

‘The Church: Human Insertion in Trinitarian Life; Trinitarian Assertion in Human Life’

Rhys S. Bezzant, *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2014)

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History reports to us the passions of other ages. Since their passions are not ours, our first instinct is to doubt their relevance. But then we remind ourselves that we like passion. It is part of our psyche. It is yet another of those national traits which may be traced to the most formative of all influences on the Australian character: Jesus. Passion comes from his passion. What we call passion, Jonathan Edwards called affection – our most powerful, settled inclination of the heart; and its cognate – compassion – is our most benevolent affection.

So Rhys has written a book about Jonathan Edwards’s passion for the Church. It is, at first sight, so very different from today’s passions about the Church, many of which are negative. We are angry at its record of abuse; we are impatient with its institutionalization. We are cynical, for example, of the claim of the denominational leader that politics in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is ‘ministry by other means’. We are troubled by the Church’s hardness of heart. A gay activist in Melbourne fiercely denounced the Church for keeping him indoors in his youth when he wanted to be out in the sun. This was really a *cri de coeur* at the Church’s perceived condemnation of his sexuality. It was only ostensibly about keeping him from being out in the sun, for in pre-Climate change] Melbourne there was never any sun, and the Church was compassionately sheltering him from the rain. Not all passions about the church are negative. Rhys reminds us of one positive modern passion about the Church – our love for the technology, the science of Church growth.

What a contrast then to learn of Jonathan Edwards’s transcendent understanding of the Church as one of the principals in the great drama of redemption, as the spouse of the eternal Son of God, as the bride of Christ at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb, as the fulfillment of the collective aspiration of the Holy Trinity to expand its geometry from a triangle to a square: Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Holy Church. Maybe Edwards did not put it in precisely those words and neither did Rhys, but that is essentially what they meant. What Rhys does say in fact is that the Trinity is ‘the ultimate life in which the church is invited to participate’ (54). ‘Here,’ observes Rhys in one of his many memorable turns of phrase, ‘we find not a spirit of theological caution but rather of trinitarian assertion, and this is based on

our created likeness to God'(58). 'Trinitarian assertion'! Those words must be found in any manifesto for the Church in Australia today.

Now, exercise your imagination for a moment. In November 2005 Rhys comes to you with a proposal to work on Edwards's ecclesiology – his theology of the Church. How would you respond? You might think (a) it's going to be really tough to write anything fresh on Edwards. The study of Edwards has become a vast industry, arguably the greatest historical enterprise in Modern Church History as befits his being the Everest figure in Modern Christianity.

And (b) you are not aware that Edwards wrote much on the Church. There is his farewell sermon to his congregation when they sacked him in 1750, a sermon which you think was written by a saint, but Rhys will come to tell you was written by a sinner. But you suspect that Edwards did not write much on this subject, that ecclesiology was not his favoured branch of theology. [After all he was the founder of modern evangelicalism, wasn't he, and aren't all evangelicals weak on the doctrine of the Church? So how could Rhys say anything new about this evangelical's view of the church from such a narrow range of sources?

Not a problem, responded the never-flappable Bezzant: I will glean from the rich grain of all his major works what he had to say about the Church. At a stroke the sources became voluminous. In this book in short compass is a survey of the great works of Edwards: inter alia *Charity and its Fruits*; *A History of the Work of Redemption*; *A faithful narrative of a surprising work of God*; *The Religious Affections*; *An Humble Attempt*; *The Life of Brainerd*, even an analysis, mercifully brief, of the so-called Stockbridge Treatises: *Freedom of the Will*; *Original Sin*; *True Virtue* and the incomparable *The End for which God created the World*. This in itself makes the book very useful. It actually makes it as good as any place to start your reading of Edwards if you have not already waded into those deep waters. This is the more so because the structure of the book follows Edwards's life experience, beginning with his childhood in East Windsor, Ct., and proceeding through his education, his undergraduate days at Yale, his early pastoral appointment in New York, his postgraduate years at Yale, his pastorates in Northampton and Stockbridge, MA., and ending with his appointment as President of the College of New Jersey which became Princeton. It is, in effect, yet another biography of Edwards – an account of his life and thought, arranged around the theme of his lifelong thinking on the Church.

So Rhys's book is, in fact, an important refutation of any suggestion that Edwards did not write much on the church because he really wasn't very interested in it

because of his evangelical orientation. Indeed it is perilous to suggest that Edwards did not write much on any matter. He spent up to 15 hours a day in his study – he wrote much on everything under the sun. There are 26 large volumes of his works in the monumental Yale edition and a further 46 online volumes. Rhys has ventured forth on that great ocean of scholarship, so foundational to so much evangelical theology and enterprise. There he is on p.79, footnote 56, for example, citing one of Edwards’s sermons from the 55th volume in the online Yale edition.

And, as for originality, no-one had before read all his major works with that noble theme in view. True, one Tom Schafer, made a beginning, He is revered among the ranks of Edwards’s scholars for his transcriptions of Edwards’s more than 1500 miscellaneous thoughts, revered not for transcribing so many, but for transcribing any, for Edwards’s handwriting was execrable. In 1955 Schafer’s study of Edwards’s view of the church was published. It was much cited. But Rhys critiques it for being too derived from above, from the synthesizing of Edwards’s loftiest and latest works. Rhys invites us to consider the extent to which it was also distilled from below, from the experience of revival and other phenomenological struggles. In this one respect Edwards’s ecclesiology resembles Pentecostal ecclesiology, an ecclesiology from below. Well, in spite of, and perhaps because of, his critique of the much-revered Schafer, all the captains of the Edwards’s industry welcomed Rhys into the fold with acclamation at this new perspective on the great man’s ecclesiology.

But, not content with that, Rhys brought another store of intellectual capital to the mountain of Edwards’s scholarship. The other captains of the Edwards industry, for the most part, do not share the same background as Edwards. They are often splendid academically, but, to be candid, they are not biblical enough. It is, let us be assured, quite possible to be an evangelical and an academic. It distinguishes this book that its author is strong on the Gospel and the Word, and their interdependence.

Debates concerning the church, which the Reformations generated and which Edwards inherited, are more substantially debates concerning the nature of the Gospel, its authority, and its scope. ... If ... the Word of the Gospel is understood as the progenitor of the church, persistent appeal to that Word enables ongoing reform, and access to salvation is to be found through means of grace, themselves dependent on that Word. It thus became a maxim in Protestant thought that the Gospel had the preeminent authority to create, shape, and reform the life of the church (10).

The training of many of the captains of the Edwards’s industry had been more secular. They said, ‘Edwards is a philosophical theologian, and therefore we can

philosophise about him to our heart's content'. And they made it all too complicated. Admittedly it all looked very impressive, but that was because it was so incomprehensible. You know, it was like that Biblical criticism which is all theory and no Bible. So Rhys decreed, 'I'll write simply.' Bezzantine is the very opposite of Byzantine. The clarity of this book is clearer than crystal. It has the clarity of a diamond, and it has the structure of a cut-diamond. It is a jewel of a book.

How does one read a diamond? First, by being dazzled by the flashes of brilliance from its facets, especially those which throw light on one's present concerns; second, by penetrating to the essential core of its nature; third by observing and admiring how each facet relates to each other facet; fourth by reflecting on all the forces of nature and time which have produced this paragon. Well, to read this diamond, you'll have to read the book and not settle for what is said at a book launch. But it may be appropriate for a book launch to comment on a few brilliant flashes and the core. It is very regrettable that we do not have time to explore the third way in which the diamond is to be read, namely the way in which one facet relates to another. That is one of Edwards's most conspicuous intellectual capacities, and it is also probably the most impressive intellectual achievement of this book. Early in the book, Rhys promises (3): 'I shall track the development of his ecclesiological commitments, establishing their substantial connection with other major theological themes.' And he keeps his promise. But let us concentrate on the flashes and the core.

The experience of reading Edwards is one of being surprised by the flashes. He addresses the role of adolescents in the Church before anyone had heard of such strange creatures; he spoke of the future role and destiny of Australian Aboriginal people six decades before the first fleet; he prophesied the role of the church in creating a multicultural society centuries before the Liberal and Labor parties put it on the national agenda for debate.

First, youth. On this Rhys wrote (73):

Edwards's response to this declension [in the traditional order of family life] was remarkable for its day: he would target the demographic that needed a timely word. He began a new "service" that included preaching to address specific issues for the youth, organized neighborhood meetings of parents to discuss the matter, and encouraged those same heads of families to assert once again coordinated discipline.

Too often the Church when it has not ignored young people has abused them; and too often it has avoided abuse by ignoring them. The predicament of today's church is partly due to this, especially perhaps the latter. Church's without vital youth programmes seem to be churches without a future. Edwards had a surprising lot to

say about the role of youth in the Church. He had a large family of three sons and eight daughters who seemed to love him as much as respect him. He knew what made for happy children and he filled his sermons with advice addressed especially to them. Many modern scholars are aghast at this advice, and indeed parents in his congregation found it easier to remove him than to correct the behaviour of their own children along the lines recommended by Edwards. But it was precisely because he cared so much for their eternal happiness that he gave his advice. One of Edwards's writings which every youthworker should read is the sermon he preached at the funeral of his daughter, Jerusha.

Second, Indigenous Australians. Edwards prophesied the conversion of the pagans of Terra Australis and that, one day, they would bear witness to the glory of the gospel by writing impressive works of scholarship and by putting on 'wonderful performances' (45, cf. 153). Almost three centuries later, we are beginning to see the fulfillment of Edwards's prophecy.

Third, a multicultural world. Rhys tells us that Edwards resisted the Puritan tendency to make the local church the measure of all that is right and good in the world. He refuted tribalism and that form of nationalism which has justified American aggression in the world. He sought to pull down those 'impervious boundaries' which those who like to think they are right erect around themselves. He stressed the international role of the missionary church, its inclusiveness and its openness to that which promotes human flourishing. So, while the local church is grounded deeply in one place, it needs to be responsive to its environment, like a thriving tree to use Edwards' and the Bible's metaphor for the church; or better, the tree is a type of the church. Typology is one of the chief tools of trade which Edwards offers the modern evangelical, since today's evangelicals are largely ignorant of it. Edwards looks for a church deeply grounded and yet responsive. Rhys puts it like this: "Edwards's understanding of the church requires from him and from us theological principle and contextual plasticity' (xi, xii).

As to what this diamond of a book has at its core, Rhys characterises Edwards's ecclesiology as revitalized orthodoxy. To be more precise, if less concise, Edwards worked for the refreshing or re-creation (90, 158, 168, 181, 182, 190, 210) of the ecclesiology which the Puritans had developed in New England, a church which was in a dynamic relationship with creation and history, and which was renewed through the experience of revival, through the practice of such evangelical initiatives as itinerancy, concerts of prayer and cross-cultural missions, and through Edwards's specialty, namely doctrinal clarification. (xi).

You say: what was that again? Well, Rhys tells you, often enough:

256 His ecclesiology was generated by superimposing revivalist conditions and social aspirations onto Reformed convictions (sometimes with the revivalist strand eclipsing his patrimony), making it innovatively evangelical rather than generically Protestant.

257 Edwards drew together divergent strands of Reformation thought to demonstrate the possibility of creating a purer fellowship for the regenerate, which is nevertheless nestled within a church whose social responsibility is wider than its membership. An ethical vision for human flourishing is tied into divine and dynamic trinitarian life within the church...

Here is an understanding of the church which is more than pure doctrine. It reconciles the best in tradition with the best in modern thought. It fosters the church's interaction with its social context and gives it a vision for the means to human flourishing. If your first instinct is to think – human flourishing – that sounds a bit postmodern, then Rhys would encourage you to think again. Maybe Edwards holds the key to that, rather more than any other of the church's ecclesiologists. Four times in the book (xi, 17, 218, 257), Rhys refers to the ways in which Edwards's ecclesiology promotes human flourishing. One of the ways to flourish is worship, which, with its treatment of how Edwards takes on board the new hymns of his age, is yet another flash from the diamond. Citing the Edwards's scholar, Kenneth Minkema, Rhys tells us (218) that, for Edwards, 'worship and praise were ways of participating in the beauty of God'. Beauty is another of the great Edwards's insights. He understood it as the harmony of all things in God, of which a good type is orchestral music which is why heaven will exhibit such symphonic grandeur. 'Music', writes Rhys, '... is a pervasive metaphor used by Edwards to give an account of the beauty of God's plans and of our unity within them.' (218).

But enough. Edwards himself observed that our palates cannot digest too much sweetness, which is why God reveals his glories progressively and not all at once. Revelation is a box of chocolates. Eat them slowly to maximise happiness. Eat them all at once and you won't feel well.

So, without further ado, let's open this box of chocolates, and congratulate Rhys for preparing such a feast for our delectation. May it nurture us in our commitment to promoting the unity of local congregations and the expansion of the church throughout the world. May it bring much glory to God, and a healthy dose of honour to its author, who has now joined the distinguished ranks of Captain of the Edwards industry.

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