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BAD BOOKS AND THE GLORIOUS TRINITY:
JONATHAN EDWARDS ON THE SEXUAL HOLINESS OF THE
CHURCH

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Introduction

It is obvious that we live in a sex-obsessed world. One only needs to look at any form of media, whether advertisements, television shows, magazines, or movies to see that this is so. This obsession extends beyond traditional media outlets. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat all revolve around posting sexually explicit materials, with explicit users attracting large followings. However, this sexual dysfunction extends far beyond the mere existence of sexually charged content. Sexuality is the subject of profound abuse, perversion, distortion, violence, and confusion.¹ For many people, sexual acts no longer carry intrinsic meaning. Others have adopted the philosophy that as long as no harm is caused to others, humans must fully realize and express all their sexual desires. For some, even the need to have explicit consent before performing sexual acts has vanished.² All of this brokenness has become the normal course of life for many people. Our workplaces, neighborhoods, colleges, and homes all experience the repercussions of our sexually charged culture. One wishes that one could say that the church has successfully navigated its way through this world filled with sexual dysfunction, but sadly, the church has not done much better than the world in this particular area. One hears

1. For instance, see the recent film *50 Shades of Grey*.
2. For an example of how this issue has recently been discussed, see Smith, "Campus Dilemma."

story after story of church pastors failing to stay faithful in their marriages, and of men and women struggling with pornography and promiscuity. It is clear that even the church deals with the effects of our sexually charged culture. Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III are correct when they say, “the point is simple and disturbing: every human being on this earth struggles with sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are contrary to love and in conflict with the holiness of God.”³ Is this struggle to maintain sexual holiness a modern phenomenon brought on by things like the sexual revolution of the 1970s and the sexual confusion of the 2000s? By no means! Allender and Longman’s quotation could be amended to say that “every human being regardless of time or culture struggles with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are . . . in conflict with the holiness of God.” The eighteenth-century Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards could certainly affirm this statement. The simple fact is that, through his personal life and ministry, Jonathan Edwards experienced the repercussions of this universal tendency to struggle with forms of sexuality that are in conflict with the holiness of God.

As a youth, Edwards was personally acquainted with the struggle between inordinate sexual desires and a desire for God. In one of his journal entries, Edwards decides that when he is “violently beset with temptations” or cannot rid himself of “evil thoughts” that he would “do some sum in arithmetic, or geometry, or some other study, which necessarily engages all my [his] thoughts, and unavoidably keeps them from wandering.”⁴ His acquaintance with inordinate sexual desires extends beyond personal experience; as strange as it might sound, Puritan New England was also a sexually charged culture (though sexual sin often occurred in hiding behind closed doors). George Marsden notes that the 1700s were “a time of changing sexual mores and gender relationships . . . this was a period in which there was a

3. Allender and Longman, *God Loves Sex*, 8.

4. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 56. Marsden argues that we can be sure that this quotation refers to his fight against sexual desires, even though he did not explicitly record his struggles with those temptations.

breakdown of the older communal ideal and the assertion of greater sexual freedom.”⁵ Ava Chamberlin confirms the reality of this statement when she notes that bridal pregnancies (brides who gave birth within seven months of marriage) increased from a low of 8.1 percent in the seventeenth century to a high of 33 percent in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁶ As a pastor, Edwards experienced these changing attitudes toward sexuality within his own parish. In his writings, Edwards describes the practices he witnessed among his own people, especially the youth. He describes the “shameful lascivious custom of handling women’s breasts and different sexes lying in beds together.”⁷ It was this latter practice, called “bundling,” that particularly disturbed Edwards. Bundling was the custom in which parents allowed unmarried couples to spend the night together in bed, with the one condition that the couple be fully clothed. This was supposed to be a safe alternative to sexual intercourse, but (as any youth minister today could tell you) it certainly was not. This led to the unsurprising statistic that, in Northampton, Edwards’s own parish, one out of ten married couples had their first child within eight months of being married. Edwards was often forced to deal with the repercussions of premarital sex in his congregation. In the 1740s, there were at least three notable cases dealing with sex related offenses: Samuel Danks in 1743, Thomas Wait in 1747, and Lieutenant Elisha Hawley in 1748. This last case was particularly explosive. Hawley had fathered twins with Martha Root. The Roots were of a lower social class, and both families agreed to a cash settlement rather than a marriage. Edwards was appalled and insisted that they marry. Edwards believed that it was not right for “a man to have his pleasure with a woman and then be able to buy his way out of a long term responsibility.”⁸ Sadly, a council of local ministers ruled against Edwards.

5. Ibid., 301.

6. Chamberlin, “Jonathan Edwards,” 112.

7. Marsden, *Short Life*, 107.

8. Ibid., 108.

Although the Hawley case was certainly controversial, no case regarding sexual impropriety proved more explosive than the “Bad Books Case.” Most scholars note that the so-called “Bad Books Case” (or the “Young Folks Bible Case”) was a key tipping point in a series of events that eventually led to Edwards’s dismissal from Northampton. His forceful reaction to this scandal was one factor that led to his dismissal from his pastorate at Northampton.⁹ However, one might wonder, “Why did Edwards come down so swiftly and forcefully upon those involved?” This article suggests that Edwards’s reaction was due in part to his understanding of the nature of the church. By focusing upon Edwards’s understanding of the Trinity as displayed in his published and unpublished works, I argue that Edwards’s understanding of the church as the primary locus for God’s Trinitarian act of self-glorification was what drove him to pursue sexual holiness within the church, and, in turn, to respond forcefully against the young men involved in this case. This article concludes with a few suggestions for how the church might appropriate Edwards’s Trinitarian theology in its pursuit of sexual holiness. But first, we must turn our attention to the nature of the controversy.

The Bad Books Case

As a Puritan pastor, Jonathan Edwards was more than just a minister of the gospel. He was also responsible for maintaining church discipline and promoting good Christian behavior throughout his parish. This dual role is clearly seen in the “Bad Books Case” of 1744. In 1744, Edwards came to learn that several young men, ages twenty-one to twenty-nine, had gotten ahold of some sexually explicit material. One was a book titled, “The Midwife Rightly Instructed,” and the other was a pseudo-scientific manual of information on human anatomy and sexuality associated with Aristotle. One boy, Oliver Warner, had

9. Other factors include his request for a raise, and of course the controversy over his deviation from Solomon Stoddard’s position on communion and church membership.

been showing this material to other boys for a ten-shilling fee. Despite the fact that many young men in the community had seen the material, the controversy primarily revolved around two brothers: Timothy and Simeon Root. However, the issue was not simply that the boys had been looking at sexually explicit material (the closest thing to pornography that the boys would likely see). Edwards also knew the type of behavior boys engaged in during the middle of the night behind the barn. The problem is that the bad behavior had taken on a public dimension. It was no longer concealed sexual sin and inordinate desires—it had become what we would today call sexual harassment. Plenty of witnesses testified to the nature of their sin. Rebecca Strong testified that the boys taunted her saying, “You need not to be scared; we know as much about ye as you, and more too.”¹⁰ Mary Downing, a young woman from Northampton, notes that the boys would take the book behind the barn and read it. She explains that one time the boys began to read the book even while they were among young women (Mary, Betty, and Molly). Downing explains that one young boy “talked about things that was in the book in a most unclean manner a long time . . . He had talked exceedingly uncleanly and lasciviously, so that I never heard any fellow go so far.”¹¹ She testified that she and the other girls agreed that “we never heard any such talk come out of any man’s mouth whatsoever. It seemed to me to be almost as bad as tongue could express.”¹² Bathsheba, who was a slave, gives the most detailed testimony as to what was going on. According to her, Warner once said to Hannah Clark, “When will the moon change girls? I believe you can tell. I believe you have circles ‘round your eyes. I believe it runs.”¹³ However, the sexual offenses went beyond coarse joking. Bathsheba testifies that, Timothy Root, who read the book the most, would “Laugh. Ready to kiss them, and catch hold of the girls and shook ‘em.” If anything qualified as sexual

10. Edwards, *Reader*, 172.

11. *Ibid.*, 175.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 173.

harassment, this was it. Edwards moved swiftly against these offenses, but he did so in an unwise way. After a church service, Edwards publicly announced the offense and read a list of names of the people involved. However, he failed to make a distinction between the accused and the witnesses. The investigation lasted for months. At one point, he lost control over how it was being handled. One of the Root brothers displayed open contempt against the council. He refused to sit at the council all day long, so he simply walked out in the middle of the trial. Witnesses saw the boys at the tavern that day. These witnesses testified that the boys “called for a mug of flip and drank it.”¹⁴ To make matters worse, Caleb Sheldon testified that Timothy Root was “the first in moving the young men to play leap frog in the time of the sitting of the committee.”¹⁵ The contempt escalated when Root said of the committee “They are nothing but men molded up of a little dirt. I don’t care a turd, or I don’t care a fart, for any of them.”¹⁶ Despite the fact that the entire situation was quite messy, and that it would have been a lot easier for Edwards to privately reprimand them in a Matthew 18 fashion, Edwards decided to move swiftly, publicly, and forcefully against the offenders. But we ought to ask why.

There are several reasons why Edwards took the manner so seriously. First, this was an instance of covenant breaking. Several years earlier, these boys had made a covenant to forsake their “youthful passions.” However, Edwards now knew that these boys had been engaged in this behavior in secret even when they made this covenant. Second, Edwards felt as though this behavior threatened the awakening he was seeing. Third, these boys showed contempt for church discipline. Fourth, this was a public offense which affected many young women in the town, so a public action was justified. Fifth, Edwards abhorred sexual indulgence because it distracted from the higher beauty of spiritual things.¹⁷ Although all of these factors are certainly

14. Ibid., 176.

15. Ibid., 177.

16. Ibid., 178.

17. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 293.

important in understanding Edwards's reaction to the Bad Books Case, they are merely surface-level explanations of his behavior. There are deeper reasons within Edwards's theology that drove his behavior. It is well known that Edwards's primary motivation in life and theology was the concept of God's glory, especially as it was displayed in God's Trinitarian glorification *ad intra* and *ad extra*. When the church behaves in a way that takes away from or diminishes God's Trinitarian glorification, Edwards always reacts forcefully. I believe Edwards's understanding of the church as the primary locus for God's Trinitarian act of self-glorification is the underlying theological motivation for pursuing sexual holiness within the church, and that it in turn explains his forceful response to these young men's sin. To see how this is so we must turn to Edwards's Trinitarian theology, but first, a few comments must be made about the state of scholarship regarding Edwards's view on the Trinity.

The State of Scholarship on Edwards's View of the Trinity

Regarding the topic of Jonathan Edwards's views on the Trinity, one must come to understand several key factors. The first concerns the use of Edwards's writings as a resource for research. Edwards never published anything on the topic of the Trinity, although he certainly is a Trinitarian theologian. One needs only to look at his other works to see that his theology is infused with a deep understanding of the Trinity; however, he never published any discourses on the Trinity or any of his fragments on the topic. This is not insignificant. Amy Plantinga Pauw has argued that Edwards never published anything on the Trinity because he planned to include his thoughts on the Trinity in his work on the History of Redemption.¹⁸ This argument, however, is unfounded. There is no reason to believe that he would have included a detailed discourse on the Trinity in this work. A more likely explanation as to why Edwards did not publish anything on the Trinity, though he has an entire discourse written on the topic, is that he was unsure about his

18. Pauw, *Supreme Harmony*, 10.

conclusions. Oliver Crisp¹⁹ has pointed out that there is hesitancy in some of what he says in his *Discourse on the Trinity* that is not found in some of his other published works. The fact that he is hesitant and that he never published anything on the Trinity is something that many interpreters have overlooked. However, it is something that interpreters of Edwards certainly need to notice. Kyle Strobel is one of the few Edwards interpreters that does not make this mistake. In speaking of Edwards's *Discourse on the Trinity*, Strobel says that "it is noteworthy that the discourse itself was never readied for publication and therefore, it could be argued, maintains the status of a working note."²⁰ Strobel adds another consideration that must be taken into account when interpreting Edwards's Trinitarian theology. He adds that we must consider the weight of his various Trinitarian works. He argues that his weightiest materials are his published works, followed by his sermons, and then his notebook entries.²¹ How do these factors affect our reading of Edwards in this particular paper? I believe that this helps us see that Edwards does not necessarily have things "all figured out" in his writings. His writings are works in progress.²² His writings represent a method of investigation and discovery by writing. This means that if we see tensions or contradictions in his writings on the Trinity, it is not because he is inconsistent. Rather, it means that he is still on his way to figuring out what he finally believes.

The second item one needs to understand is the state of discussion regarding what type of Trinitarian theologian Edwards was. Pauw believes that Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity does not fall neatly into any of the historical models of the Trinity.²³ William Danaher Jr. argues that there is both a

19. In personal conversation with Dr. Crisp.

20. Strobel, *Theology*, 35.

21. *Ibid.*, 17.

22. See Strobel's argument throughout *Theology*. In this monograph Strobel argues that Edwards changed his view of the Trinity when he wrote his *Discourse on the Trinity*.

23. Pauw, *Supreme Harmony*, 10–17.

psychological and a social analogy in Edwards's work.²⁴ Sang Hyun Lee speaks of an evolution in Edwards's thinking from a psychological to a moderate social analogy of the Trinity.²⁵ Robert Caldwell III argues that there is an Augustinian "flavor" to Edwards's Trinitarianism.²⁶ Overall, there is no consensus regarding what type of Trinitarian theologian Edwards was. However, what all interpreters agree upon is that Edwards uses language that reflects both the psychological and the social traditions of Trinitarian theology. He uses language that portrays the Son and Spirit as the Wisdom and Love of God, thus emphasizing divine unity. He also uses language that emphasizes the Trinity as depicting God as a society or a family of persons. It should be noted that, recently, Kyle Strobel has attempted to present an innovative way to draw these two theological traditions together. Strobel calls his view the "personal beatific-delight" view. He argues that Edwards moves from a concept of divine personhood (grounded in a psychological analogy) to a view of divine personhood through perichoresis.²⁷ Nevertheless, Edwards does not abandon his psychological language. The Father still serves as the ground of being. The son, as the perfect idea of the Father, still serves as God's understanding. The Holy Spirit, as the bond of love between the Father and Son, is still the love or will of God. However, what is unique about Strobel's take on the psychological model is that Strobel believes that, for Edwards, the Son and Holy Spirit are not individual persons. Edwards also uses elements of the social Trinitarian tradition. Specifically, like many social Trinitarians, he commandeers perichoresis to ground divine unity. According to Strobel, Edwards uses the concept of perichoresis to explain how these attributes (understanding and will) can be persons. Thus, "the Father, Son, and Spirit have personhood only insofar as they exist in perichoretic union."²⁸ Strobel's explanation makes sense

24. Danaher, *Trinitarian Ethics*, 6–7.

25. Lee, "Editor's Introduction," 12–13.

26. Caldwell, *Communion*, 33.

27. Strobel, *Theology*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*, 14.

of the psychological and social elements in Edwards's Trinitarian theology.

Even though Strobel's explanation of the psychological and social elements in Edwards's theology is compelling, it is not the goal of this article to determine the foundations of Edwards's thought on the Trinity. For the sake of this article, it will suffice to say that Edwards's writings are filled with language that speaks of both models. Once again, Pauw's work is helpful in understanding Edwards on the Trinity. She writes:

Edwards alternated or modulated between them (models) depending on the immediate theological and cultural context of his writing, but never repudiated either one. That Edwards refused to choose between them is an indication of his high tolerance for theological tension.²⁹

In other words, Edwards was willing to live with the tension between these two models of the Trinity because he found them necessary for telling the story of God's work of redemption through Christ. I too am willing to live with the tension between these two models of the Trinity,³⁰ because they are necessary for telling the story of Edwards's views on the sexual holiness of the church.

Three Axioms Concerning the Trinity and the Life of the Church

Ever since Perry Miller's 1949 study, *Jonathan Edwards*, many have tried to pinpoint the central theme of Edwards's theology. Michael McClymond and Gerald McDermott have avoided this trend and have argued that instead of pointing to any one theme as *the* center of Edwards's theology, we should think of his theology as a sort of symphony, where different "instruments" play different parts, contributing to an overall whole. McClymond and McDermott believe that the problem with many of the current interpretations of Edwards's theology is that "they

29. Pauw, *Supreme Harmony*, 11.

30. I will continue to call them "models" of the Trinity, primarily because I see Edwards as using them to represent a deeper reality that is inscrutable. These models are not reality; they are images of reality.

capture one or another part of the symphony, yet fail to construe the sound and flow of the whole.”³¹ In order to fully appreciate Edwards’s theology, one would have to “attend to the whole range of musical instruments that play simultaneously to create the total performance that we call the symphony.”³² So what are the musical instruments in this metaphor?

McClymond and McDermott believe that there are five constituents in this orchestra: (1) Trinitarian communication, (2) creaturely participation, (3) necessitarian dispositionalism, (4) theocentric voluntarism, and (5) harmonious constitutionalism. McClymond and McDermott’s position ought to be heeded by Edwards’s interpreters, because there is always a danger of becoming myopic when reading Edwards. However, just because there is always the danger of becoming myopic, this does not mean that one ought to avoid the task of finding one organizing principle in Edwards’s theology. In fact, many theologians have argued that there is *one* central organizing principle in Edwards’s theology. One organizing principle that has become quite popular is the notion that the central theme of Edwards’s theology is the glory of God.³³ Some have nuanced this even more by arguing that the communication of God’s Trinitarian self-glorification is the main theme of Edwards’s work. By this we mean that God’s self-communication transpired from all eternity among the three persons of the Trinity and occurred once again in the creation of the world. This communication overflows into creatures who participate in God’s own Trinitarian self-glorification.³⁴ This idea, which McClymond and McDermott acknowledge as an important part of Edwards’s theology, is taken by William Schweitzer to be *the* central aspect of Edwards’s theology. In *God is a Communicative Being*, Schweitzer argues that God’s goodness entails a disposition to share or “communicate” his good state.³⁵ This communication

31. McClymond and McDermott, *Theology*, 8.

32. *Ibid.*, 8.

33. See Holmes, *God of Grace*; and Lucas, *God’s Grand Design*.

34. McClymond and McDermott, *Theology*, 5.

35. Schweitzer, *Communicative Being*, 7.

consists of noetic, affectional, and beatific elements. One does not need to agree that this is the central aspect of Edwards's theology. However, it is almost undeniable that it is an important aspect.³⁶

Axiom 1—God is a Communicative Being

As noted above, one of the fundamental axioms of Jonathan Edwards's theology is that "God is a communicative being."³⁷ We now turn to Edwards's own writings to see what this means.

Edwards states that it is in God's "essence to incline to communicate himself."³⁸ Edwards also states that "the disposition to communicate himself or diffuse his own fullness, [is that] which we must conceive of as being originally in God as a perfection of his nature."³⁹

So what exactly is God communicating? God is communicating nothing less than himself. When God does this, God communicates his own glory. Once again Edwards's *Miscellanies* shed light on this concept. Edwards says, "His own glory was the ultimate [end], himself was his end; that is himself communicated."⁴⁰ This divine self-communication (or self-glorification) occurs in two different ways. It occurs *ad intra* and *ad extra*—within the inner life of the Trinity and the external workings of the Trinity. Regarding the first mode of self-communication, Edwards says:

God is glorified within himself these two ways: 1. By appearing or being manifested to himself in his own perfect idea, or his Son, who is the brightness of his glory; 2. By enjoying and delighting in himself by flowing forth in infinite love and delight towards himself, or in his Holy Spirit.⁴¹

36. For more on importance of Trinitarian communication *ad intra* and *ad extra* see Lee, *Philosophical Theology*, 196–210.

37. Edwards, *Miscellanies a–500*, 410.

38. *Ibid.*, 277–78.

39. Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 433.

40. Edwards, *Miscellanies a–500*, 361.

41. *Ibid.*, 495.

Because God is a communicative being, God tends towards further communication of himself. Thus God is disposed to enlarge, increase, and multiply his own glory. God does this through the communication of his self-knowledge and self-love, which occurs through the relationship between God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, respectively. At this point, we are still talking about intra-Trinitarian communication. However, God's glory is an infinitely self-enlarging glory, so God ensures that this same self-communication (self-glorification) that occurs *ad intra* also occurs *ad extra*. Edwards says that this occurs in two ways:

God glorifies himself towards the creatures also two ways: 1. by appearing to them, being manifested to their understanding; 2. in communicating himself to their hearts . . . both of them may be called his glory in the more extensive sense of the word, viz. a shinning forth or the going forth of his excellency, beauty, and essential glory *ad extra*.⁴²

Elsewhere he says:

It is a regard to himself that disposes him to diffuse and communicate himself. It is such a delight in his own internal fullness and glory that disposes him to abundant effusion and emanation of that glory. The same disposition that inclines him to delight in his own glory (*ad intra*), causes him to delight in the exhibitions, expressions, and communications of it (*ad extra*).⁴³

However, all of this is about God's self-communication and self-glorification, which flows out from the Trinitarian life of God. How do sentient beings participate in the glorification of God? Specifically, how does the church participate in glorifying God? To answer that question we must look at the other two axioms regarding the Trinity and the life of the church.

Axiom 2—In the Beauty of the Spiritual Community the Glory of God Becomes Visible

Jonathan Edwards begins his philosophical treatise, *The Mind*, with the question "What is excellency?" Edwards answers this

42. Ibid.

43. Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 452.

question by defining excellency as consent to being. Edwards says, “This is an universal definition of excellency: The consent of being to being, or being’s consent to entity. The more the consent is, and the more extensive, the greater the excellency.”⁴⁴

Fundamental to Edwards’s theology is that God is simply Being in general. Given Edwards’s definition of excellency and the notion that God is simply Being in general, one might wonder, “How can there be excellency in God if God is one?” After all, as Edwards says,

One alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent; for in such a case there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore no such thing as consent . . . But in a being that is absolutely without any plurality there cannot be excellency, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement.⁴⁵

This is where Edwards’s Trinitarian theology helps solve this problem. The Trinity for Edwards can be understood as a community of love. God the Father has a perfect idea of himself, which is the Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. The relationship between them is nothing but infinite love. God’s infinite love to himself, which is exerted from eternity, is nothing but the Holy Spirit. This relationship of mutual love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit is God’s “delight in excellency, God’s sweet consent to himself.”⁴⁶ This is the highest form of excellency, because it is the pure form of Being consenting to Being.

What role does the church play in this intra-Trinitarian consent to being? The church participates in this Trinitarian action of consent to being. When the saints receive God’s communication of self (knowledge of self through Christ and love of self through the Holy Spirit), they respond with consent to being. Thus, they enter into this relationship of consent to being, or beauty.

44. Edwards, *Reader*, 26.

45. *Ibid.*, 27.

46. Edwards, *Miscellanies a–500*, 263.

If God's excellency is to be seen, that is, if the world is going to see and delight in God's glory, then the saints' participation in this consent must be seen. However, the saints' consent towards being, and thus their participation in this beautiful relationship, must not only be seen in their relationship towards God, it must be displayed towards one another. If the church is to reflect God's own excellent nature, it must display excellency. This happens as consent towards one another occurs. Where there is a lack of consent, there is a lack of beauty; or, as Edwards says in *The Nature of True Virtue*, "Beauty does not consist in discord and dissent, but in consent and agreement."⁴⁷ Stephen Holmes paraphrases this point and applies it to the church by saying, "in the church the beauty of God . . . should be seen, and so there is a need for harmony and consent amongst the members of the church."⁴⁸ This, however, was precisely what was not happening during the Bad Books Case. It is clear that there were vast amounts of discord and dissent. As noted above, the young men involved were using the information found in these books to harass and tease the girls. In the eighteenth century, the term sexual harassment did not exist, but by today's standards, this is precisely what was going on. This behavior towards the girls and the insubordinate attitude towards church leadership displayed a lack of harmony within the church. This was a serious problem, because it undermined God's project of displaying his Trinitarian glory in what should have been a beautiful and harmonious (i.e., excellent or virtuous) community.

Axiom 3—The Church Glorifies God When It Knows and Delights in Him

In order to see how this is so, we must turn to several passages that display the Augustinian tendencies in Edwards's Trinitarian theology. According to the Augustinian model, the human mind knowing itself and loving itself provides a most fitting image of the Godhead.⁴⁹ In comparing the Trinity to a human mind and its

47. Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 541.

48. Holmes, *God of Grace*, 194.

49. Pauw, *Supreme Harmony*, 12.

internal operations of knowledge and love, Augustine depicted the Son as the idea or image of God and the Spirit as the divine love and joy. We see Edwards pick up on this model of the Trinity for his own Trinitarian theology in *A Discourse on the Trinity*.⁵⁰ Edwards says that the Father is the deity subsisting in the prime unoriginated and most absolute manner. The Son is the deity generated by the Father having an idea of himself and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Spirit is the divine essence flowed out and breathed forth by God's love to and delight in himself. He specifically says that the divine essence truly and distinctly subsists in both the divine idea of himself and the divine love towards itself.

This Augustinian understanding of the Trinity leads directly to his understanding of how God glorifies himself. According to Edwards, God glorifies himself *ad intra* in two ways.⁵¹ First, God appears to himself in his own idea of himself. This corresponds to the Son. Second, God glorifies himself by enjoying and delighting in himself, that is, "by flowing forth in infinite love and delight towards himself."⁵² This corresponds to the Holy Spirit.

Edwards then makes the step from God's own inner Trinitarian knowledge, love, and joy displayed above to how the saints participate in the glorification of God. First, God appears to them in their understanding. This corresponds to the Son. Second, God glorifies himself towards creatures by communicating himself to their hearts.⁵³ The creatures rejoice, delight, and find joy in God's communication to them. It should be noted that the first manner of God's self-glorification towards the creature is aimed at the creature's understanding. The other manner is directed towards their wills or their hearts. Thus, "God is glorified not only by his glory being seen, but by its being rejoiced in, when those that see it delight in it: God is more

50. Edwards, *Treatise*, 118.

51. For Edwards's own wording of how God glorifies himself *ad intra*, see the text corresponding to note 40 above.

52. Edwards, *Miscellanies a-500*, 495.

53. For Edwards's own wording of how God glorifies himself *ad intra*, see the text corresponding to note 41 above.

glorified than if they only see it; his glory is then received by the whole soul, by the understanding and by the heart.”⁵⁴

The key phrase here is that God is glorified when his glory is not only seen but when it is *rejoiced in*. This only happens as God’s knowledge of himself (in the Son) and God’s delight or joy in himself (the Holy Spirit) is received by the mind (understanding) and heart of the saints. Elsewhere Edwards says something very similar: “In the creature’s knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned.”⁵⁵ Or, as John Piper has consistently said—God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.

This lack of satisfaction or delight in God seems to be one of the problems Edwards had with sexual sin. In “The Beauty and Piety of Youth,”⁵⁶ a sermon preached eight months after the Bad Books Case, Edwards encourages the youth of Northampton to forsake sin and pursue Christ. He encourages them to exchange carnal appetites for “the sweetest gratification of appetites,” which is found only in knowing and loving God. Sexual sin in the church is the exchange of affections which glorify God for lesser affections that diminish God’s glory.

The Trinitarian Basis for Edwards’s Reaction to the Bad Books Case

Given what has been argued throughout this article, we can clearly say that what was occurring in the Bad Books Case conflicted with Edwards’s Trinitarian theology of the church. However, we might wonder if his Trinitarian theology is sufficient to explain the forcefulness of his reaction to the situation. In other words, we might want to ask, “How do we know that Edwards’s Trinitarian theology was the explicit reason he responded to the Bad Books Case with such forcefulness?” There are several reasons which lead us to believe that his

54. Edwards, *Miscellanies a–500*, 495.

55. Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 531.

56. Edwards, *Sermons*, 105–10.

Trinitarian theology provides a satisfactory reason for his reaction.

First, we must take into account the centrality of his Trinitarian theology for making sense of the Christian life, or, as Strobel has written, “Ultimately, God’s Trinitarian nature determines Edwards’s entire theology . . . [delineating] how *this* God relates to his creatures.”⁵⁷ In *Jonathan Edwards’s Theology: A Reinterpretation*, Strobel makes a case for how the Trinitarian concept of the creaturely reception of God’s glory and the creature’s remanation (the notion that the creature rebounds God’s glory back to God) of that glory is the key to understanding Edwards’s notions of spiritual knowledge, regeneration, and religious affection. Strobel makes it clear that these are just three “case studies” of how this Trinitarian concept helps to make sense of Edwards’s theology of the Christian life. William Schweitzer makes a similar argument, but instead of using the language of emanation and remanation, he uses the language of communication.⁵⁸ He uses this Trinitarian concept to make sense of Edwards’s theology of scripture, history, and pastoral ministry. Once again, these are just “case studies” of how this Trinitarian concept helps to make sense of Edwards’s theology of the Christian life. Although it seems evident that Edwards is a thoroughly Trinitarian thinker, do we have sufficient reason to say that his Trinitarian theology provides a satisfactory reason for his reaction? It seems as though we need a more specific explanation for his reaction.

Second, we can say that his reaction corresponds to his Trinitarian ethics. Most recently, Elizabeth Agnew Cochran has argued that virtue is best achieved through relationship with others, and that for Edwards the Christian’s relationship with God is the most foundational relationship for becoming a virtuous moral agent.⁵⁹ Thus, she implicitly situates Edwards’s ethics within a Trinitarian framework of relations. However, Edwards’s Trinitarian ethics is more than just implicit. For

57. Strobel, *Theology*, 146.

58. Schweitzer, *Communicative Being*.

59. Cochran, “Jonathan Edwards,” 79.

example, Roland Delattre has written that Edwards's ethics finds its source within the metaphysical concept of beauty, which for Edwards is ultimately a Trinitarian concept.⁶⁰ William Danaher has claimed that Edwards developed a social analogy of the Trinity which emphasized a deeply interdependent communion among the persons of the Trinity.⁶¹ This communion of interdependence provides a model for thinking about ethics in light of relational and interdependent expressions of love. Paul Ramsey has argued that self-love, consent, benevolence, happiness, and knowledge of God, which are all Trinitarian concepts, are ethical concepts for Edwards as well.⁶² I have made a similar argument, except I have grounded the ethical concepts of consent, knowledge of God, and love of God within the Trinitarian concept of self-glorification. Thus, we may say that, given the centrality of his Trinitarian theology for making sense of the Christian life, and more specifically, Christian ethics, Edwards would naturally have reacted to the Bad Books case with disciplinary action. However, these two arguments do not adequately address why his reaction was so forceful. I suggest that there are two basic reasons that explain the forcefulness of his reaction.

First, Edwards "sees a connection between his theology of divine communication and the role of ministers."⁶³ According to Schweitzer, ministers participate in God's program of communicating himself to the elect. The minister has a role in emanating this Trinitarian self-knowledge through Christ and joy through the Holy Spirit. As the minister communicates God's self-knowledge of Christ to the elect, the elect are led to an affectional response, which allows them to behold, admire, adore, love, and glorify God. Thus, the minister's role as God's representative was to be the means by which the elect will achieve their purpose in remanating God's Trinitarian glory back to Him. Understanding this connection between the role of the

60. See Delattre, *Beauty*.

61. See Danaher, *Trinitarian Ethics*.

62. See Edwards, *Ethical Writings*.

63. Schweitzer, *Communicative Being*, 151.

minister and God's Trinitarian self-communication helps us make sense of his forceful reaction to the Bad Books Case. Edwards would have understood his role as a minister to be primarily about communicating God's self-knowledge of Christ and helping his congregation behold, admire, love, and glorify God. As we have noted above, the Bad Books case was a failure to properly appreciate the communication of God's self-knowledge in Christ and self-love and joy in the Spirit. Thus, as a minister, Edwards was required to respond forcefully to this violation of Trinitarian principles.

Finally, we can say that the Bad Books Case corresponds to his Trinitarian theology more clearly than any other disciplinary case. Edwards certainly dealt with other violations of proper conduct, but this particular case violates many elements which were central to the core of his theology. As noted above, it violates the concept of consent to being, thus undermining God's project of displaying his Trinitarian glory in what should have been a beautiful and harmonious community. The Bad Books Case also violates God's desire that his creatures would rejoice and delight in him. Rejoicing in God happens as knowledge of himself (in the Son) and delight or joy in himself (through the Holy Spirit) is received by the mind (understanding) and heart of the saints. It is clear that rejoicing and delight in God was not happening in the lives of the guilty parties in the Bad Books Case. We do not have knowledge of any other disciplinary case, which violates so many of Edwards's Trinitarian principles. These four reasons explain the forcefulness of Edwards's reaction to the Bad Books Case.

Implications of Edwards's Trinitarian Theology for the Sexual Holiness of the Church

It is clear that God's self-glorification was fundamental to Edwards's theology. To put it quite simply, Edwards believed that God is all about his self-glorification. God is glorified when the beauty of the spiritual community becomes visible and when this same community knows and delights in him. Both of these ways of God glorifying himself were being violated during the

Bad Books Case, so one can see why Edwards became so heated over the situation. There is much for the church today to learn from Edwards's reaction to the Bad Books Case.

First, we must take seriously the fact that sexual sin within the church is not merely a private matter. It affects the whole community, and it is a violation of the love that ought to be seen within the church. This is what the Apostle Paul himself says in 1 Thess 4:3–7.⁶⁴ Here Paul emphasizes that sexual sin is not simply a transgression against God, it is also a transgression against one's fellow believers. To engage in sexual sin or to entertain lustful passions wrongs one's brothers and sisters. One contemporary example of how this is the case involves the use of pornography. Eighty-six percent of male college students view pornography at least once per month.⁶⁵ Even though Christians claim to feel guiltier about this practice than the general populace, the number of Christians who participates in this practice is not much lower than the general populace. If there were one sexual sin that would seem to be a private matter, one would think that it is the use of pornography. This is simply not the case. What might be considered a private sin actually has wide ranging effects. Repeated pornography use has been linked to alcohol and drug abuse, low self-esteem, increased sexual promiscuity, and violence. "It also has the tendency to separate the physical from the emotional and relational aspects of sexual intimacy, leading to compartmentalized patterns that continue in marriage."⁶⁶ This particular sexual sin does not only affect the sinner and those with whom he or she has relationships. Pornography also tends to lead to body image problems, anxiety, and relational discord among women in the general populace. It

64. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness" (NRSV).

65. Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 170.

66. *Ibid.*, 170.

is clear that this sexual sin, which is just one example among many, affects more than just the sinner, it takes a toll on the people around the sinner. The person who engages in this sexual sin commits an act that harms those around him or her. This is a clear violation of Edwards's belief that the church should be a beautiful community that truly lives out "consent to being or harmony."

We might ask, "What will this God-beautiful, God-glorifying community look like?" According to Edwards, the beautiful, God-glorifying community, "exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature, consisting in knowledge or view of God's glory and beauty, its union with God, its union with God, and conformity to him, love to him and joy in him."⁶⁷ Practically, this means that members of the church will be concerned about the sexual purity of other believers because that is what true virtue demands. How might the church put this concern into action?

Let us briefly consider the topic, which we dealt with above, namely pornography. There are many ways which individual congregations might help believers address the sins of pornography in their lives. However, there are several actions which any congregation might take to help believers grow in sexual purity in this area. For instance, churches might encourage believers to have the freedom to confess this sin without the fear of shame. It might also help believers take steps towards surrendering this area of their life over to God. This might include a daily vow of purity, the placement of boundaries, the installation of software for filtering or monitoring Internet usage, or some sort of accountability program. The church might also encourage people to find support within the congregation through small groups, mentors, spiritual directors, or even professional counselors. These seem like simple steps; however, they can go a long way in helping the church live out its call to help its congregants live out the sexual purity that God's glory demands.

67. Edwards, *Reader*, 258.

Second, we must oppose sexual morality done simply for the sake of being moral; rather, we must encourage sexual morality by encouraging people to find delight in God. This fits well with an Augustinian model of human beings. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith argues for an Augustinian understanding of human beings as “persons defined by love—as desiring agents and liturgical animals whose primary mode of intending the world is love.”⁶⁸ As people’s knowledge of and love for God grows, their desire for sexual sin will begin to diminish, and their desire for sexual holiness will increase. As believers seek to know and delight in God, they will find that God is more satisfying than any sexual sin, or as Dane Ortlund has put it:

The joy that Christ pours into the hearts of his people is perfectly satisfying. Nothing more is longed for. “The pleasure and joy that is in Christ Jesus . . . is of such a nature that those that receive it desire no other kind of joy.” To see Christ in his beauty is to long for more of such a sight; and yet the sight itself drives out all need for anything to supplement it.⁶⁹

How can believers grow in their longing to see the beauty of Christ? One simple way to do this is to reconceive the task of preaching. Much preaching today follows a cognitive model of preaching. This sort of preaching tends to embody the belief that being a disciple of Jesus is a matter of getting the right ideas into your mind in order to guarantee proper behavior. This sort of preaching often reduces to a series of “practical steps” for living and behaving rightly. There is also preaching that follows Smith’s Augustinian understanding of human beings. This sort of preaching does not aim solely at a human being’s cognitive faculties. Rather, it aims at what Christians throughout the tradition have called “the heart” or what Jonathan Edwards called “the affections.” It is based on the conviction that, as human beings, we are creatures “whose orientation and form of life is

68. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 37.

69. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life*, 81.

primarily shaped by what one loves as ultimate.”⁷⁰ This sort of preaching, affective preaching, recognizes that our notions of ultimate ends, and hence penultimate ends, are affected by the beauty and truth of the gospel more than rules or applications which are entailed by the gospel. If the preacher’s goal is to help believers grow in their knowledge of and love for God, thus diminishing their desire for sexual sin and increasing their desire for sexual holiness, the preacher will attempt to preach in a way that stirs up “holy affections—things like hate for sin, delight in God, hope in his promises, gratitude for his mercy.”⁷¹ Preaching that aims at stirring holy affections is preaching that takes seriously the fact that holiness is grounded upon God’s Trinitarian self-communication of his knowledge and delight in Christ and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

If the church would begin to emphasize these simple things, which flow out of Edwards’s robust Trinitarian theology (e.g. sexual sin is a violation of the love that ought to be seen within the church, and sexual holiness ought to be grounded in a love for and delight in God), then the church would certainly be a community that brings much glory to God, which after all is the end for which God created the world and his church.

Conclusion

We have seen that Jonathan Edwards’s understanding of the church as the primary locus for God’s Trinitarian act of self-glorification is his underlying theological motivation for pursuing sexual holiness within the church. This in turn explains his forceful response to the young men involved in the Bad Books Case. It is likely that most congregations will never have to deal with a situation as dramatic as the Bad Books Case. However, in our over-sexualized western culture, churches will increasingly have to deal with issues related to sexual sin. Even though Edwards’s manner of handling the situation was plagued with missteps, it would certainly be an error for contemporary

70. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

71. Piper, *Supremacy*, 84.

Christians to overlook what we can learn from Edwards in this situation. What we learn from Edwards's Trinitarian theology is that, because God is glorified in his self-communication *ad intra* and *ad extra*, the church ought to be a community that seeks to glorify God, especially as it seeks sexual holiness.

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