

## Jonathan Edwards and *The End for Which God Created the World*

*Christopher de la Hoyde*

Edwards wrote the dissertation *The End for Which God Created the World* against the background of a society saturated in humanistic and deistic philosophy, where human happiness was the ultimate end of divine creation. This destiny was to be achieved by the pursuit of reason, which would ultimately yield a state of perfect happiness, as human beings tamed the forces of chaos and disorder and banished all unreason and superstition. What is more, it was a destiny that could be pursued apart from the pursuit of God himself, as anything that brought about true human happiness could be seen as fulfilling the divine purposes for creation.

Edwards' essay refutes this position absolutely, while at the same time retaining human happiness as integral to God's purposes for creation. This he does by demonstrating through reason and through a full consideration of the Scriptural witness that God's chief end in creation is his own glory, but that this glory is achieved through human enjoyment and participation in himself. While the latter may rightly be said to be an ultimate end of creation (that is, an end that is good in itself and not necessarily subordinate to another end), God's chief end is his own glory brought about through the elect's knowing, delighting in and participating in God himself.

### Definitions of terms

Edwards delineates three principal ends that a person might have for performing an action: a *subordinate* end, an *ultimate* end and a *chief* or *last* end. A *subordinate* end is that which is not desired merely for its own sake, but order to achieve something further, and an *ultimate* end: is an end which *is* desired in itself. A man walking to work, for example, does not walk there merely for the sake of arriving at work, but only subordinately, in order to fulfil the *ultimate* end of sustaining his family. There may be a number of *subordinate* ends, each of which depends on the last, which leads to the ultimate end being achieved, but each must nevertheless be referred to as subordinate to that *ultimate* end. Thus the man walks to work, in order to (1) earn money, in order to (2) buy bread and clothes and to pay his rent, in order to (3) feed, clothe and keep his family dry. As Edwards writes, 'That end which is sought for the sake of itself, and not for the sake of a further end, is an ultimate end; there the aim of the agent stops and rests.'<sup>1</sup>

There may, nevertheless, be a number of ultimate ends in an action, but only one *chief* end. 'A chief end,' writes Edwards, 'is something diverse from an ultimate end; it is [the end] most valued, and therefore most sought after by the agent in what he does.'<sup>2</sup> Thus a man may walk to work in order to earn money to do a number of things that are ultimate ends: to satisfy his drinking habit, to gain goods and thus the respect of the neighbourhood, and to provide for his family, to name but a few. But the chief end is that end which is most highly cherished by the agent.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works I*, 768.

<sup>2</sup> *Works I*, 768

Such definitions, though apparently technical, are extremely helpful in understanding God's ends in creating the world, as we shall now see.

### **The theology of *The End For Which God Created The World***

Edwards' theology is a profoundly God-centred theology. He uses both reason and Scripture to show that God's own glory is his chief end in creation. He clearly states that reason is an inferior and subordinate means of ascertaining truth:

...though it be true, that the revelation which God has given to men, as a light shining in a dark place, has been the occasion of great improvement of their faculties, and has taught men how to use their reason; and though mankind now, through the long-continued assistance they have had by this divine light, have come to great attainments in the habitual exercise of reason; yet I confess it would be relying too much on reason, to determine the affair of God's last end in the creation of the world, without being herein principally guided by divine revelation, since God has given a revelation containing instructions concerning this very matter.<sup>3</sup>

Such a commitment to the primacy of the Biblical witness is reflected also in the comparative space he devotes to reason as compared with the majority of the book that is given to an examination of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, he begins by addressing proponents of the man-centred viewpoint, by showing from reason why God's chief end in creation can be nothing but his own glory. We will therefore look in turn at his arguments from reason, before moving on to his scriptural analyses.

### **Arguments from reason**

An abridged version of Edwards' use of reason runs thus. (1) God's purpose in creation could not be down to any insufficiency in God himself: God's end cannot be to make up for some lack in himself, as this would make him less than God. (2) God's ultimate end must be something he attains *through* his works, and not something he already possesses. Thus God's end in creation cannot be any of his intrinsic qualities: his goodness, holiness, greatness or graciousness. (3) Anything which is *good in itself* is worthy of being God's ultimate end. (4) Whatever is *most valuable* will be God's last and highest end in creation. (5) If God himself is attainable through his works, then this must be his last and highest end, since he is the highest and most valuable being there is. As Edwards writes, 'A great part of the moral rectitude of God, whereby he is disposed to every thing that is fit, suitable, and amiable in itself, consists in his having the highest regard to that which is in itself highest and best.'<sup>4</sup>

Reason itself thus shows that God must himself be the goal of creation. As Edwards sums up:

...as the Creator is infinite, and has all possible existence, perfection, and excellence, so he must have all possible regard. As he is every way the first and supreme, and as his excellency is in all respects the supreme beauty and glory, the original good, and fountain of all good; so he must have in all respects the supreme regard. And as he is God over all, to whom all are properly subordinate, and on whom all depend, worthy to reign as supreme Head, with absolute and universal dominion; so it is fit that he should be so regarded by all, and in all proceedings and effects through the whole system: The universality of things, in their whole compass and series, should look to him, in such a manner, as that respect to him should reign over all respect to other

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<sup>3</sup> *Works I*, p.773

<sup>4</sup> *Works I*, p.773

things, and regard to creatures should, universally, be subordinate and subject.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, reasons Edwards, if God's end in creation was indeed himself, then this will be seen through those effects of creation that are unqualifiedly good in themselves. God's intention will be seen through the results of his actions, just as the purpose of an apple-tree is discerned by the fruit it produces. Edwards thus states that God can indeed be seen to be his own end in creation, because the unqualified and good effects of creation are the following:

- 1.) God's intrinsic power, wisdom, righteousness, goodness are all put to work.
- 2.) The glorious perfections of God are known and seen by other beings besides himself. As he writes, 'It is a thing infinitely good in itself, that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings.'<sup>6</sup>
- 3.) Creatures delight in God's perfections: as it is desirable in itself that God's glory should be known, so when known it seems equally reasonable that it should be esteemed and delighted in.
- 4.) God's own holiness is communicated. As Edwards puts it, 'It is fit, since there is an infinite fountain of light and knowledge, that this light should shine forth in beams of communicated knowledge and understanding; and, as there is an infinite fountain of holiness, moral excellence, and beauty, that so it should flow out in communicated holiness.'<sup>7</sup>

If these are the unqualifiedly good consequences of creation, then these must be God's ultimate and chief end in creation. God's aim in creation was thus an emanation of his own infinite fullness to his creatures due to a disposition in himself to communicate himself. God himself, and not human happiness, is thus his chief end, as God's delight is in his own exercise of his attributes, in his creatures' delight in his own attributes, in their knowledge of his attributes and in the communication of his attributes to his creatures. God's aim in creation is thus to enjoy himself by his creatures enjoying and participating in him and his own attributes for ever.

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This account of his purposes is thus entirely compatible with his self-sufficiency because God's delight begins and ends in God's activity alone. Indeed, only the claim that God makes himself his end in creation preserves the divine self-sufficiency, for if the creature was God's end, then God would be dependent upon his creatures and not the other way round.

Thus Edwards shows through reason that God himself and the emanation and communication of his own attributes to his creatures must be God's end in creating the world. Human happiness is indeed an ultimate end of God in creation, but it is to be found not through the exercise of human reason, but through human participation in the divine happiness. He thus defeats the philosophers at their own game.

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<sup>5</sup> Works 1, p.776

<sup>6</sup> Works 1, p.779

<sup>7</sup> Works 1, p.779

## Arguments from Scripture

### *God's glory as his chief end in creation*

Far more significant and foundational for Edwards is the Scriptural witness to God's purposes. He begins by demonstrating from Scripture that God's glory is his chief end in creation. Crucial to Edwards' argument from Scripture are three observations:

- 1.) *God's glory* has two principal denotations in Scripture. The first is his internal glory – his weightiness, his worthiness, his excellency. While lightness in Hebrew signifies contempt, weightiness (the meaning of the root of the Hebrew word for glory) conveys dignity and a worthiness of regard. The second is the exhibition, emanation and communication of that internal glory that results in the view, knowledge and praise of it. For example, in 2 Peter 1:17, Peter writes, 'For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.'
- 2.) *God's name*, praise, perfections, greatness and excellency function in Scripture as virtual synonyms for God's glory. Thus in Isaiah 48:9-11, God says, 'For *my name's sake* I defer my anger, for the *sake of my praise* I restrain it for you... For *my own sake*, for *my own sake* I do it... My glory I will not give to another.' Thus when God seeks his glory, he is seeking to display, emanate and communicate his internal glory with a view to gaining the praise and enjoyment of his creatures.
- 3.) Edwards reasons that those things that are stated as God's chief ends in his principal works of providence (e.g. in salvation) may be rightly said to be his chief ends in creation. Furthermore, his aims for the moral part of his creation, his directions and approbations concerning his elect and the stated ends of Jesus Christ himself may all also be rightly seen as reflecting God's chief ends in creating the world.

Edwards demonstrates from Scripture that the ends of all the above are God's own glory. While piling up his Scriptural evidence cumulatively and persuasively, he returns again and again to the above-mentioned passage from Isaiah 48, which functions as something of a focal point for the dissertation as a whole. He presents the biblical view of the universe as a closed system in which 'of him, and through him, and to him, are all things' (Rom 11:36). God's own glory is his chief end in creation.

### *Human happiness an ultimate end of God in creation*

At the same time, Edwards clearly shows that human happiness, or 'the communication of good to the creature', was an ultimate end of God in creating the world. He demonstrates that the communication of good to the creature is in itself pleasing to God, not merely subordinately agreeable. God delights in this simply and ultimately. This is different from God's attitude towards judgement: God does not delight in this in the same way, but rather 'proceeds to it with backwardness and reluctance'. In mercy, however, he delights absolutely: 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.' (Ezek 33:11)

This work of redemption cannot be spoken of as merely subordinate: Scripture will not allow this (cf. John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-10), and to do so would be to make our good in itself nothing in God's regard, which again Scripture will not allow: Christ's death and suffering are presented in scripture as being out of his great love to us (e.g. Galatians 2:20). Indeed,

Isaiah 53:10-11 present the suffering servant as delighting absolutely in obtaining the salvation of his church.

With these and other such arguments, Edwards shows that the communication of good to the creature is an ultimate end of God in creation: an end pleasing in itself to God, and not merely subordinate to another.

*These two ends are in fact the same*

While these ends may seem to be different, Edwards shows that they are, in reality, identical, because God's glory is synonymous with his emanation and communication of himself to his creatures. Edwards sees God's external glory as consisting in five things:

- a.) the *exercise* of God's perfections (e.g. his power, wisdom, majesty) to produce their proper effect:
- b.) the *manifestation* of his eternal glory to created understandings.
- c.) the *communication* of the infinite fullness of God to the creature.
- d.) the *creature's high esteem* of God, love to him, and complacency and joy in him.
- e.) the *proper exercises* and expressions of the creature's high esteem of God, love to him, and delight in him.

While these may seem distinct, they are in fact all comprehended by 'the emanation of God's glory', or 'the brightness and fullness of divinity diffused, overflowing, enlarged and extra.'

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God's internal glory consists in three things: in his knowledge of himself, in his holiness and in his happiness. In the same way, God's external glory consists in his communication of these three things to the creature: the giving of the knowledge of himself to the creature, the giving of his own holiness to the creature, and the communication of his own happiness and joy in himself to the creature, so that the creature comes to delight in God's excellency and to praise him for it. As Edwards himself sums up:

What has been said may be sufficient to show, how those things, which are spoken of in Scripture as ultimate ends of God's works, though they may seem at first view to be distinct, are all plainly to be reduced to this one thing, viz. God's internal glory or fullness existing in its emanation. And though God, in seeking this end, seeks the creature's good; yet therein appears his supreme regard to himself?

Edwards' theology is a thoroughly and consistently God-centred theology, in which the whole universe and all God's creatures exist and tend towards the glory of their creator. For Edwards, there is no external scale of virtue or happiness by which the purpose of the universe can be judged, but all virtue and happiness are to be found in the creator himself. A final quote from the last page of the dissertation will suffice to show this:

God aims at that which the motion or progression which he causes, aims at, or tends to. If there be many things supposed to be so made and appointed, that, by a constant eternal motion, they all tend to a certain centre; then it appears that he who made them, and is the cause of their motion, aimed at that centre: that term of their motion, to which they eternally tend, and are

eternally, as it were, striving after. And if God be this centre, then God aimed at himself. And herein it appears that as he is the first author of their being and motion, so he is the last end, the final term, to which is their ultimate tendency and aim.

### *Eschatology*

Finally, we see that Edwards' eschatology is shaped by his God-centred understanding of the universe. As all things tend towards God, so in eternity, God's glory is ever enhanced as human beings behold and participate in his glory more and more. Edwards' view of the new creation is not one of a stasis of perfection, but rather of an ever-increasing knowledge of God, and of holiness and happiness in him. This is how 'his glory will fill the earth'.

Let the most perfect union with God be represented by something at an infinite height above us; and the eternally increasing union of the saints with God, by something that is ascending constantly towards that infinite height, moving upwards with a given velocity; and that is to continue thus to move to all eternity. God, who views the whole of this eternally increasing height, views it as an infinite height. And if he has respect to it, and makes it his end, as in the whole of it, he has respect to it as an infinite height, though the time will never come when it can be said it has already arrived at this infinite height.

Edwards' theology is thus future-orientated: it is in the new creation that God's glory will finally be seen in a way like never before, when the whole creation will praise him and delight in him. And yet even in the new creation, there is movement and dynamism, as God's creatures know him, delight in him and are become one with him in ever-increasing measures.

## **The relevance of *The End for Which God Created the World***

### *Joy and obedience*

God's aim for his creatures is not simply that they obey him and conform to his moral standards, but that they enjoy him and delight in him. It is in this that holiness consists, and in this that God's glory consists: the communication of himself and his excellencies to the creature. Thus any arid obedience to an external set of morals, be they evinced by human beings or discerned from God's moral law, is not to live for God's glory but to attempt to rob him of it, striving to find happiness in ones own actions and not in God himself. True obedience to God and true holiness are found in delighting in God, in seeking to be conformed to him and in making him our chief end. Writes Edwards:

Thus it is easy to conceive, how God should seek the good of the creature, consisting in the creature's knowledge and holiness, and even his happiness, from a supreme regard to himself; as his happiness arises from that which is an image and participation of God's own beauty; and consists in the creature's exercising a supreme regard to God, and complacence in him; in beholding God's glory, in esteeming and loving it, and rejoicing in it, and in his exercising and testifying love and supreme respect to God: which is the same thing with the creature's exalting God as his chief good, and making him his supreme end.

This is a message which contemporary evangelicalism desperately needs to hear and respond to. Dry and dutiful obedience is not simply insufficient: it is to steal God's glory for ourselves. God's end is that we should delight and rejoice in him, know him, and find our happiness in him: this delight of his creatures is where his external glory lies.

### *God himself as God's aim*

The contemporary relevance of God's God-centeredness is indisputable, both within Christian culture and in the secular world. Three particular areas serve to demonstrate this:

#### *i) Evangelism*

Contemporary evangelism often consists in showing the relevance of God and the work of Christ to human beings – of demonstrating how the good news of Jesus solves the deepest problems of human existence. This can be necessary in order to give the gospel a hearing and has good precedence in Jesus' own teaching that weary, burdened people must find their rest in him (Matthew 11:28). Indeed, Edwards himself sees that human happiness in God is in which God's external glory consists. There is, however, a need to explain the gospel in a way which takes seriously the God-centeredness of God and the universe: that it is not so much God who solves the deepest problems of human existence, but us who exist for his glory. Our evangelism must thus consist principally in showing how worthy and lovely God is and calling people into joy in him and living for his glory. The cross thus becomes not merely a solution to the problem of human existence, but the pinnacle of God's purposes for the communication of his internal glory to his creatures.

#### *ii) Ethics*

The question of ethics is also pertinent to Edwards' essay. His closed system in which all things are of, from and to God himself, indicates that human ethics cannot be determined by any outside set of criteria, but only ever in relation to God himself. If his goal for humanity is that he communicates himself to them, then he himself and his character is the starting-point and end-point for all questions of ethics. Living for him and being conformed to his nature is the content of all ethics, and thus Christian ethics will always be fundamentally opposed to human ethics, where the happiness of human beings is the starting point.

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#### *iii) Pastoral Care*

In the same way, pastoral care also begins and ends with God. The goal of our pastoral care as a whole will always be God's glory through his people delighting in him, and not people's recovery in itself. The diagnoses we make for people's substandard experience of living will always relate to a seeking for joy in other places than God; our prescriptions will always involve a reorientation towards God and a call to find joy and delight in him; and the resources we suggest will not be human effort, but God's own holiness which he has communicated to us in the gospel.

### **Eschatology and a dynamic view of the new creation**

Edwards' vision is profoundly eschatological, having us place our happiness not in temporal pleasures here, nor even in our present knowledge of and participation in God, but in God's future revelation of himself and our participation in him in the new creation. In a world obsessed with the immediate, this future perspective on the goal of our existence will equip us to live within a fallen creation in a godly and hopeful manner. Furthermore, it is an antidote to the kind of experience-obsessed culture that represents the other side of contemporary evangelicalism.

More than this, though, Edwards offers us a tantalising view of this new creation. Freddie Mercury sang ‘Who wants to live for ever?’ but often it is Christians who are hard-pushed to answer this question, and present a compelling view of the new creation to Christians and non Christians. Even though the new creation is gloriously different to the world we live in now, a world with no more suffering or mourning or crying or pain, we struggle to conceive of this world, and therefore struggle to present it to others.

Edwards’ picture of the new creation is God-centred, refreshing and enticing: a world where God’s creatures rise upwards in an ever-increasing knowledge of, and participation in, God’s excellencies and always moving towards a closer union with God.

### **God’s glory and Christian assurance**

If the certainty of our future happiness were predicated on anything less than God’s own glory, then it would be on shaky ground. In a world in which post-modernism suggests that we should be sure of ourselves but unsure about everything else, Edwards’ understanding of God’s glory lying in our participation in him is a glorious tonic. God’s preoccupation with his own glory tells us that, while we are right to be unsure of ourselves and our own capacities, we have every reason to have confidence in God, who will surely bring about his own glory. Edwards repeatedly returns to Isaiah 48 in order to remind us that our future salvation is predicated in God’s own glory, which he *will* jealously guard: ‘For my name’s sake I will defer my anger... For mine own sake, for mine own sake, will I do it; for how should my name be polluted?’

### **God’s glory and the possibility of spiritual growth**

While Edwards’ theocentric theology is profoundly future-orientated, it also offers wonderful hope for change in the present. Again, we live in a world where human change is considered impossible, and where human beings are seen as victims of their circumstances, upbringing, genes or all three, trapped in themselves and unable to escape. Christians often adopt a similar view of themselves, stating that change is harder for them than for others, because of circumstances or genetic make-up.

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It is of course true that change is often slow, that heart attitudes are deeply ingrained, and that people have often suffered in real and horrific ways, making spiritual growth painful and laboured. We are right to long for the new creation he describes. But Edwards’ God-centred theology offers, at the same time, significant hope for change now, because God’s own glory is tied to our growth in knowledge of him: in being conformed to him and in our finding happiness in him. Growth may be slow and painstaking. It is only in the new creation that we will see him face to face. But God will get the glory: he will not allow his name to be polluted, and he will communicate his goodness and excellencies to his creatures. For it is in us, the church, that he will display his wisdom to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3:10). We leave the final words to Edwards himself:

God’s respect to the creature’s good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature

aimed at is happiness in union with himself. The creature is no farther happy with this happiness which God makes his ultimate end, than he becomes one with God. The more happiness the greater union: when the happiness is perfect, the union is perfect. And as the happiness will be increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more strict and perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father and the Son; who are so united, that their interest is perfectly one.

*Christopher de la Hoyde co-leads a new church plant which is part of the Crowded House network in Sheffield. He is currently a third year student with the Northern Training Institute.*

### **Northern Training Institute**

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[info@northerntraininginstitute.org](mailto:info@northerntraininginstitute.org)

[www.northerntraininginstitute.org](http://www.northerntraininginstitute.org)

[www.theporterbrooknetwork.org](http://www.theporterbrooknetwork.org)