

The Life of Christ As the Center of History in Jonathan Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*

Mark Sidwell¹

When a journal states by its title a devotion to biblical theology and worldview, it raises questions about what falls within its purview.² Because there is an assumed commitment to the Bible as the source for both theology and constructing a Christian view of the issues of human life, a natural assumption would be that the journal would use Scripture as the source for all discussions of worldview. However, there is another useful—although subordinate—method of forming a Christian worldview, that of studying how theologians of the past have attempted to frame answers to the questions that confront us. An example would be the Christian view of history. Christianity is a historical religion, based in God's revelation of himself and his work of redemption within time. As a result, Christian writers of all stripes have wrestled with how a Christian should understand history.³

Perhaps no one has undertaken a more ambitious effort to construct a Christ-centered view of history than Jonathan Edwards. Although he died before revising his work on this subject, Edwards laid out intriguing concepts worth weighing for Christians who are considering their own view of history. Edwards was perhaps America's most important philosopher prior to the twentieth century,⁴ America's first significant theologian, and a wellspring of American evangelicalism and revivalism. Although his interests were wide ranging, all had a theological center. George Marsden aptly observes, "The key to Edwards' thought is that everything is related because everything is related to God."⁵ Edwards's contemplation of the works of God led him to wrestle with history as the intersection of God's actions and man's needs. In his *History of the Work of Redemption* Edwards laid out a Christian view of history that placed the person and work of Jesus Christ at the center of history, a work comparable in comprehensive scope to Augustine's *City of God*. With this in mind, we come to a key question: Does Edwards's *History* provide a framework for a Christian approach to history?

¹ Mark Sidwell (PhD, Church History) serves as a professor in the Division of History, Government, and Social Science at Bob Jones University. He is also adjunct professor of church history at Geneva Reformed Seminary. His books include *Free Indeed: Heroes of Black Christian History* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth, 2002) and *Set Apart: The Nature and Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016).

² I would like to thank Michael Hamilton and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

³ A good sampling of modern views may be found in C. T. McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁴ See the comments, e.g., in Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 29–30. Zakai's book is likely the best comprehensive discussion of Edwards's philosophy of history.

⁵ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 460. Marsden's magisterial work is the best starting point for studying the life of Jonathan Edwards. Another good study, more devotionally oriented, is Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

Jonathan Edwards As Historian

Consideration of Edwards as a historian is divisible into four parts: his historical writings, a comparison of his perspective of history to that of contemporary Enlightenment, his views on eschatology, and his *History of the Work of Redemption*.

The Histories of Edwards

Few of Edwards's works were really histories, despite the implications of some of the titles. Four works from his massive corpus stand out: *The History of the Work of Redemption*, the autobiographical *Personal Narrative* (c. 1740), *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737), and *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (1749), the last of which he only edited. The *Personal Narrative*, although revealing of Edwards's character, was only marginally a historical work.⁶ The last two works offer better material for historiographical consideration.

Edwards wrote *A Faithful Narrative* in 1736 as a lengthy letter to a fellow New England pastor.⁷ The work is an example what Hegel calls "original history," the detailing of events contemporary to the writer.⁸ This narrative of the early Northampton revivals of 1735 was the first authentic history of the Great Awakening. Although Edwards's most popular work in his lifetime, the book was not a model of history. He did little historical research, mostly retold first-hand experience, and made no attempt to examine secondary causation. Only in the central section on the psychology of conversion did Edwards delve into the scientific method, conduct original research on the nature of conversion, and include two "case studies." The *Narrative* suggests that Edwards likely had the ability but not the inclination to write "scientific history."⁹

That Edwards only edited *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* diminishes its importance as a window into his work as a historian. Still the introduction reveals something of Edwards's view of the purpose of history: "There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other by instance and example."¹⁰ Christian biography specifically teaches by example "so that the world has had opportunity to see a confirmation of the truth, efficacy, and amiableness of the religion taught, in the

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn, vol. 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 790-804. The "Personal Narrative" was first published posthumously in 1765.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 99-211.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1901), 43-46.

⁹ As John F. Wilson notes, "On the basis of the earlier revival Writings, especially the *A Faithful Narrative ... of the Surprising Work of God*, it has been argued that Edwards' demonstrated powers of observation and analysis with respect to psychological and sociological materials could have sustained a thoroughly critical narrative, a kind of achievement which, if extrapolated to a larger scale, would have resembled in some ways the new Enlightenment interest in history." "Jonathan Edwards as Historian," *Church History* 46 (March 1977): 11. Wilson himself is cautious concerning this idea.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "Author's Preface" to *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, vol. 7 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 89.

practice of the same persons who most clearly and forceably [sic] taught it.”¹¹ Also revealing (and appalling to modern historians) is Edwards’s treatment of Brainerd’s diary. He suppressed some sections (at Brainerd’s request, one must note) and then destroyed most of the manuscript once the book had been published.¹²

An Enlightenment Comparison

This small body of work, even when supplemented by *The History of the Work of Redemption*, does not qualify Edwards as a significant historian. In his historical work, however, he continued to engage the Enlightenment worldview that he strongly criticized throughout his career. As Zakai notes, Edwards understood the new approach to history emerging from the Age of Reason¹³ but insisted that history should spring from a divine perspective and not draw its meaning from human acts. Edwards asserted Scripture’s primacy against the Enlightenment’s rejection of the authority of revelation.¹⁴

One may better understand the context of Edwards’s reply to the Enlightenment by comparing him to a leading historian of the era. Edward Gibbon (1737-94) is justly remembered for his classic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). Although published after Edwards’s death (meaning of course that Edwards never read it), the work provides a useful contrast to Edwards’s approach to history.

Presbyterian Bible commentator Albert Barnes, after acknowledging the practical agnosticism of Gibbon’s work, nonetheless considers the *Decline and Fall* “probably ... the most candid and impartial history of the time that succeeded the introduction of Christianity that the world possesses” and concludes that Gibbon’s “work contains the best ecclesiastical history that is to be found.”¹⁵ Even

¹¹ Edwards, “Author’s Preface,” 90. In the context of the Enlightenment it is interesting to compare this comment to that of Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, “that history is philosophy teaching by examples how to conduct ourselves in all the situation of public and private life.” *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, (Basil: J. J. Tourneisen, 1788), Letter III, 36. The work was originally published in 1735. See Zakai, 227.

¹² Some portions of the original manuscript survived, allowing modern historians to partially reconstruct how Edwards edited the diaries. For discussion of how Edwards revised and shaped the manuscript, see Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” to *The Life of David Brainerd*, 80–83.

¹³ See Zakai, 8–12, for a discussion of the works of history from “Enlightened” historians that Edwards read. The importance of Zakai’s observation is realizing that Edwards was not simply writing a traditional approach to history but actively engaging a contradictory worldview.

¹⁴ For some writers, Edwards’s rejection of Enlightenment historiography is a blot on his reputation. Most famously, Peter Gay wrote that Edwards’s “mind was the opposite of reactionary or fundamentalist. Yet his history was both. Such apparent contradictions are a sign of something extraordinary; with Jonathan Edwards, they are the mark of tragedy.” Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 104. He contrasted Edwards with David Hume and Voltaire with their embrace of Enlightenment philosophy and research in primary sources. “To grasp the temper of Edwards’ history,” Gay said, “one must read the Church Fathers and the Scriptures.” The *Work of Redemption* in particular “is a thoroughly traditional book, and the tradition is the tradition of Augustine” (94).

¹⁵ Albert Barnes, *Revelation. Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical* (1851; reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), vii. For an excellent overview and evaluation of Gibbon as a historian of early Christianity, see W.H.C. Frend, “Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Early Christianity,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994): 661–72.

to a modern reader, Gibbon compares favorably in scope and relative objectivity to historians of his and succeeding generations. There is, however, a sharp philosophical difference that sets Gibbon apart from Edwards.

One reason that Gibbon's work is a milestone in historical writing is that he symbolizes the secularizing of history during the Enlightenment. In particular he advances a natural explanation for the rise and success of Christianity. In a famous passage, Gibbon writes, "The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."¹⁶ In contrast to earlier writers who saw divine Providence behind the events they described, Gibbon offers a naturalistic explanation. Sometimes Gibbon disguises his more secular approach. In listing his four causes for the growth of Christianity, he includes "the doctrine of a future life" and "the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church."¹⁷ Nevertheless it becomes clear on a closer reading that Gibbon refers to the *belief* in such matters that helped popularize the cause of Christianity.

One objection that Edwards would likely raise is that he could not so readily separate the theologian from the historian, but there is also a deeper philosophical issue. In contrast to Gibbon's naturalistic explanation, Edwards offers a "supernaturalistic" approach based on his view of the immanence of God in nature that carried over into God's immanence in history. Edwards traced the intervention of God to the atomic level in nature, that is, at the most basic level of material reality God caused the universe to cohere by his providential power. Indeed, each moment is a new act of creation *ex nihilo*. From moment to moment the universe exists only because of God's constant power, an aspect of Edwards's doctrine of preservation, of what is sometimes called in his theology the doctrine of "continuous creation."¹⁸ With such a view of reality, Edwards saw history as a description of phenomena that bore the constant marks of divine superintendence.¹⁹ As a result, God can be known in time and not removed, as in Gibbon's approach, to a distance from his creation.

In fact, Edwards's focus on a Christ-centered view of history contrasts even with the larger worldview of Enlightenment thinkers. Zakai notes, for example, how Isaac Newton, the father of Enlightenment thought and method, held to an Arian view of Christ's nature that made even Christ subject to the great scheme of God for creation. The trinitarian Edwards by contrast made Christ central to the very being of the universe and the great controlling factor in all of life.²⁰ In contrast to

¹⁶ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For discussion of Edwards's view of continuous creation, in the overall context of his views on creation, see John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1992), 2:189–202. For a brief description of Edwards's views of atoms and their ramifications for his theology and cosmology, see Zakai, 96–101.

¹⁹ "Edwards strove to reconstitute God's absolute sovereignty and redemptive activity in the physical world by arguing that he controls the smallest particles of atoms, and hence all natural phenomena." Zakai, 14.

²⁰ See Zakai, 109–10.

Newton's view, Jesus Christ is sovereign in Edwards's thought, an idea that carries through to his view of history.²¹

The Eschatology of Edwards

How one views eschatology, the "last things" in general and prophecy in particular, naturally affects how one views the course of history and its patterns. Prior to Edwards's day, there were two dominant approaches to eschatology: the premillennialism that characterized the early church and the amillennialism that dominated the medieval and Reformation eras. Edwards was in the vanguard of a new scheme: postmillennialism. Due in part to the influence of Edwards, postmillennialism achieved a hegemony in American theology until the early twentieth century.

In outline, Edwards held the following scheme. After the early growth of the church and its triumph under Constantine, humanity fell under the reign of Antichrist, the papacy. With the Reformation, humans began once again to find liberty in Christ and to shatter the kingdom of Antichrist. Eventually God's Spirit will so work in human affairs that the pope will be cast down, Satan bound, and Christ will rule on earth in the hearts of his people. Like leaven in bread dough (cf. Mt 13:33), the kingdom of Christ will gradually spread and bring to earth a peace unknown since the Fall. Then, after a millennial reign of righteousness, Satan will once again rise and lead many into rebellion. Christ himself will descend from heaven, defeat his enemies, render the final judgment, and initiate eternity.²²

As Goen notes, Edwards's postmillennialism was in its day a novel position.²³ His view clearly contrasted with the Reformed tradition of amillennialism found in John Calvin and later affirmed in the Westminster Confession. But as Goen also points out, there had been foreshadowings of the postmillennial position. The roots of the concept, he suggests, may lie with the medieval Spiritual Franciscans and their concept of a future "Age of the Spirit," as well as the desire during the Reformation to speed the arrival of Christ's kingdom. Closer to Edwards's own day and tradition was the shift in the Savoy Declaration of 1648, Congregationalism's revision of the Westminster Confession.²⁴ But if these were contributors, Edwards undoubtedly became the system's influential voice. A keynote of this position was its optimism. As Goen points out, in Edwards's postmillennialism, "*the worst of our troubles is already past.*"²⁵ Edwards's teaching was not without somber notes of

²¹ Zakai compares Edwards to other noted Christian writers who engaged the cultural situation of the church in their historical writings. Eusebius dealt with the end of Roman persecution and the Constantinian settlement. Augustine wrestled with the collapse of the Roman Empire under barbarian pressure. John Foxe sought "to forge a new Protestant vision of England" in the Reformation. In the same way Edwards represented Christian engagement with the Enlightenment. Zakai, 279.

²² On Edwards's eschatological views, see Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 5 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). See also the helpful summary and discussion in C. C. Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," *Church History* 28 (1959): 25–40.

²³ Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33–36. He also notes the influence of early postmillennial commentaries by Daniel Whitby, Charles Daubuz, and especially Moses Lowman on Edwards, 36.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 30, italics in original.

warning and judgment, but its overall cast was positive concerning the future of the present age, more so than the earlier systems of premillennialism and amillennialism.

As his notebooks show, Edwards studied prophecy avidly. His scheme of interpretation was not only postmillennial but also historical/historicist; that is, he viewed the prophecies of the book of Revelation as symbols of events in history since the time of the apostles. He held that “the bigger part of the book of Revelation is taken up in foretelling the events” of the period between Constantine and the fall of the Antichrist.²⁶ In his view, for example, both the four angels holding back the wind (Rv 7) and the half-hour of quiet (Rv 12) represent the rest arising from Constantine’s toleration.²⁷ In Edwards’s scheme only a few things are left to be accomplished before the final consummation, leading him to observe, for example, that only two of the seven vials in Revelation 16 remain to be poured out.²⁸ Edwards saw the present age as the fulfillment of prophecy. Current history was full of meaning, because it was revelation unfolding before the eyes of contemporary believers.

Edwards’s *History of the Work of Redemption*

The genesis of *The History of the Work of Redemption* was a series of sermons Edwards delivered in 1739 to his church at Northampton, Massachusetts. Using a single text, Isaiah 51:8, “For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation,” Edwards preached thirty sermons detailing the plan of God throughout history to redeem men and women through Jesus Christ. After Edwards’s death his son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., prepared transcripts from his father’s sermon manuscripts and sent them to John Erskine in Scotland, who published them in 1774. This Erskine edition was the only one known to the public until Yale University Press issued its critical edition in 1989.²⁹

Even so, the present form of the *History* does not represent Edwards’s ultimate plans for the work. In a letter to the trustees of the College of New Jersey, who had offered him the presidency of the school, Edwards said he hesitated to accept for several reasons. Among the obstacles were several writing projects he feared would be shunted aside. Chief among these was

a great work, which I call a *History of the Work of Redemption*, a body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it, in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ; which I suppose is to be the grand design of all God’s designs; . . . particularly considering all parts of the grand scheme in their historical order. The order of their existence, or their being brought forth to view, in the course of divine dispensations, or the wonderful series of successive acts and events; beginning from eternity and descending from thence to the great work and successive dispensations of the infinitely wise God

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, vol. 9 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 404.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 373, 405.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 456–57. See also Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, 298.

²⁹ Wilson, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Work of Redemption*, 20–28, details the history of the publication and editions of the work. Wilson notes that Erskine further edited the sermons for publication, primarily in omitting overtly sermonic material such as recapitulations (25). Marsden, 193–95, gives the background of the original delivery of the sermons.

in time, considering the chief events coming to pass in the church of God, and revolutions in the world of mankind, affecting the state of the church and the affair of redemption, which we have an account of in history or prophecy; till at last we come to the general resurrection, last judgment, and consummation of all things. . . . This history will be carried on with regard to all three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell: considering the connected, successive events and alterations, in each so far as the Scriptures give any light; introducing all parts of divinity in that order which is most scriptural and most natural; which is a method which appears to me the most beautiful and entertaining, wherein every divine doctrine will appear to the greatest advantage, in the brightest light, in the most striking manner, showing the admirable contexture and harmony of the whole.³⁰

Edwards accepted the presidency in January 1758, but his death from a smallpox inoculation on March 22 prevented elaboration of his design. He did leave behind three notebooks related to his planned revision of the sermon series, and these fragmentary notebooks, as well as the sweeping comments Edwards made in his letter to the college trustees, have tempted historians to speculate about what form the revised work would have taken. Some imagine a work unlike anything else Edwards ever wrote.³¹ But it is the completed portion that we must reckon with.

Jonathan Edwards on the Scope of History

The *Work of Redemption* was first a *history*. More specifically, Edwards's work was a *universal history*, a category whose roots reach back to the ancient Greeks. Essentially, this genre sought to encompass all eras, regions, and peoples, not so much factually but in comprehensive explanation. The Christian tradition produced several examples of universal history with a theological orientation such as Augustine's *City of God* and Bishop Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History*. During the Renaissance authors also attempted the form from a more secular perspective, e.g., Jean Bodin's *Method for the Easy Knowledge of History*. Edwards fell squarely in the Christian tradition. He did not intend to offer a new presentation of the *facts* of history but of its *interpretation*, specifically the unity of history in the redemption by Jesus Christ.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, *Letters and Personal Writings*, 727–28. Marsden, 481–89, discusses Edwards's plans for the revision of *Work of Redemption*.

³¹ A prime example of such speculation is Michael J. McClymond, "A Different Legacy? The Cultural Turn in Edwards's Later Notebooks and the Unwritten *History of the Work of Redemption*," in David W. Kling and Douglas A. Sweeney, ed., *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 16–39. McClymond theorizes that Edwards would have demonstrated greater sensitivity to other cultures and a deeper understanding of non-Christian religions. Otherwise, he argues, it is hard to see how the proposed work could be revolutionary. In this approach McClymond draws heavily on Gerald McDermott's revision of Edwards found in McDermott's *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). By contrast, Stephen M. Clark, "Jonathan Edwards: The History of the Work of Redemption," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 45–58, sees the revolutionary character in what Edwards actually wrote, not in speculative reconstruction. Clark's interpretation shows how Edwards's approach would have impressed Calvinist theologians and intellectuals of his own day, even though it might seem less innovative to modern readers. John Wilson, editor of the Yale edition of *The Work of Redemption*, concludes that "the notebooks toward revision of the sermons which date from the very end of Edwards' career do not provide evidence that *The Work of Redemption* would have been basically recast." Wilson, "Jonathan Edwards as Historian," 9.

Edwards's division of history displayed his logical, methodical nature. He perceived three great periods in the work of redemption: from the Fall to the incarnation of Christ, from the incarnation to Christ's resurrection, and from the resurrection to the end of the world. The first and last periods he subdivided. He saw six eras before the coming of Christ: from the Fall to the Flood, from the Flood to call of Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, from the captivity to the incarnation.³² Edwards divided history after Christ according to "four successive great events": from the conclusion of Christ's ministry to the destruction of Jerusalem, from that event to the time of Constantine and "the destruction of the heathen Roman empire," from Constantine to the destruction of Antichrist, and from the fall of Antichrist to the Second Coming.³³

Driving history from epoch to epoch is the Holy Spirit. Edwards in essence saw history as a series of revivals, arguing "that from the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God. Though there be a more constant influence of God's Spirit always in some degree attending his ordinances, yet the way in which the greatest things have been done toward carrying on this work always has been by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit at special seasons of mercy."³⁴ This theme leads William Scheick "to suggest . . . that Edwards thought of his study as innovative because in it he treats history as an allegory of the conversion experience. History, in his view, merely manifests in large the experiences of the individual soul undergoing the regenerative process."³⁵

The focus of history was Jesus Christ. Edwards demonstrated this emphasis in his development of his first major era. In the period before the incarnation "God was doing those things that was a preparatory to Christ's coming and were forerunners of it."³⁶ God foretold the coming of Christ in two ways: "predictions" by prophets and "types and shadows of Christ whereby his coming and redemption were prefigured." These types fell into three categories: "instituted types" (e.g., the sacrificial system), "providential types" through events (e.g., deliverance from Egypt), and "personal types" (e.g., David).³⁷ Indeed, God stirred the whole world to prepare for the coming of his Son. Edwards called the preparations for Christ's comings "the greatest revolutions that any history whatsoever gives any account of" since the Flood. Preeminently Edwards stressed the "general overturnings" reflected in Daniel—Babylon, Persia, Greece (Alexander), and Rome—as witness to the coming incarnation.³⁸

³² *Work of Redemption*, 128–29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 351. For a detailed presentation of Edwards's view of post-resurrection history, see the chart in Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, 14, which shows how he organized history according to the seals, trumpets, and vials of the book of Revelation.

³⁴ *Work of Redemption*, 143.

³⁵ William J. Scheick, "The Grand Design: Jonathan Edwards' *History of the Work of Redemption*," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, ed. William Scheick (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 178.

³⁶ *Work of Redemption*, 280.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 136, 204.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 244–45.

Jonathan Edwards on Redemption

More than simply a history, Edwards's work was a history of the *work of redemption*. Narrowly speaking, Christ's life ("humiliation") is the work of redemption; broadly stated, the work is all of God's activity in applying Christ's work.³⁹ History is inextricably, inseparably united to Christ's redemption. History began, for example, not with creation, but with the Fall. Likewise, Christ began his work as a mediator at the Fall. Even though it had been planned before that point, Christ did not actually fill the office of mediator until history had commenced.⁴⁰ In other words, the very purpose of history in God's economy was to enact the drama of redemption.

Edwards displayed this emphasis in his treatment of biblical history. He argued that God allocated space in the inspired histories of Scripture according to how the events related to the history of redemption. Therefore, the story of Abraham, the deliverance from Egypt, and the reigns of David and Solomon—all major milestones in redemptive history—received full treatment. By contrast accounts of the children of Israel's time in Egypt, the era of the judges, and the reigns of kings after Solomon were comparatively brief.⁴¹ The theme of redemption united the three periods of Edwards's history:

- I. That [from] the fall of man till the incarnation of Christ God was doing those things that were preparatory to Christ's coming and working out redemption and were forerunners and earnest of it.
- II. That the time from Christ's incarnation till his resurrection was spent in procuring or purchasing redemption.
- III. That the space of time from the resurrection of Christ to the end of the world is all taken up in bringing about or accomplishing the great effect or success of that purchase.⁴²

As Edwards stated, redemption is historical; its fruits, which are eternal, are not.⁴³

As a Reformed theologian, Edwards viewed Scripture and history through the lens of covenant theology. Therefore, he expressly associated redemption with the covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption.⁴⁴ As Perry Miller famously notes, the covenant was the central concept in Reformed/Puritan theology.⁴⁵ No less, then, is the covenant central to a Reformed view of history. To Edwards the covenant leads to a historical understanding of theology and revelation, i.e., that God deals with humanity historically. Even though the covenants are eternal and unalterable, they unfold progressively in history. Clark demonstrates how in Edwards's treatment each renewal of the covenant

³⁹ *Work of Redemption*, 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 114–18.

⁴⁵ Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 48–98.

of grace reveals more details, citing for example how the renewal with Abraham unveiled the calling of the Gentiles—a previously unrevealed aspect.⁴⁶

Jonathan Edwards on the Life of Christ

The central era of Edwards’s scheme, both in order and importance, was the earthly life of Jesus Christ. “Though it was but between thirty and forty years, yet more was done in it than had been done from the beginning of the world to that time.”⁴⁷ Noting the disparity among his periods, he said, “It may be some may be ready to think this is a very unequal division and it is so. Indeed in some respects it is so because the second period is so much the greatest. For though it be so much shorter than either of the other, being but between thirty and forty years whereas both the other contain thousands, yet in this affair that we are now upon it is indeed more than both the other.”⁴⁸

Unlike the first and third periods, Edwards did not subdivide this era. Although he noted the distinction between Christ’s private life and public ministry, Edwards did not stress them as separate periods.⁴⁹ Instead, he emphasized the unity of purpose that characterized the period: “I would observe that both Christ’s satisfaction for sin and also his meriting happiness by his righteousness were carried on through the whole time of his humiliation.”⁵⁰ Christ’s earthly life and work of redemption were coextensive: “As soon as Christ was incarnate, then the purchase began immediately without any delay. And the whole time of Christ’s humiliation, from the morning that Christ began to be incarnate till the morning that he rose from the dead, was taken up in this purchase. And then the purchase was entirely and completely finished.”⁵¹

In Edwards’s mind, God’s choice for the setting of the work of redemption was supremely appropriate. “God saw need that the same world that was the stage of man’s fall and ruin should also be the stage of his redemption.”⁵² Christ’s incarnation as a true human being was a necessary component of his redemption, for “the incarnation of Christ was necessary in order to Christ’s being in a next capacity for to purchase of redemption.”⁵³ Edwards followed the famous dictum of Gregory

⁴⁶ Clark, 49–50. Edwards also used the concept of *dispensation*, although it is “a term that Edwards uses less technically than is the rule in later evangelicalism.” Wilson, “Editor’s Introduction,” 39. Edwards wrote, e.g., “Till Christ rose from the dead the Old Testament dispensation remained; but now it ceases, all being fulfilled that was shadowed forth in the typical ordinances of that dispensation.” *Work of Redemption*, 360; see also 362. To Edwards the term applied to a divine administration with chronological aspects, but in this case its clash with his threefold division of history suggests that he did not see the temporal aspect of a dispensation as its most significant feature.

⁴⁷ *Work of Redemption*, 294.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 127–28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 313. He did note the provocative fact “that for about thirty years together he should live a private, obscure life among laboring men, and all this while to be overlooked, and not taken notice of in the world, as more than other common laborers. Christ’s humiliation in some respects was greater in his private life than in the time of his public ministry,” in which he displayed his glory and character publicly through miracles and other works. *Ibid.*, 325.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵² *Work of Redemption*, 296. “In order to man’s recovery it was needful that he [Christ] should come to man, to the world that was his proper habitation, and that [he] should tabernacle with us.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 357.

of Nazianzus against the Apollinarians: “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed.”⁵⁴ But Edwards went beyond Gregory in applying the redemptive ramifications of the incarnation. God must enter human history because “Christ merely as God was not capable either of that obedience or suffering that was needful,” for divine nature cannot suffer nor can it obey any law given to humanity.⁵⁵

Edwards presented the obedience that Christ practiced as threefold: those commands he obeyed as a human, those he obeyed as a Jew, and those he obeyed as mediator. All forms of obedience were necessary, but Edwards highlighted the third as especially relevant to redemption. The “mediatorial” commands “were the commands that the Father gave him to teach such doctrines, to preach the gospel, to work such miracles, to call such disciples, to appoint such ordinances, and finally to lay down his life.” This mediatorial obedience is that which Christ practiced as the Second Adam, fulfilling that mediatorial role in which Adam failed.⁵⁶

The reference to Christ’s obedience opens a key aspect of Edwards’s presentation of Christ’s work of redemption: the nature of his obedience. Edwards followed the common distinction between Christ’s passive obedience (his passion, the vicarious suffering as a sacrifice) and his active obedience (his complete obedience to the law in place of the obedience that fallen humanity could never render). “Christ’s satisfaction was chiefly by his death,” Edwards said.⁵⁷ But he also saw Christ’s satisfaction and merit as multifaceted and included “his meritorious obedience” because “positively obeying is needful to satisfy the law.” Edwards described this twofold work as “satisfaction ... to free us from misery” and “merit ... to purchase happiness for us.”⁵⁸

There are hints that Edwards viewed Christ’s life as redemptive even beyond the categories of passive and active obedience, or perhaps more properly that he extended the reach of active obedience. “For Christ did [not] only make satisfaction by proper suffering, but by whatsoever had the same nature of humiliation and abasement of circumstances.” An example is Christ’s “lying buried in the grave,” which is redemptive although it involved no suffering nor active obedience. Edwards contended that “all his sufferings, and all the humiliation that he was subject to, from the first moment of his incarnation to his resurrection, were propitiatory or satisfactory.” Such humiliation included “the mean circumstances in which he was born” such as birth “of a poor virgin in a stable.” The whole second period of Edwards’s tripartite scheme, all the events of Christ’s earthly life, relate to his work of redemption. “Thus his going about doing good, preaching the gospel, and teaching disciples, was part of righteousness and purchase of heaven as it was done in obedience to the Father.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, “First Letter to Cleonidas,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Series 2, (1890; reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 7:440.

⁵⁵ *Work of Redemption*, 295–96.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 309–10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 305–7.

Analysis

The History of the Work of Redemption impresses the reader with the sweep of its scope and the remarkable unity of design. “The events of providence ben’t so many distinct independent works of providence,” Edwards said, “but they are rather so many different parts of one work of providence: ‘tis all one work, one regular scheme.”⁶⁰ Theoretically, any knowledgeable theologian could construct an account of redemptive history from the resources that Edwards used, but few—perhaps none—could have done it so well. Edwards mastered the content of his study, organized it in remarkable fashion, and presented the account in a compelling manner. The author unveiled the “one work of providence” with force and conviction.

This unity of design in Edwards’s work has appealed even to observers lacking sympathy with his theology. Jonathan Edwards deeply impressed historian Perry Miller, an atheist of definitely non-Puritan tastes, who revived Edwardsean studies in the twentieth century by claiming Edwards as the first “modern” man in North America. Miller dismissed the “surface narrative” of Edwards’s *Work of Redemption* as “a story book for fundamentalists” and called it “an absurd book, where it is not pathetic.”⁶¹ He nonetheless praised its comprehensive scope. Miller argued that “in whatever terms (for Edwards they were those of the Christian epic), the real thesis of the *History of Redemption* is the unity of history.” He wrote, “History, Edwards says, is a grand conception, a design, a chain of events within a scheme of causation.” Edwards appealed to Miller because Edwards recognized a principle that Miller professed: “Only that history which satisfies the mind by accounting for all things is worthy of the name.”⁶²

Miller could appreciate Edwards’s work, however, only by dismissing the historicity of its content.⁶³ He therefore missed a key element in Edwards’s approach, the unified nature of history in regard to its truth. Edwards concerned himself with what has traditionally been called *heilsgeschichte*, or “salvation history.” His focus was entirely the activity of God in history to redeem his people. Edwards’s history was a record of the acts of God.⁶⁴ Only incidentally did he delve into *weltgeschichte* (“world history”), the realm of human history as commonly understood.⁶⁵ Edwards undoubtedly

⁶⁰ *Work of Redemption*, 519.

⁶¹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* ([New York]: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 312.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶³ E.g., Miller wrote of Edwards’s understanding, “There is no date within historical time for the Last Judgment. That is something incommensurate with time. It will come, but not in the sense in which the sun will rise tomorrow. As an event, it is eternal.” *Ibid.*, 329.

⁶⁴ Zakai observes that Eusebius, the “father” of church history, focused on the church in his work whereas Edwards focused on divine activity (18).

⁶⁵ One may debate what term to set against *heilsgeschichte* in such a context. The usage here follows Matthew L. Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 220–32. Another approach is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Redemptive Event and History,” in *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 1:15–16, 21–22, where he prefers to contrast *heilsgeschichte* with the ideas of *historie* (research of past events, the work done by historians) and *geschichte* (roughly, the independent reality of past events). As far as *historie* is concerned, the distinction possesses some validity. There are aspects of *heilsgeschichte* beyond the grasp of historical research, but those are limitations of resources and methodology, not the intrinsic nature of the facts themselves.

thought salvation history the more important form of history, but there was no trace of the idea popularized in later theology that *heilsgeschichte* and *weltgeschichte* reflected different levels of reality. The events of redemptive history truly occurred in this present reality. There is no realm of “faith history” that differs metaphysically from other history, except that to Edwards salvation history is more certain. In fact, it is unlikely that such a distinction ever entered Edwards’s mind, because he predated the debate by over a century. Nonetheless his view of history joins divine and human so inextricably that no such distinction is possible.⁶⁶

Another contribution of Edwards was constructing a Christ/redemption-centered universal history. Writers have rightly likened Edwards’s *History of the Work of Redemption* to Augustine’s *City of God*. Yet there are differences in their respective approaches. For one, as Zakai notes, Augustine removed prophecy and eschatology from history, whereas Edwards wove both into the fabric of history.⁶⁷ Even more, Edwards focused on the person and work of Christ as the redemptive center of history. Augustine unquestionably saw a redemptive purpose in God building his city, but Edwards directly tied that redemption to the life of Christ. The theme of Christ and his redemption made *The Work of Redemption* a Protestant *City of God*.

One could easily overstate the revolutionary nature of Edwards’s work. As critic Peter Gay says, *The History of the Work of Redemption* was in many ways “a thoroughly traditional book.”⁶⁸ The research shows the limitations of the era and the author’s situation, and some historical concepts reflect simply received Protestant tradition.⁶⁹ Yet the sweep of the narrative and the integration of the biblical/historical data into a coherent whole give the *History of the Work of Redemption* the status of a Christian classic.

We could even consider ramifications of Edwards’s work in light of controversies that occurred after his death. We cannot really conceive the search for the historical Jesus that began in the nineteenth century in light of the central reality of Christ’s life that Edwards insists on. History and redemption are so joined in Edwards’s thought that such a challenge makes little sense. Edwards’s acceptance of Scripture as a dependable authority would preclude any evaluation of Christ’s life that

⁶⁶ On the issue of faith and history in Edwards’s work, John Piper suggests that Edwards held to the objective reality of history which is the basis of faith and which one can study. But Edwards also recognized the practical limitations of such an approach for the great body of believers. “First, he [Edwards] respects the validity of and encourages the pursuit of historical argument for the truth of the gospel. Second, he recognises that these arguments have a limited function not because they are inimical to the nature of faith (as modern existentialist theologians say), but because the great mass of ordinary people cannot carry through a detailed historical argument. Third, faith must nevertheless be reasonable if it is to be saving faith; that is, it must have a just ground for certainty. This ground, Edwards argues, is really there in the gospel record for all who have eyes to see.” John Piper, “Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Faith and History,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978): 227–28. Piper thus seeks to deflect the charge made against writers such as Pannenberg that they allegedly make an understanding of the nature of history and historical research a prerequisite to faith.

⁶⁷ *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History*, 160–61.

⁶⁸ *Loss of Mastery*, 94.

⁶⁹ Edwards certainly showed the limits of his research, e.g., when he cited Peter the Great’s Russia as demonstrating “the most considerable success of the gospel.” *Work of Redemption*, 433. He also repeated now generally discredited interpretations such as numbering ten persecutions before Constantine (based on the “ten days” in Rv 2:10) (389) and advocating a generally successionist view of church history (419).

did not completely accept the testimony of the Bible. Likewise, the alleged tension between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history that has marked so much contemporary theology from classic theological liberalism to Neo-orthodoxy to contemporary debates does not even exist in Edwards's scheme. The Christ of faith *is* the Jesus of history to Edwards.

So to return to the original question: Does Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* provide a framework for a Christian approach to history? Unquestionably, Edwards wrestles with essential questions in considering a Christian philosophy of history. What is the purpose of history? Is there actually a design for history? What force or forces drive its development? How does the Bible form and inform a Christian's view of the subject? Is there a progressive movement or climax to history? Above all, for a *Christian* approach to history, what place do the person and work of Jesus Christ occupy? In Edwards there is certainly material useful in constructing a Christian philosophy of history, even should one object to the details or modify his approach.

However, for a proper perspective, one should remember Edwards's goal in this work. He did not seek to write a Christian guide to history. Instead, the *History* began as a series of sermons designed to glorify God and to edify the hearers. In no way was the work an academic study. Its status as a Christian philosophy of history must be read back into the work. To some extent. Edwards's interests lay elsewhere. In Sermon 17, right in the middle of the series, immediately after reviewing the life of Christ, Edwards interjects an overtly evangelistic message. He presses the claims of Christ on those who rejected him. Properly understanding history led one to Jesus Christ: "You slight that glorious person for whose coming God made such great preparation, in such a series of wonderful providences from the beginning of the world, and whom, after all things were ready, God sent into the world, bringing to pass a before unknown thing, viz. the union of the divine with the human nature in one person." He notes how Christ, "who, after he had spent three or four and thirty years in poverty and labor and contempt in purchasing redemption, at last finished the purchase by closing his life under such extreme sufferings as you have heard."⁷⁰ Salvation is not just the theme for a work of history. Salvation is the central concern of human existence and, even more, of divine design. And the life of Jesus Christ, Edwards declared, embodied that salvation. In his *History of the Work of Redemption* Edwards laid out ideas that make it possible to construct a Christian philosophy of history, but such a use of this work can be for him only a subordinate expression of the great theme of redemption.

⁷⁰ *Work of Redemption*, 332–33.