

# Remembering Jonathan Edwards

Simon Vibert

1703 was a significant year! You will probably be aware of the birth date of John Wesley (28th June, 1703). Less well known on this side of the Atlantic, but in my opinion more significant, was the birth of Jonathan Edwards, to an evangelical family on the 5th October, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut. His later ministry was to follow the pattern of intellectual Puritanism. However, as a pastor and a formidable theologian, the overriding impression of his life was of a man besotted with the love of God.

To attempt any summary of the life, ministry or writings of Jonathan Edwards in a short article would be to do a serious injustice to the man! The sheer volume of his writing and its subsequent influence is staggering. However, in recognition of the 300th anniversary of his birth, it seems that we would do well to look at the way in which Edwards interweaved the relationship between love to God; love to others and love to self.

## Four Key Texts

These four passages of Scripture shaped enormously Jonathan Edwards' loving relationships.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Edward's masterly exposition of 1 Corinthians 13 expounds the truth that 'true religion, in great part, consists in Holy Affections'.<sup>1</sup>

1 Peter 1:8

*Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy*

This text became an important marker for correctly understanding the Revival sweeping through New England in the 1740s. On the one hand, Edwards taught that just because the emotions are greatly moved this does not in itself prove genuine Christian experience. But on the other hand—

The religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in His word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, 'fervent in spirit', and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion... .<sup>2</sup>

Matthew 22:37-40

*Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'*  
*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*

In his book, *Charity and its Fruit*,<sup>3</sup> and later more fully in *True Virtue*,<sup>4</sup> Edwards argues that love is the ground and goal of all true virtue, and true saving faith is both 'heat and light'. This combination of head/heart and godward/manward affections does not allow a separation of intellect and emotion, or understanding and action.

Ephesians 5:22-30

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body.

Self-interest is not absent from true love. This is exemplified in the assumption that the love of self should be extended to such an extent that we love God and our neighbour. Similarly, within marriage, the husband finds that in truly loving his spouse as Christ has exemplified, he loves himself.

#### Four Key Relationships

During my reading of Jonathan Edwards over the last few years I have been increasingly convinced that his view of biblical love coloured the key relationships of his life. Let me illustrate this briefly in these four areas.

##### A. Jonathan and his Wife, Sarah—Self-Giving Love

At his deathbed, America's finest theologian saved his dying words for his beloved wife: 'Give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her that the uncommon union which has so long subsisted between us has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue forever'.<sup>5</sup>

The main study of Edwards' marriage was made by Elizabeth Dodds. This book is self-confessedly selective and interested primarily in the human biography of Jonathan and Sarah.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, an insight into Edwards' relationship enables us to appreciate the kind of love in action of which Edwards wrote about extensively

Jonathan and Sarah Edwards were married on 28 July, 1727 at New Haven. They had eleven children. By modern standards, their relationship would have been considerably strained since Edwards would commonly work thirteen hours a day.

[Sarah Edwards] uniformly paid a becoming deference to her husband and treated him with entire respect, she spared no pains in conforming to his inclinations, and rendering everything in the family agreeable and pleasant: counting it her greatest glory, and that wherein she could best serve God and her generation, to be the means, in this way, of promoting his usefulness and happiness.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah, like many clergy wives, felt keenly the criticism which her husband received. This was especially acute when it came from family sources, such as Chester Williams, an Arminian minister who would turn his head as he rode past the Edwards' house.<sup>8</sup>

During this period, Sarah Edwards went through a period of depression. She had given birth to their sixth child, their only son, Timothy. Sensing his wife's fatigue, in 1740 Edwards took her on a trip to Boston, without children. The

purpose was to have their portraits painted, but with the added benefit of a much needed break from duties.

George Whitefield commented on Jonathan and Sarah Edwards' relationship following his visit to Northampton in 1740—

A sweeter Couple I have not yet seen....She...talked feelingly and solidly of the Things of God, and seemed to be such a Help meet for her Husband that she caused me to...[pray] God, that he would be pleased to send me a Daughter of Abraham to be my wife.<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan once gave Sarah a gold locket costing £11 at a time when the town was bristling with muttering over him wearing his slightly ostentatious wigs. He was known to delight in his wife, and whilst some men went off to ordinations or barn-raising, Edwards would rather be at home with her whenever he could.

Sarah's way with the children did more for Edwards than shield him from hullabaloo while he studied. The family gave him an incarnate foundation for his ethic. As George Gordon has put it, Edwards's life at home opened up 'the world in which love lifts the whole animal endowment to an ethical level'. In 1738, Edwards poured out his feelings about this in sermons which eventually appeared as a book, *Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life*. He summarized the conviction his family had planted in him that 'the whole world of mankind are chiefly kept in action from day to day...by love'.<sup>10</sup>

B. Jonathan and his Church—Sacrificing and Serving love

The interrelationship between the analogy of Christ (as bridegroom) and the church (as bride) is carefully woven through Edwards's writing. This joy in marriage is reciprocal: as Christ rejoices in his bride, the bride rejoices in her husband.

His sermon, "The church's marriage to her sons, and to her God" gives clear examples of how this intimate relationship should be worked out—

The mutual joy of Christ and his church is like that of bridegroom and bride, in that they rejoice in each other as those whom they have chosen

above others, for their nearest, most intimate, and everlasting friends and companions....

Christ and his church, like the bridegroom and the bride, rejoice in each other, as those that are the objects of each other's most tender and ardent love. The love of Christ to his church is altogether unparalleled: the height and depth and length and breadth of it pass knowledge: for he loved the church and gave himself for it; and his love to her proved stronger than death. And on the other hand, she loves him with all her heart. Her whole soul is offered up to him in the flame of love.<sup>11</sup>

This pictorial language is future, of course, for the glorification of the church (Christ's bride) will be when, with fullness of joy, she is united and perfected—

And they both in that relation and union, together receive the Father's blessing; and shall thenceforward rejoice together, in consummate, uninterrupted, immutable, and everlasting glory, in the love and embraces of each other and joint enjoyment of the love of the Father.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards goes on to apply this analogy to the role of the pastor as being like a husband, sacrificing and serving the congregation, giving himself to provide the church comfort and welfare. Accordingly, the church is to submit to the pastor as unto Christ. The results of a faithful union between pastor and church is joy, helpfulness and a working together for the good of each other.

C. Jonathan and his God—Godly Love

Perhaps Edwards' most famous work is *Religious Affections*, in which he states—

He that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion... I am bold to assert that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind or conversion of any person, by anything of a religious nature that ever he read, heard of or saw, that had not his affections moved...The Scriptures do represent true religion, as being summarily comprehended in love, the chief of all the affections and the fountain of all other affections.<sup>13</sup>

It is not the intensity or fervour of these affections which makes them godly. These affections are to be directed god-ward if they are to be god-honouring. He makes this point vividly by pointing out that true religion, that is, true holiness is the opposite of hardness of heart—

Now by a hard heart is plainly meant an unaffected heart, or a heart not easy to be moved with virtuous affections, like a stone, insensible, stupid, unmoved, and hard to be impressed. Hence the hard heart is called a *stony heart*, and it opposed to a heart of flesh, that has feeling, and is sensibly touched and moved.<sup>14</sup>

A heart of flesh is a heart that is moved *by* the love of God *to* love God.

D. Jonathan and Himself—Self-Love and True Virtue

In *Charity and Its Fruits* Edwards states—

A truly practical or saving faith, is light and heat together; or rather light and love, while that which is only a speculative faith, is only light without heat; and, in that it wants spiritual heat or divine love, is in vain, and good for nothing. A speculative faith consists only in the assent of the understanding; but in a saving faith which is only of the former kind, is no better than the faith of devils for they have faith so far as it can exist without love, believing while they tremble.<sup>15</sup>

We have already noted, above, that true virtue is not at odds with self-love. This is one of the most difficult bits of Edwards' writing for the modern reader to grasp. It, perhaps, goes without saying, that Edwards would have little sympathy with the modern psychobabble which advocates that we must love and esteem ourselves in order to know the love of God. Indeed, much of *Charity and Its Fruits* is taken up with an explanation of the text 'Love seeks not its own' (1 Cor. 13:5).

True virtue is grounded in the love of Being first. 'One that loves Being in general will necessary value good will to Being in general, wherever he sees it'.<sup>16</sup> True virtue is not found in the love of virtue or the love of love, but rather is grounded in the Being of love, God. As a consequence, the love one human being shows to another is a participation in God's love to them. 'From what

has been said, 'tis evident that true virtue must chiefly consist in love to God the Being of beings, infinitely the greatest and best of beings'.<sup>17</sup>

True virtue is found in love towards God, for the being of God is the ground of love and all other loves are but a reflection of this love. An ethical system which does not have ultimate regard to the Deity will end up basing morality on the created system. 'If true virtue consist partly in a respect to God, then', argues Edwards 'it chiefly consists in it.'<sup>18</sup> Consequently, he concludes, the worthiness of true virtue is found in greatness and moral goodness, supremely in the love to God.

In *True Virtue* Edwards wrestles with the question: 'How broad can self-love be before it ceases to be selfish?' To which he concludes, no act can be truly virtuous if it does not have God as the prime focus of the action. The love of oneself is not at odds with God's love of ourselves, if that love extended upwards towards God as the ground of love, and outwards to humankind as the goal of all love.

Such love is close to the heart of true virtue: True virtue can not be said to exist without the grace of God. Self-love which puts man at the center seeks happiness in the wrong places. Self-love that includes the love of everything that God loves is true virtue.<sup>19</sup>

It is a great mistake to assume that true virtue requires renouncing happiness. Rather, true happiness arises out of self-love—

If after a man loves God, and has his heart so united to him, as to look upon God as his chief good...it will be a consequence and fruit of this, that even self-love or love to his own happiness, will cause him to desire the glorifying and enjoying of God.<sup>20</sup>

### Three Hundred Years Later and Two Timeless Principles

Among the treasure which Edwards bequeaths to us, is an understanding of love which is deeply God-focussed! True religion is not a matter of the head alone, nor a matter of the heart alone, but a matter of the heart and head combined.

God as the GROUND of love

All truly virtuous acts and affections have God as the starting point and God as the enabler.

God as the GOAL of love

Similarly, all truly virtuous acts have God as the object or goal, enabling us to sacrifice and discipline ourselves for the sake of the kingdom: loving the unlovely and denying ourselves to take up our cross and follow him.

Edwards believed, lived by and extolled these God-honouring concepts, which we get but a reflection of in the four main relationships I have mentioned above!

SIMON VIBERT is Vicar of St. Luke's Wimbledon

#### ENDNOTES

1. J. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), p. 23.
2. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 27.
3. J. Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961).
4. J. Edwards, *True Virtue*
5. E. & D. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man, The "Uncommon Union" of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 201.
6. Note criticisms of Dodd's book in S. R. Holmes, *The Grace and Glory of God, An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 2-3.
7. J. Edwards, *Works*, Banner, Vol. 1: xlv.
8. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, p. 78.
9. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, p. 80.
10. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, p. 54.
11. J. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 2, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), pp. 17-26.
12. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 2, p. 21.
13. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, pp. 30-35.
14. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 46.
15. Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, p. 13.
16. Edwards, "The Wisdom of God displayed in the Way of Salvation," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Ethical Writings*, Vol. 8, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 20.
17. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 8, p. 550.
18. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 8, p. 553.
19. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 8, p. 578-9.
20. Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 2, p. 241.