Book Reviews, Movie Reviews, and Historiographic Essays

Jonathan Edwards, born 1703
Priscilla Marquez Cisneros

Priscilla Marquez Cisneros is a junior from Oklahoma City, majoring in Political Science and minoring in History. She wrote this review for a course in Colonial America. She is a member of Pi Sigma Alpha, the Political Science Honor Society.

Jonathan Edwards is regarded as one of America’s greatest philosophical theologians and proponents of the Great Awakening. Like his father and grandfather, Edwards became a minister. During the Great Awakening, he stood as a moderate voice, proclaiming that there was a stark difference between knowing God exists and actually knowing or having a sense of his presence. Henceforth, Edwards believed emotion in Christianity was beneficial, but at the same time it must not be too radical. In the year 1738, at the height of the Great Awakening, Edwards preached at his ministerial post in Northampton, Massachusetts, “Charity and Its Fruits”. This sermon focused on charity as the most highly esteemed virtue in Christianity due to its humility, and on how it is the opposite of selfishness, anger, and judgment of others. Edwards concludes his sermon by proclaiming that Heaven is the ultimate form of charity and love.

Edwards defined charity as “love, or that disposition or affection whereby one is dear to another” (Charity). He further stated that such charity inclined a person to submit wholly to God, to become meek in spirit, and to not only love in words, but more importantly through action. In addition, Edwards preached that charity is humility.
Individuals should seek to be humble by first glorifying God and recognizing his sovereignty and how insignificant human life is. He further preached that a humble person totally relies on God and submits willingly to His will. He further contended that humility prevents power-hungry, gaudy, arrogant, mocking, stubborn, belittling, and defensive behaviors from emerging in a person. Furthermore, he believed that individuals should desire to be meek like Jesus and should examine from within for true humility. In his conclusion on humility, Edwards called for all people, even unbelievers, to seek God and strive for humility.

Likewise, Edwards preached how charity is the opposite of selfish, angry, and judgmental behavior. He believed that sin was the cause of selfishness and led individuals to be governed by like principles. God, according to Edwards, had mercy and freed our souls from the confinement of self-love. Edwards stated that charity is the opposite of selfishness when individuals find their happiness or put their love in things beneficial to self and not to the common good. In addition, Edwards called for Christians to devote wholly to God and become unselfish in their actions and thoughts. Secondly, Edwards wrote how charity is the opposite of an angry spirit. Edwards further proclaimed how this anger must meet certain qualifications in order to be contrary to charity. First, it must be anger out of “ill will or revenge” (Charity). Second, it must be anger in the form of grumbling against the success of others, and therefore, of God’s providence and creation. Finally, that it must be disproportionate and longstanding anger. He then provided a means for fighting against anger by self-evaluation in the home and with neighbors. Only with humility and God’s divine love can one effectively combat an angry spirit. Finally,
Edwards contended that charity is the opposite of a judgmental or critical spirit. He preached that individuals should not judge others since their circumstances are unknown except to God, that we should not dimply judge people based off their bad qualities, and that people should not judge others’ actions without sufficient evidence. He further stated that God is the only judge and that those who derive pleasure from judging ill of others are guilty of sin. According to Edwards, not only is scripture against judging others, but also most of the time individuals judge too quickly and often make unmerited assumptions. In addition, individuals who judge will too be judged by God. Edwards concludes his sermon by declaring that heaven is the ultimate dominion of charity and Christian love. Edwards stated that God is the ultimate form of love and since he dwells amongst heaven, it will likewise be filled with His Charity.

The timing of this sermon indicates that Edwards was intent on generating emotion within his audience. Being at the height of the Great Awakening, Edwards had taken advantage of it. In fact, the entire sermon centered on the emotion of well-being and love one can receive by emulating charity or Christian love. With this sermon, Edwards posited it is not only reasonable to show emotions through actions of charity but that it is both expected by God and pleasing to God. Edwards exhibits some elements of the lingering Puritan dilemma, in which he warns against false humility as an instrument of the Devil and calls for individuals to be wary of feelings of humility so as to not fool oneself. This delicate balance of never knowing what is real and what is not often came into play in the issue of whether one is saved or not, an issue Edwards himself had experienced on multiple occasions. Other intellectuals, such as Benjamin Franklin,
believed humility to be an important virtue in and of itself and that one could strive to improve on it by keeping watch on one’s actions. On the other hand, in this sermon Edwards stressed humility as a subset or condition of Christian love, and that the only way to attain it is by devoting oneself entirely to God. Only God can change one’s heart and once the heart is changed, charity, along with humility, will be true and abundant. Edwards, who grew up on the frontier, understood it to be that Native Americans should first learn English, and then convert to Christianity, so as to not misinterpret scripture. Like believers who give themselves entirely over to God to fully become charitable, so too Natives should give themselves entirely to God in order to have true humility and Christian love. This is also why Edwards asserts that Heaven is the only true place of Christian love since God dwells amongst it. Individuals can emulate charity and Christian love only by striving to be like Jesus, and giving full dependence on God. This full devotion to God also provides evidence that Edwards still strictly adhered to Puritan principles.