

In what ways would current English evangelicalism most benefit from and be challenged by familiarity with the teaching of Jonathan Edwards' *The End for which God made the World*?

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards' work, *The End for which God made the World*, defends the claim that God made the world for only one end, his own glory. This essay will first summarise the *Dissertation*'s teaching, and then consider trends and weaknesses in contemporary English evangelicalism, identified by recent authors, that are usefully addressed by Edwards' thesis.

Outline of *The End for which God made the World*.

The arguments in *End for which* are involved and complex;¹ there is only space for a summary of the main points. Edwards defines his terms in an introduction, concludes what he can from reason in chapter 1, and listens to Scripture in chapter 2.

Introduction

Edwards' title sets the task for his *Dissertation*: to establish the end for which God made the world. The introduction defines "end" precisely; a number of the views Edwards counters in the body of his *Dissertation* arise from a failure to appreciate the distinctions he draws here.

Consider any action. The *chief end* of that action, in contrast to an *inferior end*, is the most important end. The *ultimate end* of that action, in contrast to a *subordinate end*, is any end that is valuable in itself, not merely because it serves a greater end. Where an action only has one ultimate end, that will also be the chief end.

A further distinction can be drawn between ultimate ends that are *independent*, and those that are *contingent* on something else. For example, showing justice towards a particular creature may be an ultimate end (inherently valuable), but cannot be the end for which the creature was created as it presupposes the existence of the creature. However, as God always accomplishes what he intends, the ultimate end of providence will be the ultimate end of creation.

¹ It runs to just over 40,000 words!

Therefore, Edwards defines his task precisely. He must determine the single, ultimate end for God's providential acts. This will then be *the chief and ultimate end* in creating the world.

Chapter 1

Because people object to the teaching of Scripture as being unreasonable, Edwards first concludes what he can from reason.²

Edwards starts in general.³ God's ultimate end in creation cannot be one that makes God dependent upon his creation. Neither can it be an end that was already attained before God made the world. Further, God's ultimate end must be something which God values in itself; as nothing is more valuable than he is, God must (in some way) be the end of creation.

More specifically, (because God achieves his intentions) the purpose of creation can be deduced from its effects. Section 2 explains⁴ that God's perfections (such as his power, wisdom and love) are *exercised* in creation and providence. It is also fitting that the exercise of those perfections be *seen* and *loved*. Finally, God's (communicable) perfections are *multiplied* as they are communicated to creatures. Therefore, God created the world that the exercise and multiplication of his perfections might be seen and loved.

Section 3 "reconciles these claims",⁵ namely the end of creation in section 2 (the sight and love of God's attributes) and the end of creation in section 1 (making himself his end).⁶ Essentially, Edwards' answer is that if God values himself, he will also value his perfections being exercised, seen, loved and communicated. He illustrates with a friend whose qualities you value. Delighting in seeing them exercise their qualities is not at odds with delighting in the person himself. So, in achieving the objectives of section 2, "he makes himself his end."⁷

Reconciling communication of God's perfections with God being his own end is trickier, as the creatures benefit. However God wished to emanate his glory before any particular

² Edwards, *End for which God made the World*, page 97

³ This paragraph summarises Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 1, Section 1: pages 97-99

⁴ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 1, Section 2: pages 99-100

⁵ Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards'

⁶ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 1, Section 3: pages 100-102

⁷ 3 times on Edwards, Op. Cit., page 100

creature was even thought of; what he actually desires is “*himself* diffused”.⁸ Therefore God doesn’t sacrifice his interests to the creature’s; rather he fulfils his interest *by* blessing the creature. The attributes communicated can be grouped into the three categories of knowledge, holiness and happiness. *Rightly understood*, these are knowledge *of God*, love *of God* and delight *in God*, so that *God* is the ultimate beneficiary of their communication.

Edwards then deals with four potential objections to his case. First,⁹ this does not make God dependent on his creatures. Second,¹⁰ whereas selfishness is vicious in a creature, with God his infinite value does make it a virtue. Third,¹¹ it may be that living for the praise of others is beneath a truly great person, but if God is most praiseworthy it is appropriate in his case. Fourth,¹² God is still genuinely good; God achieves his end by creating creatures to be (genuinely) good to; setting good for God *against* good for creatures is a false dichotomy.

So, objections dealt with, Edwards has used reason to argue that God makes “himself his end” by exercising and multiplying his attributes, and by being seen and loved for doing so.

Chapter 2

Without leaving reason behind *as a method*, Edwards now turns to the teaching of Scripture. In general,¹³ creation is not only made by God, but also for him and to him. The question is: *In what sense?*

Before turning to specific texts of Scripture (and he discusses many), Edwards sets out what he is looking for. No texts say, “God made the world for this one, ultimate and chief end...”. Therefore Edwards gives twelve types of statement that *will* tell us, by implication, why God made the world.¹⁴ This section is vital to appreciate the relevance of the texts he will cite.

⁸ Edwards, Op. Cit., page 100

⁹ Edwards, Op. Cit., pages 102-103

¹⁰ Edwards, Op. Cit., page 103

¹¹ Edwards, Op. Cit., pages 103-105

¹² Edwards, Op. Cit., pages 105-106

¹³ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 1: pages 106

¹⁴ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 2: pages 106-107

For example, his fourth category is texts that speak of God's purpose in creating the *rational part* of creation. As the rest of creation exists for that part, this purpose will be his end in creating everything. His eighth category is texts that speak of what God *expects* of his moral creatures. Because they can be asked to live up to what God intended for them, what he expects of them will be his purpose in creating the world.

Edwards then shows¹⁶ that "the way in which he makes himself his end... is in making *his glory his end*."¹⁷ He does this by taking in turn most of the statements in section 2, and quoting and discussing texts that establish that God's glory is the end in view. For example, he shows that moral creatures in creation ought to seek God's glory as their ultimate end. Therefore, "according to position the eighth [from section 2], *God's glory is the last end of the creation*."¹⁸

Section 4 applies the same method to show, more briefly, that God had his name, the revelation of his perfections, and his praise as an end for making the world.¹⁹

Section 5 presents the argument for saying that "communication of good to the creature"²⁰ was one of God's ultimate ends. The main arguments are as follows:²¹ Communication good to creatures pleases God in itself, not merely subordinately. Deeds are done "for God's goodness' sake" as much as "for God's name's sake". God governs all things *for our good*. Even judgement of the wicked is for the happiness of God's people. The ultimate end of virtue is love of neighbour.

Edwards doesn't explain how section 5 fits into his argument. He has already replied to much of it in his distinction between subordinate and ultimate ends, and in explaining how acts done for God's sake can simultaneously be genuinely loving. In section 7, he will underscore how communication of good to the creature serves the ultimate end of God's glory.

¹⁵ Edwards, Op. Cit., page 107

¹⁶ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 3: pages 107-112

¹⁷ Edwards, Op. Cit., page 107

¹⁸ Edwards, Op. Cit., page 109

¹⁹ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 4: pages 112-114

²⁰ Edwards, Op. Cit. page 114

²¹ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 5: pages 114-116

Having said that God made the world for his glory and for his name, he ensures these terms are clearly defined.²² Glory, a word meaning “heaviness”, signifies greatness. It works at four levels. God’s internal greatness is expressed in actions *ad extra*; these actions are then known. “Glory” is used in Scripture in any of these three senses, and also in the fourth, the love of God’s greatness. God’s name is almost synonymous with his glory.

Edwards’ final section draws the threads together.²³ It appears, from his argument so far, that God had many ends in creating the world. However, the semantic range of “glory” shows that God’s glory is the unifying ultimate end for all of them. Praise, name and exercise of perfections are different facets of God’s emanated glory. The different communicated attributes of knowledge, holiness and happiness are different facets of God’s internal glory. He closes with one final warning not to divide the creature’s interests from the creator’s interests.

Application of *The End for Which* to Contemporary English Evangelicalism

This essay will consider English evangelicalism as portrayed in recent publications. It is necessary to consider published studies, as my own observations will inevitably be narrow and subjective. Although such publications cannot escape the presuppositions of their authors and cannot be comprehensive in their study, they are the result of wider and more careful aggregation than could be achieved by one relatively young student.

Callum Brown’s *Death of Christian Britain* charts why Christianity has lost its status as a cultural reference point in Britain. It has useful lessons because of its specific focus on Britain, even though his study is wider than just evangelicalism. Piper’s *Desiring God* is evangelical, in the sense that it assumes the authority of Scripture. It is also based, to a significant extent, on Edwards’ thought.²⁴ The implications are still relevant to Britain, even though his focus is wider. Barclay²⁵ and Murray²⁶ both survey the recent history of British evangelicalism, drawing lessons from their individual perspectives.

²² Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 6: pages 116-119

²³ Edwards, Op. Cit., Chapter 2, Section 7: pages 119-121

²⁴ See the footnotes or index in Piper, *Desiring God*.

²⁵ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935-1995*.

²⁶ Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*

The lessons from Edwards for contemporary English evangelicalism may be divided into five areas

Lessons from Edwards' Method

Edwards' essay would make difficult reading for many evangelicals today because of his involved, carefully argued, doctrinal thinking. English evangelicalism frequently finds such thinking more complex than is desirable. Barclay argues that Anglican evangelicals, in particular, have been "less doctrinally minded",²⁷ so in danger of cutting themselves off from other evangelicals. Evangelicals of all sorts have allowed doctrine to be given "a bad image",²⁸ with the result that liberalism "still has powerful advocates at the level of academic theology [and] therefore constantly reinvades the local churches".²⁹ English evangelicals have much to learn from the seriousness and thoroughness of Edwards' method.

Specifically, Edwards' method involves developing a clear hierarchy of values. Which ends are ultimate and which are merely subordinate? English evangelicals need to develop Edwards' clear system of prioritisation if the good is not to become the enemy of the best. In practice "a good biblical diet"³⁰ has often been sidelined by "all sorts of relevant side-issues".³¹

Lessons from Edward's Teaching on True Happiness

Happiness is only one aspect of virtue in Edwards' dissertation. God's perfection at the level of will (as opposed to understanding) divides into happiness and holiness. God's happiness is his total delight in himself. Without denying God's sufficiency, he is delighted as he communicates that happiness to his creatures. God is happy to see his creatures *truly* happy, that is, happy in him.³²

John Piper wrote *Desiring God* to explain, justify and apply this aspect of Edwards' teaching to evangelicals; by implication, his application is relevant to English evangelicalism. His

²⁷ Barclay, Op. Cit., page 88

²⁸ Ibid., page 126

²⁹ Ibid., page 127

³⁰ Ibid., page 141

³¹ Ibid., page 142

³² Edwards, Op. Cit., page 102

principal application is that it is not intrinsically sinful for a creature to be happy; what matters is the *object* of the happiness.³³

There are numerous secondary applications. For instance, the way we use money is transformed as this perspective is acquired. “The evils in the world come not because our desires for happiness are too strong, but because they are so weak that we settle for fleeting pleasures that do not satisfy our deepest souls, but in the end destroy them.”³⁴ Prayer³⁵ and showing practical love to others³⁶ likewise acquire new motivations and perspectives.

Lessons for evangelism in England today

Edwards asks whether English evangelicals are preaching the correct, biblical gospel in their evangelism in two ways?

First, in preaching narrowly the command to “believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”,³⁷ many nominal believers go unchallenged. Such people are allowed to retain a man-centred outlook on life and yet feel they have responded to the message they heard. “Could it be that today the most straightforward biblical command for conversion is not, ‘Believe in the Lord,’ but, ‘Delight yourself in the LORD?’”³⁸

Second, the *reason given* for becoming a Christian is often in terms of blessings to the recipient *as ends in themselves*. That God deserves all honour and glory is less often heard. Evangelicals and liberals “both offer such things as more success in life... and so on.”³⁹ Edwards’ *Dissertation* suggests that the motivation for becoming a Christian ought to be the rightful glory of God, and pleasures to the creature are only of value insofar as they are pleasures in and for God.

Although this shift in the content and motivation of the gospel command stems from ignorance or a desire to win converts, it may ultimately be responsible for Christianity’s perceived irrelevance. Callum Brown seeks to explain how “discursive Christianity”, his phrase for Christianity being a defining reference point for a culture, died. He reacts to the

³³ Piper, *Desiring God*, page 18

³⁴ *Ibid.*, page 153

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pages 131-132

³⁶ *Ibid.*, page 89

³⁷ Piper, *Op. Cit.*, page 43

³⁸ *Ibid.*, page 43

³⁹ Murray, *Op. Cit.*, page 256

suggestion that 19th century industrialisation, with its consequent urbanisation, was the cause. His alternative is that Christianity became feminised in the 19th century, and it only needed the 1960s to emancipate women before they too abandoned it.

Murray prefers to put the blame away from cultural revolution and firmly at the door of toleration of false teachers.⁴⁰ However Murray's explanation does not exclude Brown's, and it seems Brown has discerned what happened. What Brown doesn't address is *why* Christianity lost its appeal to men. Could it be that the gospel preached has moved away from that preached in Acts, centring on the lordship of Christ and the certainty of future judgement?⁴¹ Edwards' *Dissertation* offers a necessary corrective to the content of English evangelistic preaching, and needs to be heard if today's men are to be won back.

Lessons for church life in England today

Barclay records the debate that ran throughout his period⁴² on the type and extent of social work that evangelicals felt able to engage in. The debates revolved around how evangelism is to be maintained as a priority, and whether changing society needs to accompany meeting immediate needs.⁴³ Edwards' *Dissertation* does not fully deal with these debates. However, such debates need to include his perspective that the *ultimate* end of the church needs to be the glory of God. Therefore philanthropy, societal improvement and evangelism must all be subordinate to this one great end.

One of the significant cultural shifts in recent years has been an increasingly explicit man-centeredness. Barclay identifies three ways in which the church has followed society in this direction. Edwards' thesis strongly corrects this trend. The first way this has happened is in terms of moral conduct. "It was not long before divorce and premarital sex began to appear... in evangelical churches... The great aim was to find 'fulfilment'... It has been called the 'me generation'."⁴⁴ Second, "many churches became inward-looking 'fellowships' and lost their previous emphasis on teaching and evangelism."⁴⁵ Third, people are not willing to commit long-term to mission service or to their marriage vows, preferring instant grati-

⁴⁰ Murray, Op. Cit., pages 313-4

⁴¹ A suggestion made to me by David Jackman, personal conversation, March 1997.

⁴² 1935-1995

⁴³ See Barclay, Op. Cit. e.g., pages 33, 92-93.

⁴⁴ Barclay, Op. Cit., page 95

⁴⁵ Ibid., page 95

fication.⁴⁶ Edwards' teaching is needed if the church and the world are not to become indistinguishable.

Lessons for evangelical relationships

The way evangelicals relate to each other, and the way they relate to those outside their circle, would be shaped for the better by Edwards' teaching.

First, consider the way evangelicals relate to *each other*. The division Murray's title⁴⁷ refers to is between those who (as he sees it) compromised their evangelical nature to secure greater popular appeal, and those who saw purity as primary and resisted this seduction. He quotes Schaeffer: "What is the use of evangelicalism seeming to get larger and larger if sufficient numbers of those under the name evangelical no longer hold to that which makes evangelicalism evangelical?"⁴⁸

Again, Edwards' teaching will not solve the issue of where to draw the line called compromise. However, this debate needs to be conducted in the framework of Edwards' teaching. Numeric strength and doctrinal purity are both subordinate goals to the greater glory of God. Either end is capable of being pursued (and has been pursued) without reference to this ultimate end.⁴⁹ Equally, with the glory of God as the ultimate goal, evangelical leaders are required to "look in different directions at once"⁵⁰ and pursue truth and unity as God directs. Indeed, one of the causes of *unnecessary* division between fellow-evangelicals has been a failure to make sure that "Christ is put first".⁵¹

Second, consider the way evangelicals relate to *those outside their circle*. As evangelicals desire greater acceptance in academia, the denominations, and society at large, they have employed worldly methods. Worldliness "is a *man-centred* way of thinking; it proposes objectives which demand no radical breach with man's fallen nature;... it covets human esteem and wants no unpopularity."⁵² Edwards' teaching challenges all such approaches, asking evangelicals to be God-centred and willing to risk unpopularity.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pages 117-118

⁴⁷ *Evangelicalism Divided*.

⁴⁸ Murray, Op. Cit., page 77

⁴⁹ Barclay, Op. Cit., page 144

⁵⁰ Murray, Op. Cit., page 313

⁵¹ Ibid., page 310

⁵² Ibid., page 255; emphasis added

More can be said, however, for the answer to evangelicals' legitimate desire for credibility lies in heeding Edwards. At the heart of Edwards' teaching is a view of God in which God, as creator, is allowed to be central in his creation. In short, he asks his readers to adopt a doctrine of God that is consistent with God's own desire to be glorified.

If English evangelicals heed Edwards at this point, two things appear to follow. First, evangelical preaching becomes God-focussed, and therefore substantial. Ironically, it is preaching that is least man-centred that will most appeal to unbelievers. Such preaching satisfies "the hearers [being more than] the flights of fancy of some evangelical preachers."⁵³ Second, "the recovery of belief in the [glorious attributes] of God helped evangelicals to be more confident, more thorough in their attempt to *love God with all their minds*."⁵⁴ In other words, evangelicals can meaningfully engage in the panoply of academic disciplines.

Conclusion

Edwards argues intricately from reason and Scripture to demonstrate that God's sole ultimate end in creating the world is his own glory. Edwards' content and method are both relevant to English evangelicals in their self-definition, relationships, mission and life together.

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⁵³ Barclay, Op. Cit., page 135

⁵⁴ Ibid., page 136

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