwards’ Theology,” page 53.

⁹ Ibid, page 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, page 27.

¹¹ Both of these quotes come from the aforementioned chapter, “Revelation: Scripture, Reason, and Tradition.”

¹² McClymond and McDermott, 140.

could provide a "notional" knowledge of Christ through the text of Scripture but not a saving knowledge of God.¹³ Reason is extremely capable, capable even of perceiving God Himself, and yet it is not sufficient to save the soul. Reason cannot demonstrate humanity's sin, and thus reason cannot make a relationship with the true God accessible.¹⁴

Taking both of Edwards' sermons into account, we can see that man needs both reason and revelation. Reason allows for perception, and revelation opens the door for knowledge. Now that we have established Edwards' argument however, we must explore his scholars' analyses. In doing this, I hope to provide an application for the Christian, or perhaps, as Edwards himself would say, a "use" for his congregation.

Harold Simonson would agree with much of Edwards' meditations.¹⁵ Noting Edwards' distinction that reason cannot access salvation, Simonson clarifies that "Natural knowledge is devoid of special revelation," and, "[natural knowledge does not] finally lead to religious truth."¹⁶ Upon conversion, however, the soul can perceive the "light" "only within the province of the heart."¹⁷ And yet, if Simonson agrees with Edwards, where is the more positive view of reason? Reason, according to Simonson, is *sanctified* in the conversion process.¹⁸ Within the heart of the saved soul, according to Simonson, the believer can use his reason to better understand God. His reason has been sanctified, and thus he can access God with reason, in stark

¹³ Ibid, page 142.

¹⁴ McDermott: "Reason could not demonstrate how sinful humans might be reconciled to their Creator.... Assurance of salvation was impossible to attain by reason alone. The light of nature might show us the general shape of true religion but not its specific beliefs and practices. Human beings have thus not come to know the true God through reason" (ibid).

¹⁵ Harold Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart*, 1974.

¹⁶ Simonson, page 39.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 40.

¹⁸ Ibid.

contrast to his previously-unconverted state. We have established, then, that reason post-conversion is profitable, because reason has been sanctified.¹⁹

This newly sanctified reason is precisely what Edwards employs in his own mental processes. According to Paul Helm, in his essay, “Jonathan Edwards on Original Sin,” “...we find Edwards keen to use philosophical arguments to elucidate aspects of his theological position, an position which he held chiefly and pre-eminently because it was a matter of revelation.”²⁰ Edwards, a fervent Christian, used philosophical arguments often in his work. As Simonson would say, Edwards utilized his sanctified reason.

While we have reconciled the use of reason in the Christian life, we still have yet to get to the second part of Edwards’ view of the human – the heart. The “sense of the heart” is extremely important. As we have established, reason alone cannot grant one saving knowledge in Christ. The Christian must have revelation in the heart. Albeit in a work primarily based in “word and spirit” in Edwards’ theology, Donald Westblade notes that Edwards’ sense of the heart is “the essence of true faith.”²¹ The heart, it could be said, is the location of faith. The heart’s participation in conversion is absolutely necessary, and the heart’s condition is the distinguishing factor between the impacts of reason and of revelation in the Christian’s life.²²

¹⁹ While the technicalities of word and spirit do not necessarily pertain to my argument, Conrad Cherry, in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, writes on the topic as well. “God’s word,” he says, “is really God’s Word when it is accompanied by the Spirit dwelling in the human heart; when unaccompanied by the Spirit it is simply another natural, human word. The immediate operation of the Spirit is the operation of God’s word as God’s Word: the Spirit’s immediacy is the character of the operation of God’s Word which distinguishes it from simply another word. This is a way of stressing that when human words of Scripture and preaching become God’s Word, they become this not be their own power but by the power of God alone; they effect faith not as natural or human causes but through a divine cause operative in them” (48).

²⁰ Paul Helm, “Jonathan Edwards on Original Sin,” in *Faith and Understanding*, pages 152-176. This particular quote is on page 152.

²¹ Donald Westblade, “Word and Spirit in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” pages 49-60. On the other side of this argument, Westblade also says that “Edwards argued that man must have a “sense” of God’s gloriousness before he can know him and trust him” (56).

²² Cherry would agree. For Cherry, as for Edwards, the answer is simply, both. “Word and Spirit,” Cherry insists, “are functionally one term” (55). “The Spirit, the inward divine possibility of faith, is the Worded Spirit; and the Word, the outward orientation point of faith, is the Spirited Word” (45). “The Spirit acts with the Word, but

Jonathan Edwards requires both reason and revelation in the heart of the Christian for his conversion, and his scholars would agree with him, although their particular insights help to clarify Edwards' concepts. How does the Christian synthesize it, however?

Man begins with what God has given him. God has given Himself; God communicates with His creation in the heavens that declare the glory of God. As referenced at the beginning, man can clearly see and understand that the visible things of creation were created by the invisible. The psalmist says that "The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God."²³ God has given Himself, and He looks below to see if there are any that will respond with understanding. Man can understand, but his understanding alone will not develop into a relationship with this God.

In order to foster this relationship, God takes the first step. Understanding the glory of God must also be paired with a new heart.²⁴ As McDermott says, "The new 'sense of the heart' that comes from the divine and supernatural light is the only knowledge that transforms."²⁵ The new heart is regenerated by God, and this knowledge of Him is the knowledge that transforms the Christian. God gives the new heart *for the purpose of relationship*. As He tells the people of Israel, "And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the LORD: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart."²⁶ This heart to know Him is at the crux of salvation, for as Jesus Himself defines eternal life, "that they may

immediately with the Word on the heart of the man" (47). While Cherry here is arguing against a rather extreme Reformed theologian, he clarifies (with the Reformer) that salvation is a work of God – the Spirit acts, and the Word acts, and it is the two together that save the soul. Cherry notes that Edwards emphasizes the closeness of Word and Spirit. "The heart," according to Cherry, "is opened to faith by the Spirit," but this always occurs "in the presence of the Word" (47).

²³ Psalm 14.2.

²⁴ "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" Ezekiel 36.26. In addition to God replacing stony hearts with fleshy hearts, He also calls the Israelites to circumcise their hearts (Deuteronomy 10.16, 30.6).

²⁵ McDermott, page 379.

²⁶ Jeremiah 24.7.

know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” This knowledge implies an intimate relationship with God Almighty, a relationship that is only possible with a new heart that can love Him fully.

Faith then, as Edwards would say, is union with Christ. We are wedded with Him; we are united with Him; we are His. “To ‘have’ faith,” Simonson demonstrates, “is to be in Christ, as members are to the head and branches to the stalk. Faith is union.”²⁷ Faith is a marriage relationship and therefore an intimate relationship. Edwards refers to this phenomenon in the conversion process in one of his Miscellanies: “In marriage or in the soul’s conversion it becomes a proper covenant. This is what is called the covenant of grace in distinction from the covenant of redemption.”²⁸ After conversion, as stated with Simonson, man’s reason has been sanctified. Man can pray with the psalmist, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.”²⁹ Man can pray and sing with *understanding*, because his reason has been sanctified.³⁰

Where is revelation for the Christian? How can he find it? The problem with reason was that reason itself could never get us to God. Trying to reason our way to him is foolish, for His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts.³¹ We might as well try to build a tower tall enough that we may ascend to heaven ourselves. The heart is deceitful and wicked, man’s reason is folly. Reason gets us up the tower, but that is as far as we can go. We cannot save ourselves.

Despite the promise and the possibilities of reason, human beings were not able to find God or the fullness of spiritual truth through unaided reason. This was not a fault of

²⁷ Simonson, 42.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, Miscellanies 0821-0832. <http://www.westblade.info/JE/Misc/0821-0832.htm>.

²⁹ Psalm 119.18.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 14.15: “What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

³¹ Isaiah 55.9.

reason as originally given by God, but a reflection of reason's corruption by sin.... even Plato failed to condemn publicly the idolatries of his day.³²

Reason got us up the tower, but God must come down and meet us there. Divine revelation, as Edwards says, is extraordinarily necessary. The word is very nigh unto thee, and this is the word of faith which we preach. The best picture of Revelation is the Incarnation itself. Humanity tried to save itself for centuries. Philosophers thought deeply, kings ruled, enemies warred, people tried desperately to save themselves from death on their own reason. But it was Christ Himself, the Word made flesh, Who *dwelt among us*, is the perfect picture of reason and revelation. God Himself teaches, God Himself feeds and meets physical needs, God Himself dies on a cross to save our souls. As McDermott says, "The surest and clearest way to find the beauty of Jesus Christ, the heart of revelation, was in the only written revelation God gave to the church, its Bible."³³

Jonathan Edwards is a perfect example of a man who had knowledge of the invisible before he converted.³⁴ Edwards received the new heart, Edwards became one with Christ in an intimate relationship, and Edwards' reason was sanctified, such that he could use philosophical arguments paired with the revelation he had received. By looking at Jonathan Edwards' meditations on epistemology, we can see that man's knowledge of God is very important. God communicates Himself to the world for His glory, but He also wants an intimate relationship with His created. To achieve this, man needs a new heart in order to be united to Christ by faith – then can man understand his God. Humanity needs reason *and* revelation in order to *know* the God of the universe. Eternal life, and even salvation itself, is built on this relationship: "And this

³² McDermott, page 140.

³³ McDermott, page 135.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*.

is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”³⁵

³⁵ John 17.3, emphasis added.

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