

JONATHAN EDWARDS'S "HERMENEUTIC": A CASE STUDY OF THE SERMON "CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE"

TED RIVERA*

While biblical interpretation is as old as the Bible itself, the term "hermeneutics" did not appear in prominent theological usage until 1654, when the Lutheran theologian Johann Konrad Dannhauer published his *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum*. Since that time, the term has come to represent an entire field of often technical theological study, exploring a wide range of concepts related to the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. To speak of Jonathan Edwards's hermeneutic, then, is essentially an anachronism. At the same time, Edwards has much to say about the Bible, about how to understand it, and most particularly, what to do with that understanding.

There is the danger in every age to esteem current intellectual achievement as the pinnacle of thinking, as representing the summit of accomplishment in a given field of endeavor merely because the ink is still wet. With the sophistication of much ongoing hermeneutical dialogue it would be easy to discount the value of past thinkers, including Edwards, as far removed from the present conversation, but also as decidedly out of step with many prevailing conclusions. On the contrary, though, Edwards employs a three-dimensional interpretive method that merits reevaluation and reflection.

While many approaches could be taken to consider his method of interpretation, a case study will perhaps prove to be both succinct and illustrative. One important sermon will be considered that will provide the kernel of Edwards's teaching on the understanding of Scripture and serve as a framework by which to consider his larger "hermeneutical" program. That sermon is "Christian Knowledge."¹

It bears notice that the subtitle given to Edwards's sermon "Christian Knowledge" is "The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth." This emphasis on an individual Christian's need for a thorough

* Ted Rivera is a Ph.D. candidate at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 120 S. Wingate St., Wake Forest, NC 27587.

¹ "Christian Knowledge: Or the Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Edward Hickman; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974) 2.157–63. The Banner of Truth publication, a reprint of an 1834 edition, uses a tremendously small type; it belies the fact that the length of the sermon itself is within normal bounds for Edwards, perhaps fifty minutes in length when preached.

knowledge of Scripture, while clearly present in this particular sermon, is by no means unique for Edwards. Rather, it is a regular point of emphasis in many of his works, and an especially frequent point of application in his sermons. This emphasis did not rise accidentally from the ether of the eighteenth century. There was in Edwards himself a resolute personal habit of life, a fixed disposition, a determined and deliberate study of Scripture, grinding at intellectual and spiritual work in his study, work that revolved around Scripture thirteen hours a day for years on end.² His celebrated "Resolutions," penned for the most part in his late teen years, reveal this drive in even his early Christian experience: "Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same."³

This same orientation persists through the whole of his life and is seen even in the approach used in his last work, *Original Sin*, completed in 1757 shortly before his death. Nearly half of the work is its second part, "Containing Observations on Particular Parts of the Holy Scripture, Which Prove the Doctrine of Original Sin."⁴ Scripture was for Edwards never extraneous, never secondary; its consideration represented nothing less than a lifelong obsession. Ola Winslow wrote, "This young man had a genius for finding Scripture to his purpose, and finding it in unexplored and scriptural corners."⁵ And John Gerstner observed, "In a sense Edwards was dealing with the interpretation of Scripture almost every day of his life. All his notes in all his writings were directly or indirectly involved in this enterprise. We have never encountered a sermon which did not begin with a text of Scripture and expound and apply it throughout."⁶

At the outset, then, it must be observed that Edwards maintains a decidedly high view of Scripture and that "his strongest and most explicit commitments were to the Calvinist-Protestant cause."⁷ George Marsden summarizes this position well:

Edwards, like his Reformed and Puritan predecessors was "biblicist" in the sense of rigorously attempting to follow the Reformation principle of "the Bible

² For a thought-provoking consideration of Edwards's own teachings regarding "habit," see Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 15–75.

³ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Letters and Personal Writings" (ed. George S. Claghorn; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) 16.755.

⁴ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Original Sin" (ed. Clyde A. Holbrook; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970) 3.221–349. By even a cursory examination, it is not difficult to see how the whole of this work is an examination of this doctrine in the light of Scripture.

⁵ The citation is taken from *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Sermons and Discourses" (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) 10.132. In this editorial introduction, Kimnach is citing Ola Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1940) 140.

⁶ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Powhatan, VA: Berea Publications, 1991) 1–180.

⁷ George Marsden, "The Quest for the Historical Edwards," in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 7.

alone" as an authority, particularly in matters pertaining to theology and the church. Many of their beliefs and practices were determined because, according to their scholarship, such were taught in Scripture. At the same time, every biblicist interprets the Bible through a tradition of interpretation, and Edwards' biblicism was refracted through the scholarship of his Calvinistic heritage.⁸

Correspondingly, Edwards's sermon construction follows a conventional Puritan formulation, but not slavishly so. In "Christian Knowledge," we see the familiar Puritan pattern of Text, Doctrine, and Application as its three primary heads.⁹

Before moving to consider these three elements of Text, Doctrine, and Application in "Christian Knowledge," one further dimension must be considered that dramatically underscores Edwards's singular focus on Scripture. It is just as important to observe what is *missing* from his sermons (and writings) as it is to take notice of what is *present*, as evidence of what he sought to accentuate. In this respect, his preaching is in no way "modern." His most famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is a deceptive point of contact in this regard; it is in some ways not at all representative of his preaching.¹⁰ "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" contains a number of potent images that we might call illustrations. In this respect, the number, vivacity, and frequency of these illustrations is perhaps atypical. Edwards does often use metaphorical language and illustrations, but they are most typically drawn directly from Scripture rather than from other sources, and are not at all like contemporary sermon illustrations. In many of Edwards's sermons, one will be hard pressed to find illustrations of any kind. In addition, Edwards only very rarely quotes other preachers or authors in the course of a sermon. And last, "humor" is not a notion that Edwards is at all familiar with, so far as his preaching is concerned.

The overall effect of these "missing" elements is that Edwards retains an unwavering focus on the text, on its doctrine, and, ultimately, on its application. In this way, Edwards would aim to have his hearers deal with God himself as he has revealed himself in his word. The overall impression can be most unsettling: there is nothing to distract the listener or ease the tension. Scripture and ultimately God himself remain the preeminent concerns. This reveals a settled confidence in Scripture as sufficient, as far more persuasive than mere human wisdom.

⁸ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 514.

⁹ Of Edwards's sermons, Wilson Kimnach writes, "I have concluded that 'Text' is the most accurate term for the first section of the sermon, since it invariably begins with the reading of a Scripture text and there is frequently *no explication* . . . if the text seems clear enough without it. When JE does refer to textual explication, he usually calls it the 'Opening of the Text.' 'Doctrine' and 'Application' are JE's customary terms for the second and third major divisions of the sermon" (Kinnach, "Editor's Introduction" 32).

¹⁰ See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742" (ed. Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 400–435. I would argue, however, against various authors who have "defended" Edwards's use of so-called hellfire in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" as somehow atypical—Edwards in fact very often pronounces warnings about hell and its reality.

I. TEXT

After reading Heb 5:12, the text for “Christian Knowledge,” Edwards sets the verse in the fuller context of Hebrews 5 and 6 and articulates the occasion for its writing. He repeats the verse itself, as well as portions of it, frequently throughout the sermon as he emphasizes its various facets: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.” In all, Edwards makes forty-three references or clear allusions to scriptural passages in the course of the sermon, with nearly a quarter of these citations taken from the book of Hebrews itself. As such, it is fair to observe that although preaching from a single verse on a particular topic (as was his custom), Edwards is careful to consider the text as a cohesive part of a larger passage; he also provides historical background as needed. In this regard, Edwards is not bound by such arbitrary conventions as chapter boundaries, but freely settles on the passage as context would dictate.

While Edwards only very infrequently cited the Greek or Hebrew behind a text, he was familiar with the original languages and used them appropriately. Wilson Kinnach observes, “In explication, he is never pedantic, even on those rare occasions when he introduces Hebrew or Greek words to clarify definitions; he explains carefully, but does not belabor small points.”¹¹

II. DOCTRINE

As he does in the majority of his sermons, Edwards summarizes concisely the doctrine or main teaching of the text, in this case the doctrine of Heb 5:12: “Every Christian should make a business of endeavoring to grow in knowledge in divinity.” This particular sermon, perhaps given the nature of this text, expands on doctrinal considerations more than on application, which is uncommon for Edwards, who usually spends the greater proportion of a sermon on application. Divinity, he teaches,

is that science or doctrine which comprehends all those truths and rules which concern the great business of religion. . . . Divinity is not learned, as other sciences, merely by the improvement of man’s natural reason, but is taught by God himself in a book full of instruction, which he hath given us for that end. . . . It cannot be said, that we come to the knowledge of any part of Christian truth by the light of nature. It is only the word of God, contained in the Old and New Testament, which teaches us Christian divinity.¹²

It is God himself who teaches men by Scripture. All Christian knowledge, then, depends on divine revelation and in this way differs from the pursuit of

¹¹ Kinnach, “Editor’s Introduction” 37.

¹² “Christian Knowledge” 157–58. In this quotation, and all others from “Christian Knowledge,” I have capitalized “Christian” although it is not capitalized in the 1834 text in which this sermon appears. This change was made not so much to conform to contemporary usage, but to be consistent with other quotes from Edwards in this paper.

all other forms of knowledge. Lest we conclude that this knowledge is solely cerebral, Edwards explains, "There is no one doctrine, no promise, no rule, but what some way or other relates to the Christian and divine life, or of our living to God by Christ."¹³ True knowledge reverberates in obedient conformity to God's revelation: "Thus there is a difference between having a right speculative notion of the doctrines contained in the word of God, and having a due sense of them in the heart."¹⁴

For Edwards, the heart, most often spoken of in terms of "the affections," must respond to Scripture with a love demonstrated by faithful obedience.¹⁵ There can be no profitable study of the Bible—we might say no profitable hermeneutical exercise—without an accompanying inward response of the heart resulting in fruit in one's life. It can be seen in this light how it is that his *Religious Affections* are thereby not indicative of a separate program, one of many topics to be considered in the theological panoply. Rather, the first sentence of this work underscores a theme that rings true in so much of Edwards's preaching: "There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this, what are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards?"¹⁶

"Distinguishing qualifications," or distinguishing marks, are those patterns of life that result from a man or woman whose heart has been stirred by the divinely revealed word. There must be an aim for all Christian knowledge, for all right understanding of Scripture. Edwards urgently presses his hearers back upon a consideration of the substance of their relationship with God. He writes, "Tis no sign that religious affections are truly holy and spiritual, or that they are not, that they come with texts of Scripture, remarkably brought to the mind."¹⁷ As such, to understand Scripture is not nearly enough: understanding without a changed heart is worse than a raw ignorance:

And if [Satan] can bring one comfortable text to the mind, so he may a thousand; and may choose out such Scriptures as tend most to serve his purpose; and may heap up Scripture promises, tending, according to the perverse application he makes of them, wonderfully to remove the rising doubts, and to confirm the false joy of a poor deluded sinner.¹⁸

¹³ Ibid. 158. It is worth noting that Edwards here demonstrates a dependence on the work of Peter van Mastricht, who himself echoes the Puritan William Ames. See Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 27.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ His sermons on 1 Corinthians 13 bear this out often. See, for example, Jonathan Edwards, "True Grace in the Heart Tends to Holy Practice in Life," in *Charity and Its Fruits* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969) 221–50.

¹⁶ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Religious Affections" (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959) 84.

¹⁷ Ibid. 142.

¹⁸ Ibid. 144.

It is completely consistent, then, that in "Christian Knowledge" Edwards would stress, "There is no other way by which any means of grace whatsoever can be of any benefit, but by knowledge."¹⁹ Scripture is intelligible, and this process of comprehension is the means by which God has ordained to uniquely communicate not only information, but his grace: "God deals with man as with a rational creature. . . . God hath given us the Bible, which is a book of instructions. But this book can be of no manner of profit to us, any otherwise than as it conveys some knowledge to the mind."²⁰ A hermeneutical program divorced from an intimate connection to the work of God borne out in Christian obedience would consequently be unintelligible to Edwards.

For all who would accuse Edwards of fanaticism in the revivals that would rise up only a few short years after the preaching of "Christian Knowledge," it must be observed that they fail to discern this clear connection that he consistently teases out, between a rational understanding of Scripture and a warm response in the heart. This response can only properly occur when first a clear apprehension of the truths of God's word has taken place: "The faculty of reason and understanding was given for *actual* understanding and knowledge. If a man has no actual knowledge, the faculty or capacity of knowing is of no use to him."²¹

III. APPLICATION

In this particular sermon, the demarcation between doctrine and application is less clearly obvious than is customary for Edwards; the two are here especially interwoven. Nevertheless, there is a general movement toward application near the middle of the sermon, and the specific points of application are highly instructive with regard to not only the way in which Edwards understood Scripture, but how he pressed for others to understand them. Once again, there is even at this point a close connection between one's knowledge of Scripture and action: "The endeavor to make progress in such knowledge ought not to be attended to as a thing by the bye, but all Christians should make a business of it. They should look upon it as a part of their daily business, and no small part of it neither."²² If it is only possible for one to obtain grace by the knowledge of Scripture, then it follows that all Christians should be eagerly and diligently seeking out the truths found therein:

The doctrines of this nearly concern every one. They are about those things which relate to every man's eternal salvation and happiness. The common people cannot say, Let us leave these matters to ministers and divines; let them dispute them out among themselves as they can; they concern not us; for they are of infinite importance to every man.²³

¹⁹ "Christian Knowledge" 158.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* 159.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 159–60.

In this light, it is important to observe that in this section on application in "Christian Knowledge," the greatest preponderance of Scripture used in the sermon is brought to bear. We are to believe and act upon what Edwards is saying not based on his own authority or insight, but because what he is preaching is founded on the clear teachings of Scripture. Given this propensity, one cannot help but marvel how rarely emphasized or considered is this emphasis on Scripture in contemporary studies of Edwards. Patricia Tracy writes, "The urge to enhance Edwards's reputation as a philosopher by finding him to be essentially a modern mind trapped in an antiquated vocabulary has nevertheless distorted his thought. His brilliance has been allowed to obscure a major aspect of his historicity, and the real-life context and impact of his ideas has been neglected."²⁴

To further demonstrate how this focus on Scripture dominated Edwards's ministry, and how it bears directly on his understanding of Scripture, one need only consider several of his ordination sermons in which direction is given to new ministers for whom Edwards had occasion to recommend a pattern for ministry. If ever there were a clear indication of what Edwards believed the pattern of understanding, teaching, and preaching of Scripture should be, it would be here. At the ordination of the Rev. Robert Abercrombie, for example, Edwards urged that

ministers should be very conversant with the Holy Scriptures; making it very much their business, with the utmost diligence and strictness, to search those holy writings: for they are as it were the beams of the light of the Sun of righteousness; they are the light by which ministers must be enlightened, and the light they are to hold forth to their hearers; and they are the fire whence their hearts and the hearts of their hearers must be enkindled.²⁵

In a similar way, Edwards exhorted the Rev. Edward Billing:

Ministers are not to make those things that seem right to their own reason a rule in their interpreting a revelation, but the revelation is to be the rule of its own interpretation; i.e., the way that they must interpret Scripture is not to compare the dictates of the Spirit of God in his revelation with what their own reason says, and then to force such an interpretation as shall be agreeable to those dictates, but they must interpret the dictates of the Spirit of God by comparing them with other dictates of Scripture.²⁶

The doctrine, or principal teaching of 1 Cor 2:11–13, Edwards summarizes thus in another ordination sermon: "Ministers are not to preach those things which their own wisdom or reason suggests, but the things already dictated to them by the superior wisdom and knowledge of God."²⁷ An evident pattern

²⁴ Patricia Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979) 6.

²⁵ "The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* 2.959.

²⁶ Kenneth J. Minkema and Richard A. Bailey, eds., "Reason, Revelation and Preaching: An Unpublished Ordination Sermon by Jonathan Edwards," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3/2 (1999) 27.

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God," in *The Salvation of Souls* (ed. Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills; Wheaton: Crossway, 2002) 116.

emerges: the ideas and passions of the minister are to be subjugated to Scripture—what God teaches, Christian ministers must teach.

The conclusion of “Christian Knowledge” is consistent with this stream of thought and is a tremendously succinct distillation of Edwards’s emphasis on the need for all believers to assimilate and embrace scriptural truth. In many ways, it could be considered emblematic of his larger “hermeneutical” program:

1. Be assiduous in reading the Holy Scriptures.
2. Content not yourselves with only a cursory reading, without regarding the sense.
3. Procure, and diligently use, other books which may help you to grow in this knowledge.
4. Improve conversation with others to this end.
5. Seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause, and to enable you to dispute with others; but seek it for the benefit of your souls, and in order to practice.
6. Seek to God, that he would direct you, and bless you, in this pursuit after knowledge.
7. Practice according to what knowledge you have.²⁸

This list must be something of an embarrassment for those who would construct an image of Edwards as one consumed with purely philosophical notions, or as a great mind regrettably ensconced in an eighteenth-century ideological prison. Perry Miller, representative of many who would strip Edwards of such arcane notions as those expressed in “Christian Knowledge,” wrote in commenting on Edwards’s *History of Redemption*,

I agree that if one stops with the surface narrative, *A History of the Work of Redemption* sounds like a story book for fundamentalists, and is hardly to be mentioned with Gibbon, Marx, Spengler, or Toynbee. Measured against modern scholarship, textual criticism, archaeology, and comparative religions, it is an absurd book, where it is not pathetic.²⁹

Arguably, Miller should have stopped with the surface narrative. Miller is at once the progenitor, the real catalyst for the revival in scholarship on Edwards, while at the same time the representative of all who would cast him in a more acceptable mold. As a result, *this* Edwards—the Edwards who accepted a straightforward, careful reading of Scripture, informed by appropriate scholarship—is unacceptable. How much more troubling it must be to see his unfashionable but consistent emphasis on how one’s “assiduous” study of Scripture is to be intertwined with a spiritual vitality marked by prayer and service. Nevertheless, this is indisputably the true Edwardsian hermeneutical program which contemporary scholarship has studiously avoided

²⁸ “Christian Knowledge” 162–63. These seven points are quoted verbatim, but it should be noted that there is further explanatory material in the sermon that has not been included for the sake of clarity and brevity.

²⁹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949) 310.

while writing countless books about him.³⁰ In another context, Kevin Vanhoozer offers this important viewpoint, one that seems immediately relevant to the manner in which Edwards's works have been studied:

Ironically enough, many literary critics never raise what I call a "properly interpretive question"; in their haste to analyze and explain the text, they forget to seek understanding of what the text is about. What else can we make of a critic who discusses the way in which a novel reflects the social-historical conditions of its production, the unconscious psychoses of its producer, or the patriarchal ideology of the era, but never that to which the author is primarily attending?³¹

IV. CROSSCURRENTS IN "CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE"

While numerous other larger themes could be examined relating to Edwards's handling of Scripture, two are arguably most noteworthy, and both are once again observable in "Christian Knowledge." The first of these, which might be more formally labeled his Christological emphasis, is perhaps better expressed more simply as a regular focus on recognizing and proclaiming Jesus Christ in and through the text. This focus is regarded as a crosscurrent because it is present in the three major sections of the sermon, in the short section explaining the Text, and more fully in the sections on Doctrine and Application. Without the larger context of the sermon in view, one could wrongly conclude that these most potent statements Edwards makes are the expression of a program disconnected from the sermon's text. In actual practice, however, these Christological statements are very often the culmination of a key point of argumentation, and are often rhapsodic: "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 excellency of divine truth, unless he first have a notion that there is such a thing."³² Further on, he comments that "[a]ll Christians are put into the school of Christ, where their business is to learn, or receive knowledge from Christ, their common master and teacher."³³ In a statement that is a concise expression of this Christological concern, he adds:

³⁰ A brief review of the bibliographical works of Lesser or Manspeaker serves to illustrate this point. These works reveal dozens of titles trumpeting Edwards's philosophical achievements, or his "aesthetic," for example, but one will be hard pressed to find titles that even include the word "Bible," "Scripture," or related notions among the hundreds of works catalogued. See M. X. Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981); M. X. Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards, An Annotated Bibliography, 1979-1993* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994); and Nancy Manspeaker, *Jonathan Edwards: Bibliographical Synopses* (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1981). A possible exception worth noting is Plantinga Pauw's *The Supreme Harmony of All*, which opens with a chapter entitled "The Trinity and the Bible" that demonstrates something of the manner in which Edwards dealt with this topic. See Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All* 19-55.

³¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 284. See also David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37/1 (1980) 27-38.

³² "Christian Knowledge" 158.

³³ *Ibid.* 161.

Divinity is commonly defined, the doctrine of living to God; and by some who seem to be more accurate, the doctrine of living to God by Christ. It comprehends all Christian doctrines as they are in Jesus, and all Christian rules directing us in living to God by Christ. There is no one doctrine, no promise, no rule, but what some way or other relates to the Christian and divine life, or our living to God by Christ.³⁴

The second crosscurrent worth noting is redemption, both personal and corporate. This is a theme that Edwards returns to with remarkable consistency across the course of his sermons and in many of his larger writings. It could be that self-examination, a point of application that Edwards arguably issues more commonly than any other motif in his preaching, might be seen as a fundamental aspect of this concern. Edwards feels the weight of the responsibility of his office keenly; those who are a part of the congregation under his charge must hear from him in the preaching of Scripture an inescapable and clear call to repentance and salvation. Edwards shares with many of the Puritans an unusual fascination with being certain of one's salvation—one might call it an obsession—for there is nothing more important to get right than this. As a result, even when Edwards does not use the word "redemption," this impulse is never far from the surface: "Christians ought not to content themselves with such degrees of knowledge of divinity as they have already obtained. It should not satisfy them, as they know as much as is absolutely necessary to salvation, but should seek to make progress."³⁵ Christian divinity—and the discipline of studying and interpreting Scripture—has a very practical aim, namely progress toward heaven:

God himself, the eternal Three in one, is the chief object of this science; and next Jesus Christ, as God-man and Mediator, and the glorious work of redemption, the most glorious work that ever was wrought: then the great things of the heavenly world, the glorious and eternal inheritance purchased by Christ, and promised in the gospel; the work of the Holy Spirit of God on the hearts of men; our duty to God, and the way in which we ourselves become like angels, and like God himself in our measure. All these are objects of this science.³⁶

Redemption is thus the very business of God himself: "His works at the same time are wonderful, and cannot be found out to perfection; especially the work of redemption, about which the science of divinity is chiefly conversant, is full of unsearchable wonders."³⁷

V. JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE BIBLE

One would expect that study on the topic of Jonathan Edwards and the Bible would be of narrow use, given the award of the coveted Brewer Prize

³⁴ *Ibid.* 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 159.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* 160.

to Robert Brown's work entitled *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*.³⁸ One might assume that the subject would thereby be exhausted, with perhaps only minor flourishes remaining. All who turn to Brown with eagerness, though, to—at last—engage with the real Edwards, one consumed with a love for Scripture, will be sorely disappointed. Even in the midst of so much praise by so many of the reviewers of Brown's work, this problem has not gone unnoticed: "*Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* is less about biblical exegesis than the assumptions that precede and underlie exegesis."³⁹ Pettit rightly comments, "[T]he title of the book, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, is somewhat misleading, for Brown has little to say about the use of the Scripture in Edwards's published works."⁴⁰ And Douglas Sweeney notes, "My only complaint is that Brown fails to deliver in full on his book's title. *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* discusses only prolegomena. Brown has yet to show us how Edwards handled the biblical texts themselves—how he interpreted the Scripture (the main event of biblical study, in Edwards's own view)—and to assess the historical significance of his biblical exegesis."⁴¹

Edwards's understanding of interpretation was by no means simplistic. He would have, for example, acknowledged more than one sense in certain biblical passages; it should not be surprising that, for Edwards, God's ability to communicate includes "manifold instruction," given that he is "infinite in understanding."⁴² Douglas Sweeney, in offering his own insights on Edwards and the Bible, suggests that "[i]n response to the early rise of the higher criticism of the Bible, he defends its inspiration, the historicity of its contents, and traditional views of the provenance of its books. He affirms the veracity of the Bible's own account of the miraculous."⁴³

It is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to draw conclusions about Jonathan Edwards's handling of the Bible and how one should interpret it based on one sermon, but as can be seen, "Christian Knowledge" has not been chosen at random. Rather, it represents a clear statement of Edwards's view of Scripture in the context of how that knowledge was to be put to use. Brown's *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* does provide a key contribution to understanding how Edwards regarded Scripture: he was indisputably well aware of critical schools of thought, and often responded to them directly. As a result, while Edwards clearly settled on a methodology by which Scripture

³⁸ Robert Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

³⁹ Michael J. McClymond, review of *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* by Robert Brown, *Church History* 72 (June 2003) 416.

⁴⁰ Norman Pettit, review of *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* by Robert Brown, *The New England Quarterly* 77 (June 2004) 334.

⁴¹ Douglas A. Sweeney, review of *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* by Robert Brown, *Theology Today* 60 (April 2003) 102.

⁴² See Miscellany 851, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "The 'Miscellanies,' 833–1152" (ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) 20.80–81.

⁴³ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "The 'Miscellanies,' 1153–1360" (ed. Douglas A. Sweeney; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) 23.29.

was to be used and understood with great care and reverence, he did so in the face of many of the same critical concerns that are present in our own day. Those who would consider Edwards as nothing more than a paradigmatic Puritan cut from an antiquated bolt of cloth must now see how it is that while Edwards wrestled deeply with the rising critical trends emergent in his day, he nevertheless remained a thoroughgoing biblicist.

One historical observation may bring this into clearer focus. It might well be said that a man or woman may best be known by observing who they are when no one is looking. In the case of Edwards, there is an obvious period in which this was most abundantly the situation: his period of ministry at Stockbridge, which included a mission to the Housatonic Indians. While many have observed that, freed from the many responsibilities of pastoring a large congregation, Edwards was able to devote himself to writing four of his major works, less frequently considered is the remarkable nature of his missionary ministry. While Edwards wrote often with an eye toward eventual publication, surely, he would never have expected his sermons from this period to see the light of day in print. In point of fact, many of these sermons have only recently been published, more than 250 years after they were first preached.⁴⁴

Notably, then, the same observations that have been made with regard to Edwards's treatment of Scripture in "Christian Knowledge" could be made with little fundamental modification through the use of a sermon on a similar subject from this latter period at Stockbridge, a sermon on Luke 11:27–28 that Edwards preached in 1751, roughly twelve years after the preaching of "Christian Knowledge."⁴⁵ Once again, the threefold pattern of Text, Doctrine, and Application is observable.⁴⁶ The doctrine drawn from Luke 11 is also the sermon's title: "That Hearing and Keeping the Word of God Renders a Person More Blessed Than Any Other Privilege That Ever God Bestowed on Any of the Children of Men." As noted previously in "Christian Knowledge," we see no illustrations *per se* in this Stockbridge sermon, no external references or humor, a Christological focus, a concern for personal redemption, and a frequent use of Scripture in his argumentation.

It is not simply that Edwards regards Scripture as a trustworthy resource in this latter sermon. More to the point, while handling the Scriptures with reverence, Edwards also clearly draws from this passage in Luke several points regarding the *majesty* of Scripture: "It is a greater blessedness to hear and keep the word of God than to be an apostle or to be endued with any of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, than to be able to heal the

⁴⁴ The two volumes edited by Michael D. McMullen are notable in this regard. See Michael D. McMullen, ed., *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003) and idem, ed., *The Glory and Honor of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004).

⁴⁵ McMullen, "That Hearing and Keeping the Word of God Renders a Person More Blessed Than Any Other Privilege That Ever God Bestowed on Any of the Children of Men," in *The Glory and Honor of God* 190–207.

⁴⁶ The section on Text and Application are somewhat shorter than is characteristic for Edwards, although the end of the Application is clearly abbreviated, and it is evident that the notations could be used for a further extemporaneous treatment.

sick, or to speak with tongues, or to remove mountains."⁴⁷ One can hear in Edwards's admonitions the fruit of a life not only of study but of warm, personal devotion. His legendary expeditions on horseback to meet with God in the context of his creation are evident in his words: "The hearing and keeping the word of God brings the happiness of a spiritual union and communion with God."⁴⁸ His application is in this way by no means solely cerebral:

Hence we see how precious we ought to esteem the word of God. How precious must that be the receiving and keeping of which renders a person blessed above any other privilege that ever God bestowed on any of the children of men. Doubtless this is an inestimable treasure. Hence we see of how great worth is the written Word, how ought we to prize the Holy Scriptures and how should we value the Word preached. How should we prize therefore the advantage and price that we have in our hands, that precious tablet which Christ has committed to us, in that we do enjoy both the written and preached Word of God.⁴⁹

While numerous similar examples could be brought to bear that would substantiate Edwards's consistently high regard for Scripture, one would be hard pressed to find counter-examples. What, then, of Edwards's hermeneutic? It may well be that his view of Scripture might best be understood in light of not only his direct statements about the Bible and its interpretation, but by means of one of his statements regarding God himself. In a sermon entitled "The Christian Pilgrim" based on Heb 11:13–14, Edwards sought to draw out for his hearers the meaning of this text: "And confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country." Among other points, he draws out this application:

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean. Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life.⁵⁰

VI. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

A worthwhile hermeneutic is by no means a dry, wooden, and lifeless regurgitation of the teachings of Scripture. In Edwards's drawing out of the truth of Scripture, we see how a vital, soul-satisfying understanding may rise to view. What makes a contemporary hermeneutical program more satisfying?

⁴⁷ McMullen, "Hearing and Keeping" 196.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 202.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 206.

⁵⁰ *Works of Jonathan Edwards* 2.244.

As we have seen, Edwards believed that actual knowledge was possible, a deep understanding was required by all believers, and that Scripture was to serve as a rule of its own interpretation, even more, that the very moving of God himself was possible and resulted in the transformation of believers. Missing from much of the contemporary hermeneutical dialogue—remarkably—is this spiritual dimension. In Edwards's conception, God aided believers in their understanding of Scripture, an understanding that was not only possible, not only real, but satisfying and transforming.

Given the level of ire the likes of Matthew Tindal inspired in Edwards, one wonders what invective Edwards might levy in our age against the likes of a Jacques Derrida or a Hans Georg Gadamer, not to mention a practitioner such as Bill Hybels. Kevin Vanhoozer is right to underscore how one's worldview, and even one's Christology, greatly shapes and perhaps dictates one's interpretative method.⁵¹ Edwards was no stranger to controversy in responding to contending worldviews in his day. In facing up against the rising threat of Arminianism, one he viewed as foundational, he did not apologize for his Calvinistic interpretation. On the contrary, as was customarily the case, he based his pattern for argumentation on Scripture:

Indeed, it is a glorious argument of the divinity of the holy Scriptures, that they teach such doctrines, which in one age and another, through the blindness of men's minds, and strong prejudices in their hearts, are rejected, as most absurd and unreasonable, by the wise and great men of the world; which yet, when they are most carefully and strictly examined, appear to be exactly agreeable to the most demonstrable, certain, and natural dictates of reason.⁵²

Edwards's own habit of Scriptural study remains instructional to our generation, one too often wearied by skepticism and doubt. He writes, "I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling on one sentence to see the wonders contained in it, and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders."⁵³ Does this seem antiquated?

⁵¹ See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*

⁵² *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Freedom of the Will" (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957) 1.439.

⁵³ This statement of Edwards is quoted by Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* xiv. This reference was obtained from Donald S. Whitney, "Pursuing a Passion for God Through Spiritual Disciplines: Learning from Jonathan Edwards," in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 113.