

Princeton Theological Seminary

**Diffusion, Delight, and Deification:
Jonathan Edwards' Theology of Participation**

Kyle Barton

TH 3437: Theology and Ethics of Jonathan Edwards

Dr. KC Choi

20 March 2023

I. Introduction

A striking motif in a number of Jonathan Edwards' central works is human beings' participation in God. Edwards links the greatest gift that God can give (God himself) with the highest becoming that human beings can experience (united with God). He says that "the highest and most excellent gift that ever God bestows... the highest excellence and perfection of a rational creature" is "a participation of the Deity" that "changes the nature of the soul... [and] assimilates the nature to the divine nature."¹ The presence of a sentence like this in Edwards' writings does much to remedy the notion that in Edwards' mind salvation consists merely in rescue from hell (as his infamous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" might lead one to believe). Sentences like this are not anomalies in Edwards' writings. Though not always visible, they are like an underground aquifer that nourishes his theological imagination. This motif is traceable from its logical derivation in the inner life of the Divine Trinity, through the rationale and goal of God's creation, to the accomplishment and effect of human salvation. In this paper, I will argue that Edwards speaks of salvation as participation in God in a robustly ontological sense that is often denied or disregarded in many contemporary Reformed theologies.² Such an understanding of salvation aligns Edwards with the patristic notion of salvation as deification,³ which consists in much more than an objective, judicial proceeding. Edwards' retort to the skeptics of his own day who viewed his writings as ravings is equally

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 121, 123.

² Thankfully, there is a resurgence of interest here that is overturning popular misunderstandings.

³ See also, Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 153: "Herein lies the marrow of Edwards' soteriology... salvation is thus embedded in the grand scheme of the theology of divinization (theosis)." See also Robert Jenson, *American Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 178: "Indeed, the history of the world, as Edwards tells it, just *is* the history of the church on its way from sin to deification."

needed today: “the Word of God teaches us more things concerning it to be believed by us than have been generally taken [notice of]... [things] exceeding glorious and wonderful.”⁴ Nothing could be more glorious, wonderful, and delightful than deifying union with God.

II. Self-replication and Delight within the Trinity

The origin and pattern of Edwards’ conception of salvation is the inner life of the Divine Trinity—one might call it the conceptual architecture of God’s triunity, if it weren’t so static of an analogy (Edwards loves to employ analogies for God that capture movement and life: God is a river flowing himself out or a sun illuminating and giving life). Edwards rationally deduces⁵ the triunity of God by what has been called the psychological analogy.⁶ God, who is perfect fullness of being, surely knows himself and, therefore, has a “most perfect idea of himself.”⁷ This idea is distinct from God’s logically primary existence, but since it is an exact and substantial representation of God with “perfect clearness, fullness and strength,”⁸ God, in a way, becomes his own object and repeats himself through this self-understanding.⁹ But simultaneously coexistent with the substantiation of this repetition is God’s infinitely willing, loving, and delighting in it (himself) in a “most pure act.”¹⁰ These two conceptual moments form the rational basis of the Trinity—the idea or image of God that God generates is the Son, and the act or love of God that flows out of God is the Spirit.¹¹ The upshot of all this is a dynamic model of the

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 21: Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 139.

⁵ Edwards, *Trinity*, 131: “Reason is sufficient to tell us that there must be these distinctions in the Deity.”

⁶ Oliver D. Crisp and Kyle C. Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to His Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 40-42, 50.

⁷ Edwards, *Trinity*, 113.

⁸ Edwards, *Trinity*, 116.

⁹ Edwards, *Trinity*, 114.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Trinity*, 121.

¹¹ For Edwards succinct formal summary of the Trinity see, Edwards, *Trinity*, 131.

Trinity that emphasizes God's infinite delight in repeating himself, beholding himself, and flowing himself out while maintaining the most profound union and communion.¹² Such rigorous trinitarian thinking lies behind the deceptively simple axiom with which Edwards begins this discourse: "God [Father] is infinitely happy in the enjoyment [Holy Spirit] of himself [Son]."¹³

III. A Diffusive Disposition toward Union with the Creature

Edwards convincingly argues that the end for which God created the world is God's own glory—God aims at himself.¹⁴ Calvin had already said as much and it had become a stock Reformed theme.¹⁵ As Edwards explains himself, however, he colors the received tradition with distinctive hues. God's glory is "the emanation and true external expression of God's internal glory and fullness."¹⁶ God's internal glory consists in the infinite excellence of God's understanding and will, which manifest as God's knowledge, holiness, and happiness, or in more straightforward biblical idiom, truth and grace (John 1:14). However, because God is infinitely rich, the fullness of his internal excellencies 'naturally' overflow. And because God is perfectly good and able to communicate himself to others, it is right and fitting, "amiable and valuable in itself," that God *should* overflow to others.¹⁷ Edwards argues, therefore, that God possesses a "diffusive disposition" that moved him to create the world and communicate himself to it.¹⁸

What God communicates is not merely information about himself, but his very own being and

¹² Edwards, *Trinity*, 133.

¹³ Edwards, *Trinity*, 113.

¹⁴ Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 8: Ethical Writings*, ed. Perry Miller. *End for Which God Created the World (2)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 535.

¹⁵ See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 178: "The whole world is a theatre for the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power."

¹⁶ Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," 528.

¹⁷ Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," 432-433.

¹⁸ Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," 434.

blessedness, and this communication is so effective and radically transformative that it brings the creatures it encounters into union with the source and conforms them to God.¹⁹ The more God communicates himself to a creature, “the more it becomes one with God... and the union with him becomes more firm and close... so the good that is in the creature comes forever nearer and nearer to an identity with that which is in God.” Edwards argues here for a radical notion of ever increasing union with God that asymptotically approximates the very “strictness and perfection of union” which exists between the Father and the Son.²⁰

Though Edwards takes his bearings from Calvin’s fundamental claim about why God created the world, he one-ups him—God creates not merely to display himself but to dispense himself! Glory is not only about God showing God but God bestowing God. The divine dispensing *ad extra* accomplishes “an increase, repetition or multiplication” of God.²¹ God’s infinite delight in his perfections resides not merely in the possession of them (in God) or in the expression of them (to the world) but in the effects of them (on human beings),²² and what God’s self-communication effects is salvation in its highest sense—the creatures’ deiformity in knowledge, holiness, and delight, such that they become God’s corporate enlargement.²³ Since this is what God had in view in creating the world, this goal exerts “a governing influence in all God’s works, or with respect to everything that he does towards his creatures.” In other words,

¹⁹ Edwards, “Concerning the End for which God Created the World,” 442.

²⁰ Edwards, 443; see also p. 459 for the striking claim: “The nearer anything comes to infinite, the nearer it comes to an identity with God;” also, p. 534: “The creature must be looked upon as united to God in an infinite strictness.”

²¹ Edwards, “Concerning the End for which God Created the World,” 433.

²² Edwards, “Concerning the End for which God Created the World,” 437.

²³ See Sang Hyun Lee, “God’s Relation to the World,” in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 65: For Edwards, God’s creating is “a purposive act and an ontological self-enlargement... an ontological increase of God’s fullness... an ontologically productive extension of his own prior actuality.”

God's entire economic operation in time is ordered to the human being's deification for God's corporate expression.²⁴

We can see then that God's creating the world for his glory has nothing to do with an egotistical, selfish pathology, as if God created human beings just to have someone tell him how great he is or as if God was anxiously seeking "popular applause."²⁵ Human beings certainly will praise God for who he is and what he has done, but they will do so not merely as spectators but as participants in the divine being. They will praise God from within God, so to speak—united to God. God's glory and the human being's highest good are coterminous and mutually involving. Edwards stridently insists that for God to aim at himself in creation is equivalent to "God's aiming at an infinitely perfect union of the creature with himself." God is not juggling competing interests or considerations, as if a concern for God's glory might eclipse or sideline the creature's good—as if creatures are priced out of the cosmic neighborhood because God has purchased real estate on our block. "The interest of the creature is, as it were, God's own interest, in proportion to the degree of their relation and union to God."²⁶ God's moral judgment is not divided between a conflict of interests. For Edwards, human beings are the venue and means by which God enlarges himself in his expression.

IV. The Effects and Affections of Communion with God

When Edwards turns to the application and experience of salvation, he maintains his emphasis on participation in God. Edwards understands regeneration and the sovereignty and effect of special grace to be a direct work of the Holy Spirit on a person that transcends nature.

²⁴ Edwards answers the objection arising from a concern for God's independence and immutability on pp. 445-450.

²⁵ Edwards responds to the two objections regarding selfishness and unworthiness of God on pp. 450-458.

²⁶ Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," 443.

The difference between common grace and special grace is the difference between an influence and an impartation of the Spirit. In special grace—which consists not merely in the knowledge of divine things but in a sense of their excellence and a conviction of their truth—the Holy Spirit “unties himself to them” and “communicates himself there in his own proper nature.”²⁷ Here again, Edwards sounds the note of God’s emanation and human beings participation in God.²⁸ If the initiation of the Christian life arises from divine self-communication and human participation in God, the essence of on-going religion consists in affections that substantiate this participation.²⁹ If regeneration is the replication of the divine being in fact, religious affections are the replication of the divine being in practice. Edwards’ causal sequence here is light, understanding, affection, practice,³⁰ but all of this stems from union with the Spirit who grants believers’ participation in God’s very nature. Human virtue is the result and manifestation of human beings participation in, union with, and enjoyment of the divine being.³¹ The point here is that the dramatic fervor and expressions of religious revival in Edwards’ day were not mere emotional excesses; they were manifestations of a real participation in God’s being. Genuine religious affections were the effects of divine communication.

V. Conclusion

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 108-109, 111.

²⁸ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 121: “There is nothing the creature receives that is so much of God, of his nature, so much a participation of the Deity.”

²⁹ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 141: “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.”

³⁰ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 146: “No light in the understanding is good, which don’t produce holy affection in the heart; no habit or principle in the heart is good, which has no exercise.” See also, p. 144: “The affections are very much the spring of men’s actions.”

³¹ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 158-159: “The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of the saints, that he there... exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God’s beauty and Christ’s joy... God does, in so high a manner, communicate himself, and make the creature a partner of the divine nature.”

In summary, Edwards's writings manifest a consistent emphasis on divine-human union and mutual participation. Creation enables an asymptotic replication of God *ad extra*—eternally increasing, yet always respecting the ontological divide of Creator and creature—of the perfect replication happening eternally within God's own inner life. This replication entails a divine, ontological communication of God's very being that effects a human participation in the fullness of God's being, resulting in a delightful union with human beings as much as is creaturely possible.³² It is this divine dispensing that genuine religious affections and a virtuous, new mode of living manifest. Throughout these major doctrinal treatises, Edwards maintains a consistent emphasis on human participation in God.

³² Jonathan Edwards, "Discourse on the Trinity," 124: "So far as a creature is capable of being made partaker of it."

Bibliography

- Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 5. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849.
- Crisp, Oliver D. and Kyle C. Strobel. *Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to His Thought*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: Ethical Writings, ed. Perry Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21: Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith, ed. Sang Hyun Lee. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Jenson, Robert. *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Morimoto, Anri. *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- Lee, Sang Hyun. "God's Relation to the World," in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.