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THEOLOGY IN THE HANDS OF A LITERARY ARTIST: JONATHAN EDWARDS AS PREACHER

Jonathan Edwards learned about preaching from the Calvinist Puritan tradition in which he was raised. Calvin himself said the preacher is a “trumpet of God” who should style his sermons after the nature of Scripture itself. So his sermons were generally expository, direct and brief. Unlike Edwards, Calvin typically did not write his sermons out but preached nearly every day without notes and after studying the text. The most popular Calvinist preaching manuals in Edwards’ era were by English Puritan William Perkins, English preacher John Edwards (no relation) and Boston’s Cotton Mather. Perkins’ *Art of Prophesying* (1592) urged a “plain style” that opens a text simply without affectations of classical learning (frequently on display in Anglican sermons). John Edwards’ *The Preacher* (1703) recommended intense belief and feeling, and attention to application. Mather’s *Manuductio ad Ministerium* (1726) dismissed rhetoric and logic in favor of “natural reason and a cultivated personal style based upon emulation of the actual practice of admired authors.”¹ Edwards also learned from personal role models. His father Timothy was a Harvard graduate who used a large number of subheads and biblical citations in his sermons, yet also was an animated speaker who presided over revivals

¹ Wilson H. Kinnach’s “Editor’s Introduction,” in WJE 10:19. Kinnach’s 254-page introduction is the finest guide to Edwards’ sermons ever published. See also Kinnach’s introduction; John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1991), 1:481-6; Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 79-80; and Kinnach, “The Sermons: Concept and Execution,” in Sang H. Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 243-57.

in his East Windsor (CT) parish. Jonathan's grandfather Solomon Stoddard, under whom Edwards served as assistant for twenty-seven months at Northampton, was a powerful revivalist who declared that "when men don't Preach much about the danger of Damnation, there is want of good Preaching." Stoddard enjoyed using rhetorical dialogue in his sermons and urged preachers to "rebuke sharply" those who needed reproof.²

The Sermonic Setting

New England churches in Edwards' day were plain "meetinghouses" with unpainted clapboard on the outside and seating around a pulpit or "desk" near the center on the inside. In reaction against what they considered "graven images" and "Catholic" ostentation in Anglican churches, Puritans eschewed crosses and stained-glass windows, and sang mostly psalms without musical instruments. Ministers preached in academic gowns to demonstrate they were learned and not a sacred priesthood, and also to hide class distinctions that might be apparent in street dress. They delivered two sermons every Sunday—morning and afternoon—and often a weekday lecture. In Northampton, Edwards followed this schedule with sermons of 60-90 minutes each. The principal Sunday service consisted of ten parts: 1) a biblical text as call to worship, 2) corporate "prayer of approach," 3) Old Testament reading, with the minister giving a short "sense of the text," 4) New Testament reading with a sense of the text, 5) singing a psalm metrically, 6) prayer of confession and intercession, 7) a sermon, 8) corporate prayer led by the minister which could last up to 30 minutes, and 9) another psalm and then 10) benediction. Every eight weeks in Northampton Edwards conducted a "sacrament" service (the Lord's Supper) between the two regular Sunday services. Twice a year there were fast days by colonial decree, with special sermons. Thanksgiving days were also held at least once a year, depending on circumstances, and each would feature a sermon. Edwards produced all these sermons for a parish of 1300 people, with usually 700 present on Sundays, while receiving a steady stream of visitors at his home and regularly supervising pastoral interns.³

Three Periods of Preaching

Wilson Kimnach, the unrivalled scholar of Edwards' homiletics, divides Edwards' 37-year preaching career into three periods. The first period, 1722-27, is what Kimnach calls his "apprenticeship," during which he preached in New York City, Bolton (CT), and (after his tutorship at Yale) as an assistant under Stoddard.

² WJE 10:14.

³ Sweeney, 25-26, 57-58, 63; WJE 17:16.

Kimnach says the young preacher's sermons were "as busy in [their] formal structure as the music of Johann Sebastian Bach." Edwards helped his note-taking hearers follow along by announcing new sections as they began. While he avoided strong rhetorical devices such as alliteration and rhythm, he piqued attention by using "the vigor of a vulgar idiom." For example, the apprentice described the unregenerate as one who "spends his days in groveling in the dirt, makes his mind much like a mole or muck worm, feeding on dirt and dung, and seldom lifts his mind any higher than the surface of the earth he treads on."⁴

From 1727 to 1742 Edwards used the sermon "primarily as an instrument of awakening and pastoral leadership." This was the period of "mastery" in which, especially starting in 1729, sermons became more complex. Parts were in outline form. When he offered pastoral guidance, the focus was less on sins of youthful flesh and more on the abuses of commerce. Edwards began to experiment artistically, gradually evolving his form to suit the production of theological treatises. So he preached more sermon series, dividing long discourses into preaching units only after most of the writing was done. Kimnach writes, "The sermon was dissolving under the pressure of long, long thoughts." "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" (1741) was the last sermon with renown that was not also the marker of an important event, such as the Farewell Sermon (1750). Yet while the sermons were developing toward longer productions, Edwards was not indifferent to style. Kimnach notes that when he took his sermons from the pulpit to print, he made sure to build a rising crescendo, saving the best arguments and most important points for last. Interestingly, during this period the maturing preacher worked on several sermons at once, "apparently stor[ing] some of his output in fruitful times against times of dearth."⁵

The last phase of Edwards' extraordinary sermonic production started in January 1742, when he drew a vertical line down the middle of his sermon booklet on Dan. 5:25, dividing it into double columns—a form he retained for most of his sermons until his death sixteen years later.⁶ Kimnach thinks this was the result of watching George Whitefield preach without notes.⁷ From there on out, Edwards made even more efforts to use his sermons to help him compose treatises. As he became more of an international intellectual, he turned from his earlier "person-

⁴ Kimnach, "Edwards as Preacher," in Stephen Stein, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104; Kimnach, "Editor's Introduction," *WJE* 10:99.

⁵ Kimnach, "Edwards as Preacher," 110; "Editor's Introduction," *WJE* 10, 105, 11-12, 107n9.

⁶ There are approximately 1200 extant sermons, with roughly 200 published in hard print.

⁷ It also enabled him to conserve paper—hard to come by in his day—since the outlined sermons took up less space.

alist" focus on subjective religious experience to highlighting objective religious phenomena such as the work of redemption through the course of human history. His sermons were almost entirely outlines that grew to be "more and more like bare lists." According to Kimmach, this might have indicated a certain "indifference" to preaching, particularly as his own tenure at Northampton grew more tenuous. At the same time, his growing predilection for treatises and "things to be considered" instead of formal "doctrines" (see below) ironically paralleled the move by Boston's liberal ministers toward what would eventually become Emersonian essays.⁸

At Stockbridge where he had been exiled after his dismissal from Northampton, the discouraged preacher had new audiences, and the Indians there seem to have inspired new enthusiasm. He preached more than one hundred and eighty-seven new sermons, and on another twenty occasions preached from earlier manuscripts. It is clear from the extant manuscripts that Edwards worked hard to adapt his rhetoric to the abilities of his hearers. As Rachel Wheeler has noted, the Stockbridge sermons tell more stories than the Northampton sermons; they are also simpler in presentation and employ more imagery derived from nature. But if he preached more simply to his uneducated Indian audience, the sermons were not simplistic. He did not restrict his aesthetic vision to learned adepts but told the Stockbridge Indians in his very first sermon there that they must have "their eyes opened to see how lovely [Christ] is," and in a communion lecture explained that a good man loves God "above all else for his own beauty." His outlines were less complex and his imagery earthier than in his sermons to the white congregation at Stockbridge, but the vision he tried to evoke was no less sublime.⁹

The goal of spoken and written discourse

Edwards considered preaching of paramount importance for the work of redemption, which was at the center of his ecclesiology and historical vision.¹⁰ But his conception of the goal of preaching was also his conviction about the art of literature generally—to make what is true become real in the perception of hearers or readers. Edwards had noticed that lack of spiritual experience and frequent repetition of religious maxims can obscure recognition of what is real. When he

⁸ WJE 10:119, 122; WJE 25:45; WJE 10:123; WJE 25:46.

⁹ Rachel Wheeler, "Friends to Your Souls": The Egalitarian Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards," unpublished paper used by permission, n.41; Wheeler, "A Heathenish, Barbarous, British Education': Jonathan Edwards and the Stockbridge Indians" (unpub. paper loaned by the author), 6; see also Gerald R. McDermott, "Missions and Native Americans," in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 264-5.

¹⁰ Helen Westra's *The Minister's Task and Calling in the Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986) is especially helpful on this score.

was only nineteen years old, he preached on the doctrine, "When man dies, he is forever stripped of all earthly enjoyments." He told his hearers that while all the world "knows the *truth* of this doctrine perfectly well" it nevertheless "don't [sic] seem at all *real* to them." Five years later he said two things are required in order for something to seem real to us: "believing the truth of it, and having a sensible idea or apprehension of it." In chapter 24 we explored this Edwardsean notion of a simple idea imparted by a "divine and supernatural light," that makes what was previously a mere notion become a vivid reality by means of something like a sixth sense. In his private notebooks Edwards wrote that this is "a light cast upon the ideas of spiritual things . . . which makes them appear clear and real which before were but faint, obscure representations." What was previously only thought becomes seen, tasted and felt. It takes on a tactile dimension that forever fixes its reality in the apprehension of the believer. Edwards believed this new seeing and tasting of the reality of divine things comes principally, if not exclusively, through preaching.¹¹

Although Edwards said the preacher's sermon must penetrate the affections of his listeners and not simply change their thinking, he was emphatic about the necessity of cognitive content. In a 1739 sermon on "the importance and advantage of a thorough knowledge of divine truth," he taught that Christians must not be content to remain babes in knowledge of divine things, or to be satisfied with spiritual experience alone. They must seek "not only a practical and experimental, but also a doctrinal knowledge of the truths and mysteries of religion." He explained that there are two kinds of knowledge of divine things—the speculative or natural that pertains to the head, and the practical and spiritual that is sensed in the heart. While speculative knowledge without spiritual knowledge is worthless, speculative knowledge nevertheless is "of infinite importance" because "without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge." There is no other way that we can benefit from means of grace except by knowledge. "Therefore the preaching of the gospel would be wholly to no purpose, if it conveyed no knowledge to the mind." This assertion was based on Edwards' understanding of the human person: "The heart cannot be set upon an object of which there is no idea in the understanding." He would explicate this at much greater length in the fourth positive sign in his *Religious Affections* seven years later, but here he summarized as follows: "Such is the nature of man, that nothing can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding: and there can be no spiritual knowledge of that of which there is not first a rational knowledge." The upshot

¹¹ WJE 10:405-6, emph. added; WJE 14:201; WJE 13:470.

was that the "sense of the heart" that is at the heart of true religion is normally impossible without doctrinal understanding: "A man cannot see the wonderful excellency and love of Christ in doing such and such things for sinners, unless his understanding be first informed how those things were done. He cannot have a taste of the sweetness and divine excellency of such and such things contained in divinity, unless he first have a notion that there are such and such things." Hence the way to deeper spiritual experience was through greater cognitive understanding of divine things: "The more you have of a rational knowledge of the things of the gospel, the more opportunity will there be, when the Spirit shall be breathed into your heart, to see the excellency of these things, and to taste the sweetness of them." Therefore the Christian preacher is obliged not only to preach but also to teach more and more of the infinite and unsearchable wonders of God and his redemption.¹²

Kinnach has observed that although Edwards was a homiletical artist and powerful logician, he nevertheless conceived of the perfect sermon as a vehicle of power more than reason or beauty. He boasted in his preface to the five discourses that were delivered during the Little Awakening of 1734-35 that God had "smiled upon and bless[ed his] very plain, unfashionable way of preaching" even though he was "unable" to preach or write "politely." The important thing was not aesthetic but effect, not prestige but power. Power was never guaranteed, of course, by simply preaching Scripture. It was necessary that the preacher beg God's Spirit to inspire his preparation and enliven his words, and for the minister to preach with pathos and fervency. Prayer was indispensable, and an affective manner, helpful. But the preacher need not display his learning or be especially eloquent. Power came from God's blessing, without which even labored preparation and enthusiastic delivery would produce no lasting results. Preachers should not be surprised if some of their listeners are "stupid and senseless as stones," whispering to their neighbors or sleeping or dreaming during sermons. God is not frustrated because "he will see to it that his word shall not be in vain or without effect." Those who refuse to hear the word will pay attention in the next world and remember "that there ha[d] been a prophet among 'em." Perhaps reflecting his own frustrations with the Northampton congregation he called "sermon-proof," he warned there would be "dark seasons" in the church when preachers would seem to "labor in vain." They would sometimes fish all night, as it were, and bring up their nets empty time after time. But they must not give up or get discouraged, for God is faithful. So whether a sermon becomes a thing of power depends on God. The

¹² WJE 22:84, 87-9, 100; WJE 2:266-91.

minister can only sow the seed of the word, and leave the rest to sun and rain and the influences of heaven. He must wait patiently, like the hard-working farmer, for the harvest. But that means he should not be presumptuous by neglecting diligent study, especially in the Bible, and he must be "much in seeking God." In the end he can only be faithful and "leave the event with God."¹³

Imagery in Edwards's Sermons

Samuel Hopkins tells us that Edwards took "great pains" to compose his sermons, getting up earlier and studying Scripture more than his contemporaries. But his secret weapon was his unrivalled use of imagery.¹⁴ Kimmach calls it his "armor-piercing device of sensational imagery." Light was perhaps his favorite image, no doubt influenced in part by his age of Enlightenment. But if it was common among his contemporaries, "no one looked more intensely at the biblical meaning of light for his day than did Edwards." Marsden explains that for him it was "the most powerful image of how God communicated his love to the creation. *Regeneration* meant to be given eyes to see the light of Christ in hearts that had been hopelessly darkened by sin." The fountain was another favorite. In his 1738 sermon series on love (*Charity and Its Fruits*) he declared that God is a fountain of love that pours out its "effusions of love" into the bosoms of the saints, whom he likened to "the flowers on the earth in a pleasant spring day" that "open their bosoms to the sun to be filled with his [sic] warmth and light, and to flourish in beauty and fragranciness by his rays." Every saint is a flower in God's garden, and "holy love is the fragranciness and sweet odor" that they all emit. In the same breath he said every saint is "as a note in a concert of music which sweetly harmonizes with every other note . . . and so all helping one another to their utmost to express their love of the whole society to the glorious Father and Head of it, and [to pour back] love into the fountain of love, whence they are supplied and filled with love and with glory." The following spring he interrupted his series on the history of redemption with a sermon devoted entirely to comparing Christ to the sun. To believers his second coming will "be a thousand times more refreshing to them than ever was the sight of the rising sun to them that have wandered in a wilderness, through the longest and darkest night. The sight of [it] will fill their

¹³ Kimmach, "Edwards as Preacher," 105; WJE 19:797; WJE 24:756; WJE 4:386-8; Jonathan Edwards, "Preaching the Gospel," *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Richard Bailey and Gregory Willis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 153; WJE 17:178-9, 181; WJE 19:113; 24:965-6; sermon on Matt 13:3-4(a), WJEO 56.

¹⁴ Kristin Emery Saldine focuses on Edwards' landscape imagery in her "Preaching God Visible: Geo-Rhetoric and the Theological Appropriation of Landscape Imagery in the Sermons of Jonathan Edwards" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004).

souls with unspeakable gladness and rejoicing. It will be a bright day to the saints. The beams of that glorious Sun that will then appear will make it bright." But for unbelievers, "every ray of that glory that Christ shall then appear in will be like a stream of scorching fire, and will pierce their hearts with a keener torment than a stream of fierce lightning. . . . That day will burn as an oven indeed. That brightness that the light of Christ's glory shall fill the world with will be more terrible to them than if the world was filled with the fiercest flames." Edwards' words were rarely big and never obscure, but the pictures he painted with them were vivid and memorable.¹⁵

If his imagery made his sermons memorable, their clear and compelling logic left his auditors "little room to escape his web of arguments." Most New Englanders had "cut their eyeteeth on the logic of carefully-argued sermons," since educated eighteenth-century people were trained in and had great confidence in the power of logic to settle arguments. Edwards was a master of logical argument, and used it to great effect in his sermons. In his golden years of sermon composition—the late 1720s through the early 1740s—he carefully assembled arguments and examples "both from Scripture and reason, as even to force the assent of every attentive hearer. . . . His words were so full of ideas, set in such a plain and striking light, that few speakers have been able to command an audience as he." When logical skill was mixed with what Kimmach calls "the intensity of an inchworm," the result was remarkable intellectual focus: "Like an eagle Edwards circled over the context [of the biblical text]," observes Gerstner, "until he found his point and then descended deeply to snatch his homiletic prey and hold it up to the full view of all. For the next hour or more, Jonathan Edwards' only interest was to dissect the text, to analyze it, and to feed his hungry people." Ten-year-old Nehemiah Strong sat in the Northampton pews during his 1739 series on the history of redemption. Years later he told Edwards' grandson Timothy Dwight that he became so entranced by Edwards' sermon on the Second Coming that "he expected without one thought to the contrary the awful scene to be unfolded on that day and in that place," and was "deeply disappointed when the day terminated and left the world in its usual state of tranquility."¹⁶

Three of the Best

We will conclude this paper by looking very briefly at three of Edwards' finest

¹⁵ WJE 10:171; Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 55; WJE 8:386; WJE 22:60.

¹⁶ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 129, 90-91; Hopkins, *Life*, 51-2; Kimmach, "Jonathan Edwards's Pursuit of Reality," in Nathan Hatch and Harry Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114; Gerstner, 1:486; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4:230-31, quoted in Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 195.

sermons. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is undoubtedly Edwards' most famous sermon. Preached in at the height of the Great Awakening in New England, Harry Stout calls it "arguably America's greatest sermon." In it Edwards tried to compose the "perfect idea" of an awakening sermon by using "rhetorical dynamite" to produce "unprecedented terror." The core idea was "that one could get to life eternal only after first being scared to death." Curiously, Edwards preached it first in Northampton in June 1741, but with no discernible effect. Several weeks later he delivered it at Enfield, Connecticut, where, as Kinnach writes, "the congregation virtually rioted when the preacher had barely begun, so it is impossible to say that they actually heard the sermon." Uncounted scholars and students have studied Edwards' legendary employment of imagery in this sermon. His most striking images—the archer with the drawn bow, the loathsome spider, pent-up waters, unleashed lions—come from Scripture. Some bear repeating: sinners' righteousness would have no more power to keep them from hell "than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock"; "there are black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder"; "the wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present" but "they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher . . . the waters are continually rising and waxing more and more mighty"; the devils watching for sinners to fall into hell "stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back."¹⁷

Marsden has observed that the sometimes-missed logic of the sermon is that "it is the weight of sinners' own sins that is dragging them toward the abyss." Edwards said they stand on slippery ground and need nothing but their "own weight to throw [them] down." Their own "hellish principles" would kindle and flame out into hellfire if God permitted them. "Your wickedness," Edwards warned, "makes you as it were heavy as lead." Another oft-missed theme is that *God* is keeping sinners from falling into hell. He "restrains" their wickedness; if not for his restraints, their souls would turn into fiery ovens. The fire pent up in their hearts is struggling to break out, but God's "forbearance" keeps it in check. Only God's "arbitrary will" preserves sinners from hell every moment. Only God's power and pleasure "holds you up"; only his hand keeps "you from falling into the fire every moment" and is the reason "why you han't [sic] gone to hell since you have sat here in the house of God." If these words did not make his hearers feel radically

¹⁷ WJE 22:34, 31; Kinnach, "Edwards as Preacher," 116; Gerstner, *Rational, Biblical Theology*, 1:494; WJE 22:410, 406; Edward J. Gallagher says these images taken together deliver a "recurrent pulsation" that makes the sermon primarily an auditory experience. Gallagher, "'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God': Some Unfinished Business," *New England Quarterly* 73 (2000), 202-21.

insecure, he had more: they were walking over the pit of hell on a rotten covering with innumerable places that could not bear their weight; there were unseen arrows of death that fly about, even at noonday; no one in hell ever intended to go there, but all flattered themselves they would not wind up there; and there was nothing between them and hell "but the air." "You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder." The true issue, as Kimnach writes, was not place but time. It was urgent that sinners not wait any longer. "How awful it is to be left behind at such a day. . . . God seems *now* to be hastily gathering in his elect. . . . [P]robably the bigger part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in *now* in a little time. . . . The wrath of almighty God is *now* undoubtedly hanging over great part of this congregation." Modern readers may be surprised to learn that the original manuscript version was far more encouraging and mild than the later printed revision. Kimnach says the sermon given at Enfield "preserves a nice balance between the carrot and the stick," unlike the version most Americans have read.¹⁸

Edwards' "Farewell Sermon" was one of the few homiletic productions of his last period that were fully written-out. In Kimnach's estimation, it was "as sustained and disciplined" as "Sinners," but "supplant[ed] fire with ice" in eleven pages of doctrine and thirteen pages of application. It was delivered on the first Sunday in July 1750 after his Northampton congregation had voted to eject him from their pulpit. With cool detachment Edwards defended his doctrine, "Ministers and the people that have been under their care, must meet one another, before Christ's tribunal, at the day of judgment." "We live in a world of change," he began, when those who seem most united suddenly become "most disunited." But even if they are removed to places distant from one another, they will meet again in the next world. Then there will be "clear, certain and infallible light" so that all "deceit and delusion shall vanish away." There will be no more debate and disagreement. When ministers meet their people now, and try to instruct and correct them on eternal matters, "all is often in vain." Despite everything their ministers say, many remain "stupid and unawakened." This does not mean that ministers are always right; in fact, they are not infallible in discerning the state of souls, and the "most skillful of them are liable to mistakes." But neither can the people know certainly the state of their minister or one another. "Very often" hypocrites

¹⁸ Marsden, 222; WJE 22:404, 404, 407, original emphasis, 409, 412, 407, 410, 412; Kimnach, "Edwards as Preacher," 116; WJE 22:417-8, emphasis added; WJE 10:114. The notion that God's "arbitrary will" keeps sinners out of hell every moment is underscored by Edwards' occasionalism—his idea that at every moment God recreates the world and wills what is. My thanks to Ken Minkema for this observation.

are mistaken for "eminent saints," and "some of God's jewels" are censured and abused. Therefore it is also "very often" that "great differences and controversies arise between ministers and the people that are under their care." People "are ready to judge and censure one another . . . [and] are greatly mistaken in their judgment, and wrong one another in their censures." But on that future day in eternity when pastors and their people meet again, the secrets of every heart shall be made manifest, and no one will be careless or sleeping or "wandering [in] mind from the great concern of the meeting." The great Judge will "do justice between ministers and their people," and all will see that these affairs of the church were more important "than the temporal concerns of the greatest earthly monarchs, and their kingdoms or empires."¹⁹

In the Application Edwards defended his ministry in Northampton. "I have not spared my feeble strength, but have exerted it for the good of your souls . . . I have spent the prime of my life and strength in labors for your eternal welfare." He said he was never lazy or ambitious for his own financial gain, but "have given myself to the work of the ministry, laboring in it night and day, rising early and applying myself to this great business to which Christ has appointed me." He declared that he had borne "heavy burdens," but God had strengthened him. "Although I have often been troubled on every side, I have not yet been distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; cast down, but not destroyed." Then came a stunning admission of failure: "But now . . . my work is finished . . . You have publicly rejected me." As if to deflect attention from his defeat, he turned again to that future meeting when "our hearts will be turned inside out" and all will see "whether I have been treated with that impartiality, candor and regard which the just Judge esteemed due." He concluded by addressing different groups within the congregation. To those "I leave in a Christless, graceless condition," he feared all his labors had only hardened them and prayed God would grant his Word to be "the fire and hammer that breaketh the rock [of their hearts] in pieces." To those "who are under some awakenings," he told them to "beware of backsliding" and turn to him "who is the infinite fountain of light" so their eyes would be opened and they could meet their minister "in joyful and glorious circumstances." He told the teenagers and twenty-somethings that out of love for themselves they ought not to reject the teaching he had given them. The younger children, he advised, should not imitate those who "cast off fear." "Remember that great day when you must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and meet your minister there, who has so often counseled and warned you." Parents were admonished not to

¹⁹ WJE 25:457, 463, 468, 469, 471, 473.

be like Eli, who failed to restrain his children. Everyone in the church was told to avoid contention, which was “one of the greatest burdens” he had labored under. He suggested they give themselves to “secret” prayer, and beware of hiring an Arminian for a minister. After asking them to pray for him—even if they disagreed with him—he closed with a final exhortation to keep in mind their future meeting: “And let us all remember, and never forget our future solemn meeting, on that great day of the Lord; the day of infallible decision, and of the everlasting and unalterable sentence, Amen.”²⁰

“Heaven Is a World of Love” describes the world he thought believers would enjoy just after the final scene depicted in the Farewell Sermon. It was the fifteenth and last in his 1738 series on Paul’s paean to love in 1 Corinthians 13. In his explication of the text (vv 8-10) he asserts that “other gifts of the Spirit” and “all common fruits of the Spirit” shall cease at the end of the church age, and that only charity or love will remain in heaven. His next eighteen pages in the Yale edition develop seven reasons to support the doctrine (“heaven is a world of love”), followed by eleven pages of application. The reasons start with the declaration that while God is everywhere, he is “more especially” in some places than others—such as his progressively greater presence in Israel, Jerusalem, the temple, the Holy of Holies and then the mercy seat. But heaven is “his dwelling place above all other places in the universe.” There sits the infinite fountain of love which is the “mutual holy energy” created by the infinite love of the Father for the Son and the infinite love of the Son for the Father. The Father’s love flows to Christ the Head and through him to all his members. The saints are then secondarily subjects of love, just as planets give off reflected light from the sun. All the residents of heaven are perfectly lovely, and harmonize as so many notes “in a concert of music which sweetly [harmonize] with every other note.” They are ranked differently according to their capacities for love, but there is no envy in those lower toward those higher because the highest in glory are also highest in holiness and humility and therefore have more love than others. All exist in “an eternal youth” with “perfect tranquility and joy.” In heaven there is no fading beauty or decaying love or satiety in our faculty of enjoyment.²¹

In his application Edwards charged his listeners to beware of contention in families, for this especially causes people to “live without much of a comfortable sense of heavenly things, or any lively hope of it.” He said saints are happy because they have seen and tasted that heavenly glory. But at the same time they struggle

²⁰ WJE 25:475-77, 480-1, 484, 488.

²¹ WJE 8:369, 386, 383-5.

after holiness, since love always struggles “for liberty” against sin. In his “use” for “awakening to sinners” he told them, “You are in danger. Hell is a world of hatred . . . [it] is, as it were, a vast den of poisonous, lusting serpents.” Everything that is hateful in this universe “shall be gathered together in hell.” Even those who were friends on earth will be enemies there. Everyone will hate one another and “to their utmost torment one another.” Misery will not love company there. But “God gives men their choice.” If sinners would choose heaven and persevere in well-doing, and love the path which leads to it, “it will certainly lead [them] to heaven at last.” They can stay on the path by looking to Jesus, trusting in his mediation and blood—the price of heaven—and intercession for them, and then trusting to his strength to live by his Spirit sent from heaven. Finally, Edwards reassured the saints that to live a life of love to God and neighbor is a way of “inward peace and sweetness.” This is the way to have “clear evidences of a title to heaven” because “heavenliness consists in love.” So “if ever you arrive at heaven, faith and love must be the wings which must carry you there.”²²

A b s t r a c t

This article uncovers the setting of Edwards’ sermons, describes three periods in his sermonic career, explicates what he thought to be the goals of preaching, and depicts his incomparable use of imagery. It concludes by discussing three of his best sermons.

²² WJE 8:386, 389-91, 395-6, 391, 395-7.