

Reason, Revelation, and Preaching: An Unpublished Ordination Sermon by Jonathan Edwards

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Historical Context

The sermon printed below, and made available here for the first time, was preached by the great early American theologian Jonathan Edwards. It is an ordination sermon delivered on May 7, 1740, at the installation of Edward Billing as the pastor of Cold Spring (later Belchertown), Massachusetts. Billing, born in Hatfield, Massachusetts, had graduated from Harvard College in 1731 and taken his M.A. in 1734. After several years of preaching and surveying, he had accepted a call to the newly settled town of Cold Spring in February 1740, which had paved the way for his upcoming ordination.

The following sermon is important not only for what it reveals about Edwards's conception of the ministry but also for what it tells us about his views on the relation of reason and revelation, and the implication of that relation for the minister's office. Including several passages that appear to be taken nearly verbatim from his personal writings, this sermon also demonstrates the importance of Edwards's notebooks, particularly his

"Miscellanies," in the development of his thought.

In the spring of 1740 when he was composing advice for his friend Edward Billing and Billing's new congregation, Edwards had already distinguished himself at Northampton, Massachusetts, as a controversialist and revivalist. In sermons from the early 1730s, such as *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption* and *A Divine and Supernatural Light*, he had defended Calvinist tenets of God's sovereignty and justice and humankind's inability to be saved except through a divine bestowal of a "spiritual sense" that enlightened and renovated the soul. In 1734-1735, Edwards had overseen a major revival, an account of which he published in *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*, which brought him international notoriety.

But from the vantage of several years, Edwards could see that many people of Northampton and the surrounding area he had thought to be truly converted had returned, inexorably, to their sinful, contentious ways. Therefore, as he mounted the pulpit on that day in May with Billing seated beside him, the revival was a

memory—and a bitter one at that. His defense of Calvinist doctrines, too, seemed to be failing in the face of “new-fashioned schemes of divinity” that exalted human reason and the meritoriousness of good works to effect salvation. One manifestation of this new spirit was Arminianism, named after the seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius. Arminianism identified a broad range of heterodox notions about human worthiness, the freedom of the will, and the efficacy of sincerity in works. The more radical expression was deism, which denied God’s providential presence in creation and found in reason the ultimate standard for belief.

The new theologies found their inspiration and legitimacy, in part, in the early stages of the great intellectual and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment. One of its great minds was John Locke. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke declared that “Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with the clear and self-evident Dictates of Reason, has a Right to be urged, or assented to, as a Matter of Faith.”¹ Although Locke accepted the possible validity of revealed truths, he insisted that revelation must be subjected to the judgment of reason. God may reveal truths that are beyond the scope of reason, but they cannot be contrary to reason, because reason “can never require or enable me to believe that, which is contrary to it self.”² In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he further maintained that the validity of revealed truths may be confirmed by signs or evidences, chief among which were the performance of miracles and the fulfillment of prophecy.

Deist writers accepted Locke’s claim that religion must contain nothing contrary to reason but went much farther in their

conclusions.³ In *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), John Toland criticized the view that miracles testify to the truth of revelation, maintaining that both miracle and mystery are affronts to reason. In *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), Anthony Collins undermined the evidential value of prophecy by arguing that none of the Old Testament prophecies had been literally fulfilled. And Matthew Tindal forcefully expressed in *Christianity As Old As Creation* (1730) the fundamental principle of all deist thought, that a purely rational religion has no place for supernatural revelation, for the content of revelation is either irrational or superfluous.

In his private notebooks, Edwards mounted a counter-assault against Arminianism, deism, and other forms of liberal thought. On occasion, his apologetics spilled over into sermons. An ordination—in which the preacher sought to establish the new pastor and congregation on sound principles—apparently offered an irresistible opportunity to pursue his agenda. One scholar has commented that this sermon “is outstanding among Edwards’s ordination sermons as an *apologia* of divine revelation as the rule of faith and reason.”⁴ The polemical nature of this sermon is what makes it unusual among other sermons of this type by Edwards, in which he dwelt at length on the customary duties of minister and people. Located amidst the shift from Edwards’s jubilant and celebratory ordinations of the mid-1730s to the darker, defensive ones of the late 1740s, this discourse has an undertone of foreboding about the challenges facing evangelical ministers and congregations.

Edwards’s sermons usually followed the tripartite form of Explication, Doctrine, and Application, and the one he

preached at Cold Spring is no exception. In the Explication, the first part of the sermon in which the scriptural text is “opened,” Edwards, using 1 Corinthians 2:11-13 as his text, contrasts the revelation that the early Christians of Corinth received to the learning of the Greek philosophers. To these wise men, the “doctrine of a crucified God” was “absurd” and “foolish.” Believers, however, realized the “hidden wisdom” of God in revelation, and therefore depended on that revelation even though it was sometimes “above the reach of man’s reason.”

The Doctrine, in which Edwards explores the theological lessons of the text, fittingly focuses on the lesson for ministers of the gospel. They are “not to preach those things which their own wisdom or reason suggests, but the things already dictated to them by the superior wisdom and knowledge of God.” In considering the relation of reason and revelation, Edwards is quick to point out that he does not dismiss the importance of reason in understanding and appreciating religious truths. Reason “abstractly considered” does not at all contradict revelation; quite the contrary, it “never teaches anything that is false.” Even more, he points out that the exercise of reason is necessary to accepting revelation. Thus ministers are not to “set aside anything that true wisdom teaches.” Here we see Edwards as a child of the Enlightenment. But Edwards the Reformed evangelical emerges when he points out that a problem arises when individual reason, perverted by prejudice and ignorance, attempts by itself to judge the veracity of revelation. In this regard, ministers must not rely on their own learning and reasoning alone, or “preach those things that would seem right to their understandings if their understandings

were left alone and acted independently of any testimony or teaching from the understanding of any other being.”

Edwards goes on to assert that God has reasons that man’s fallen reason cannot know. It is inevitable, therefore, that divine revelation—the Bible—contains mysteries and seeming inconsistencies. With our understandings being limited to lower, earthly things, it is only logical that we cannot fully understand heavenly things, which “are much more above us.” It is the duty of believers, and especially of ministers, to resign themselves to the wisdom of God. Human experience has shown that things that were once mysterious are now explicable, and we have no reason not to expect that God will continue to make new discoveries known. Also, believers are privileged, through grace, to a heightened awareness of God’s workings and teachings that the unregenerate cannot enjoy. For this reason, the things of Christ appear foolish to the worldly wise.

With these arguments as a foundation, Edwards is ready to take on modern notions of religion. It is false, he asserts, to argue that there can be no mysteries in religion. Those who wish to subject revelation to the dictates of reason have it backwards; for Edwards, revelation is to be its own rule. “Revelation was given to be a rule to reason, a guide to our understanding, and not our understanding to be a guide and rule to that.”

He continues his critique in the Application section, where he considers the implications of the intellectual lessons for the particular hearers. To argue, as “many of late” do, that we should deduce God’s moral perfections from our own reason and then select from the Scriptures accordingly, is to make human reason the high-

est standard in judging God's ways. This, in effect, is to do away with the necessity for revelation. Yet this is precisely what Arminians, Arians, and deists have done.

To conclude, Edwards turns to address Billing himself and the members of his new church. Treasure the Bible and teach God's instructions, Edwards tells him, and do not be afraid of those who cast "contemptuous reproaches" upon you for it. The hearers, in their turn, are to receive their minister's words as God's teachings, and are not to gainsay them. Minister and people alike must be willing to be seeming fools for Christ's sake.

Edwards realized that argumentation alone would not suffice; people's hearts had to be aroused as well as their minds, and he looked for a new round of revivals to combat the effects of moral declension and unorthodox principles. Writing to Provincial Secretary Josiah Willard in June 1740, Edwards expressed his "hope that God is about to accomplish glorious things for his church."⁵ When it looked like these "glorious things" were about to start in late 1740, seemingly embodied in the person of George Whitefield, Edwards eagerly embraced the awakening, as did Billing. In 1743, as the series of revivals known as the "Great Awakening" progressed, Billing welcomed local itinerants such as Eleazar Wheelock of Connecticut and, along with Edwards, signed a letter by New England clergymen testifying to the success of the revivals.⁶

If Edwards and Billing were happily joined in supporting the revivals, they were more intimately—and tragically—linked in their efforts to change requirements for admission to the sacraments. Since the seventeenth century, New England Congregational polity had consisted of a two-tiered system of church

membership. Full members—those who were judged to be truly godly—were entitled to partake of the Lord's Supper, to have their children baptized, and to vote in church meetings. Those who were simply baptized members who had not undergone a spiritual renewal, or "Half-Way" members as they were called, could only have their children baptized. The churches in Hampshire County—which included Northampton and Cold Spring—adhered to this model of church membership, or to variations of it.

By the mid-1740s, Edwards had become convinced that the Half-Way Covenant was non-scriptural and detrimental to the health and well-being of the churches. When, in 1748, a member of his church presented herself for full membership, Edwards informed her that he could not in good conscience allow her to join under the old way, insisting instead that she must be able to profess a sincere hope that she was converted and a desire to live a godly life. To the congregation, however, Edwards's position meant that only those who were converted according to *his* standards could join the church. In response, they erupted in opposition, and a rancorous struggle ensued that lasted two years.

Billing played a key role in the drama, attempting throughout to support Edwards. Edwards pointed to Billing as the only minister in Hampshire County who was on his side of the controversy, which he gave as a reason for going beyond the bounds of the county in inviting churches to make up advisory councils.⁷ Billing was a member of the preliminary council that met on December 28, 1749, which drew up recommendations for resolving the dispute; and he was unexpectedly recruited to serve on what proved to be the final council that

met in June 1750 and recommended Edwards's dismissal. Because many of the people of Cold Spring were formerly of Northampton, and were sympathetic to the church's position, they had refused to send delegates to the council, and had forbade Billing from being a member. When Billing went to Northampton as an observer, Edwards apparently drummed him into service. In the end, Billing's presence was to no avail; the vote was five for dismissal and four against.

The experience was formative for Billing, who went on to advocate Edwards's views on admission to church membership at his own peril. In his only published work, *A Dialogue on the Christian Sacraments* (1752), he pronounced the custom of individuals joining the church just before marriage, and of parents joining just before the birth of a child so as to gain the right of baptism, as morally wrong. Billing suffered the same fate as Edwards; he was dismissed in 1752. Their friendship, refined in adversity and in the cause of what they considered "true religion," continued. Edwards preached Billing's last installation, this time as the first pastor of Greenfield, Massachusetts, in March 1754, where he served until his death in 1760, Edwards having died two years earlier.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), author of works such as *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* and the famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, is often considered the greatest philosopher-theologian in America. He served as minister in Northampton, Massachusetts from 1727-1750, first as assistant to his grandfather Solomon Stoddard and then as pastor upon Stoddard's death in 1729. During this time, he served as a leader in the movement known as the First Great Awakening.

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The manuscript, part of the Edwards Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, is nineteen duodecimo-sized leaves. Edwards's chirography shows signs of rapid composition, including several lengthy deleted passages. There is no indication of reproof, though the symbol that Edwards used to identify material for the History of Redemption project is in the upper left hand corner of

the first page. The text has been edited and annotated by the editors of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* according to the conventions followed in the Yale Edition.⁸

"Ministers to Preach not their own Wisdom but the Word of God"

[Explication]

First Corinthians 2:11-13:⁹ "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual."

Corinth, the city where the Christians dwelt to whom this Epistle was written, was one of the principal cities of Greece, a country that had been the chief seat of philosophy and learning, and had been the most famed for human wisdom and the improvements of reason for many ages of any country in the world. It was but a little distant from Athens, the chief resort of philosophers of any in that land.

And many such were conversant in the city of Corinth itself. The Apostle, in this Epistle which he writes to the Christians in this city, considers the place that they lived in and accommodates what he writes to their circumstance. When the mysterious wonderful doctrines which the apostles taught concerning a crucified Jesus came abroad in the world and began to obtain footing in Greece as well as other countries, it was much taken notice of by the philosophers in Athens and Corinth, and met with such a recep-

tion and treatment from them as might be expected from men that were so much conceited of, and so much depended on, their own reason as they did.

The strange doctrine of a crucified God, to their reason and philosophy, appeared very foolish, inconsistent and ridiculous. As the Apostle explained in the¹⁰ eighteenth verse of the foregoing chapter, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." Verse 22, "the Greeks seek after wisdom." The Greek philosophers seek after something that shall be agreeable to their own reason.

But the gospel revelation concerning a crucified God was not so, but appeared to them absurd and contrary to reason, as it follows: "But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumblingblock, and to the Greeks foolishness" [v. 23]. But the Apostle observes that these philosophers, with all their boasted wisdom or reason, could never discern the truth in the things of God, and that this is done alone by the gospel that they account inconsistent and self-contrary, and that God had made foolish their wisdom and baffled that human reason that they so much relied upon. Verses 19-21, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." And that the gospel, which they called nonsense and foolishness, was wiser than their most boasted wisdom. Verse 25, "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is

stronger than men."

They objected against those doctrines of the gospel [for] their mysteriousness and unintelligibleness; and therefore in the sixth, seventh [and] eighth verses of that chapter wherein is the text, we find "the wisdom of this world" and "of the princes of this world," and "the wisdom of God in a mystery" or "the hidden wisdom," set in opposition the one to the other. "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." By "the power of this world" the Apostle evidently means their philosophers and others that were accounted the wise and great men of the world. In the ninth and tenth verses, the Apostle shows that it is no wonder that the things of the gospel seem unintelligible and absurd to the wise men of the world. The reason he gives for it is that they are above our natural faculties, and our knowledge of 'em depends purely on the revelation made by the Spirit of God. "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." And in the words of the text this matter is further amplified, in which may be observed three things:

1. The reason is more particularly given why divine things are above man's reason and depend on pure revelation. The

Apostle very clearly illustrates it by a comparison taken from that which our daily experience teaches. We find that the things of men can't be known by other men any further than they reveal or declare them. What we find within our own hearts our own spirits know, but no other men know them. Their reason won't help 'em to find out what we are conscious of within ourselves, unless we tell them.

So says the Apostle it is with the things of God that we are told in the gospel. They are things that concern God himself, his secret counsels and sovereign will, and things in himself which he alone can be supposed to see and be conscious to immediately; and therefore our reason won't help us to see them any further than God's Spirit is pleased to reveal.

2. We observe by what means the apostles and other Christians came to know them when they were above the reach of man's reason, viz., by the revelation of God's Spirit. "Now we have received, not that spirit of the world," i.e., the spirit of human wisdom, but things "freely given of God," the things of the gospel.¹¹

3. What foundation the Apostle and other ministers went upon in teaching those things: they depended purely on divine revelation and not on human wisdom or philosophy. "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth." Their way was not first to compare the things that were revealed to the dictates and principles of philosophy which they or others had embraced and seemed right to their reason, but to compare 'em with other dictates or revelations of the Spirit; which is what the Apostle means when he [says, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual"]. And then the

Apostle goes on in the three next verses further to give the reason why the mysteries of the gospel appeared foolish and inconsistent to the philosophers and other natural men. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ" [vv. 14-16].

Doctrine

Ministers are not to preach those things which their own wisdom or reason suggests, but the things already dictated to them by the superior wisdom and knowledge of God.

In handling this doctrine I would:

I. Show how the words of the doctrine are to be taken.

II. I would speak particularly to several things implied in the doctrine as belonging to the duty incumbent on a gospel minister.

I. I would briefly show how the words of the doctrine are to be taken, or what is meant when it is said that ministers are not to preach those things that their own wisdom suggests, but those things that are already dictated to them by the superior wisdom of God. Because it must be acknowledged that the words, as they may be taken, [are not true]: 'tis not true that ministers are not to preach those things that their own reason teaches; in the same manner as the Apostle's doctrine, as it may be taken and perverted, is not true, viz. that ministers are not to preach what man's wisdom teaches.

Therefore for the avoiding of all confusion that might arise from the misunderstanding of the words, I would particularly take notice of the various senses in which reason may be said to teach or suggest anything, and show in what sense the words are to be taken when it is asserted that ministers are not to preach those things their own reason suggests.

There are three different senses in which reason may be said to teach or suggest things to man:

First. Reason may be said to dictate or teach these and those things, meaning by “reason” not the understanding or judgment of any man or men, but the reason and nature of things abstractly considered. There are many things that particular men’s understandings or judgments dictate that reason, in this sense, does not dictate: for thus by reason is meant that in the nature of things that is or should be the object of the faculty, or rather the ground on which man’s understanding should proceed in judging of things, rather than for any exercises of the faculty or the judgment itself that men make of things. It is something wholly independent of any judgments men make or anything that appears reasonable to one man or another. Reason in this sense is always infallible, for reason itself never teaches anything that is false. To suppose so would be to suppose that reason sometimes teaches that which [is] unreasonable, or that which there is no good or just reason for, which is a contradiction.

Indeed, reason in this sense is nothing but another word for truth, or the evidence of truth, or good and just ground of our assent. And therefore ’tis not the meaning of the doctrine that ministers ought not to preach those things that reason suggests in this sense. As it is not the design of the

Apostle, when he sets aside what man’s wisdom teaches that he may establish what the Holy Ghost teaches, to set aside anything that true wisdom teaches, or that which is wise in its own nature.

Second. Man’s own reason may be said either directly or indirectly to dictate everything that he knows or believes by any means whatsoever. That is to say, man can know nothing but by the exercise of the faculty of reason; the mind of man can’t receive anything for truth but what it sees, or thinks it sees, some reason to suppose to be truth.

And that which men believe purely from the credit they give to others because others teach it, and from the reliance they have on their superior understandings, yet they receive it as a thing which reason remotely and indirectly dictates to them. Their reason don’t dictate it immediately and of it[self], but their reason suggests this, that those that testify it have sufficient knowledge of what they testify, and that they give a true testimony according to their knowledge. Their testimony is the argument that their reason relies upon, and so their reason does indirectly suggest it, though their reason of itself and independently suggests nothing of it.

So it is with respect to those things that men receive both by divine and human testimony. When men receive things as truth purely because God has revealed ’em, yet reason is remotely concerned, as ’tis by the faculty of reason that men know it to be a revelation, and by that faculty they know that a divine revelation is to be depended on.

Or if instead of the word “reason” we use the Apostle’s phrase and say “man’s wisdom,” there is nothing that men are to believe or teach but what is taught either directly or indirectly [by] their own

best wisdom.

And therefore when the Apostle would not have ministers preach those things that man's wisdom taught, this was not his meaning. He did not intend that ministers should not preach what man's best reason and wisdom indirectly taught 'em to be true because God had said it: for then he would not [have] made the distinction between the things that man's wisdom teaches and that the Holy Spirit teaches. But,

Third. Those things are more properly said to [be] dictates of man's own reason, which their understanding or judgment suggests as acting of itself and not as being guided or led by the understanding of a teacher. These, for distinction's sake, may be called the dictates of man's reason. A man's reason, from the reliance reason has on the testimony and teaching of a superior understanding, may remotely suggest that which, at the same time, would be contrary to what their reason or judgment would suggest if it were left alone without such testimony. And it is so, in fact, in innumerable cases of human testimony as well as divine.

And this is doubtless the meaning of the Apostle in the text and context when he sets what man's wisdom teaches and what the Holy Ghost teaches in contradistinction; and this is meant in the doctrine when it is said that ministers ought not to preach those things which their own wisdom or reason suggests, but the things that are already dictated by the Spirit of God: i.e., they are not to preach those things that would seem right to their understandings if their understandings were left alone and acted independently of any testimony or teaching from the understanding of any other being. But in their preaching they ought to rely on what

[is] revealed and discovered ready to their hands by an understanding infinitely superior to theirs. And this revelation they are to make the rule in their preaching.

Having thus explained the terms used in the doctrine, I proceed, in the

II. [Second place,] to speak particularly to several things implied in the doctrine as belonging to the duty incumbent on gospel ministers.¹²

First. 'Tis their duty not to reject any doctrine that, by comparing one scripture with another, appears truly to be held forth by the voice of revelation, though it contains difficulties and seeming inconsistencies that their reason can't solve. We ought to receive doctrines that thus appear to be taught in Scripture, though they are mysteries—yea, though they remain mysteries to us still, i.e., though they still contain what we can't comprehend, and still have difficulties remaining in them that we can't solve. We are not to wait till they cease to be mysteries to us before we receive them for truth.

The Apostle in the text and context does expressly oppose the way of the philosophers in Athens and Corinth who sought after wisdom, and of the Jews [who] required a sign, and would believe nothing that their own wisdom or reason could not comprehend.

The Apostle seems to blame those Greek philosophers that they did not receive the doctrine of Christ crucified, though to their reason it seemed foolishness, i.e., though it contained seeming inconsistencies that their reason could not solve. 1 Cor. 1:22-23, "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumblingblock, and to the Greeks foolishness." That which men see no difficulty in but what their reason can solve, no

seeming inconsistency at all, don't appear foolishness to them. And if they in those days ought to have received the doctrines of divine revelation, though they had seeming inconsistencies, then we ought to do so now. The Apostle says, in the next verse after the text, that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (i.e., the things of pure revelation), "for they are foolishness to him." But must we think therefore that the Apostle supposed the natural man acted as reasonably in rejecting these doctrines as the spiritual man who received them?

It is unreasonable to expect any other in a divine revelation, than that it should contain mysteries and things that, to our understandings, should be very difficult and seemingly inconsistent. If God will give us a revelation from heaven of the very truth concerning his own nature and acts, counsels and ways, and of the spiritual and invisible world, 'tis unreasonable to expect any other than that there should be many things in such a revelation that should be utterly beyond our understanding and seem impossible. For when was there ever a time when, if there had been a revelation from heaven of the very truth in philosophical matters, and concerning the nature of created things, which must be supposed to lie more level with our understandings than divine things, but that there would have been many things in such a revelation that would have appeared not only to the vulgar but also to the learned men of that age absurd and impossible? If many of those positions in philosophy which are now received by the learned world as undoubted truths had been revealed from heaven to be truths in past ages, they would have been looked upon as mysterious and difficult, and would seem as impossible as the most

mysterious Christian doctrines do now.

And it is not reasonably to be questioned but that even now, after all the progress that is made in philosophy, if there should come a revelation from heaven of what is the very truth in these matters, without deviating at all from strict truth to accommodate its doctrine to our received notions and principles, there would be many things in it that, to our reason, would seem to be absurd and self-inconsistent. And I make no doubt but that there are learned men here present that do now receive principles in philosophy as certain and out of doubt which, the day has been when, if they had been then told 'em, they would have looked upon 'em [as] difficult as any mystery that is commonly supposed to be in the Bible.

Without doubt, much of the difficulty that we have about many of the doctrines of revelation are from wrong principles. We find that those things that are received as principles in one age and are never once questioned, it comes into nobody's thought that they possibly may not be true—and yet they are exploded in another age as light increases.

If God makes a revelation to us, he must reveal to us the truth as it is without accommodating himself to man's notions and principles; which would indeed be impossible, for those things which are received notions in one age, are contrary to what are so in another. The wisdom of God was not given for any particular age, but for all ages. It surely therefore becomes us to receive what God reveals to be truth and to look upon his word as proof sufficient, whether what he reveals squares with our notions or not.

These things considered, and considering of how sublime nature divine things are which are the subjects about which

divine revelation is conversant, 'tis not to be wondered at, that that revelation contains mysteries. It is rather to be wondered at, that it contains no more. 'Tis probably because God is tender of us and has considered the weakness of our sight, and reveals only such things as he sees an humble honest mind can well enough bear. Such a kind of tenderness we see in Christ towards his disciples, who had many things to say but forbore because they could not bear them.

Certainly those with whom difficulties and seeming inconsistencies are a weighty objection against any doctrines of revelation, don't make suitable allowance for the vast disproportion there is between God's understanding and ours. There are some things—for instance, certain mathematical theorems that relate to quantity and measure—that are known to be true not only by men of learning but by other adult persons of good understanding, which, yet if told to children, appear very absurd and seem to imply great and evident contradictions. And certainly the wisest of us are but children to God. There is vastly a greater disproportion between the understanding of the oldest philosopher or mathematician than between his and that of the meanest child.¹³

'Tis unreasonable to think any other than that many things appear to ourselves exceeding difficult and incomprehensible while our faculties are in the present low state, that may all be unfolded and seem easy in some future state of an higher elevation of our faculties. If one looks for anything in the dark by so low a faculty as the sense of feeling, or by seeing with a dim light, sometimes we cannot find it and it will seem impossible that it should be there; but yet, when a clear light comes to shine into the place and we discern by

a better faculty, or by the same faculty under better advantage, the thing that before was investigable¹⁴ appears very plain to us.

Nor do those who insist on such objections against any doctrine taught by divine revelation, duly consider what must necessarily be supposed to arise from the sublime nature of divine things, about which divine revelation is conversant. Christ says to Nicodemus, John 3:12, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" Plainly intimating that 'tis reasonable to suppose truths concerning heavenly things, or things that in their own nature are much more above us, should contain much greater difficulties and mysteries than those things that are earthly and are of a lower nature, that are more proportioned to our understanding. There are two things that are plain from these remarkable words of Christ:

1. That that tenet which some of late have advanced, that there is no mysteries in religion, is false. Christ's words imply that there are things contained in those doctrines that he came into the world to teach that are mysterious, not only in that sense that they are above a perfect comprehension, but also in that sense that they are difficult to the judgment or belief; as containing seeming impossibilities difficult to be believed, on the same account that the doctrine of the new birth was difficult to Nicodemus, as he expressed himself in the ninth verse, to which those words of Christ are a reply: "how can these things be?" Implying that they seemed to him impossible. And,

2. The words also plainly imply that the more persons or beings are in their own nature above us, the more are doctrines or truths concerning them mysterious to

us and difficult to our reason, [and] the more do those things that are really true concerning them contain seeming inconsistencies and impossibilities. Implying that if Nicodemus said "How can these things be?" or "How is it possible?" when Christ had told him earthly things, much more would he say so if he should tell him heavenly things.

When men will reject doctrines merely because their reason can't reconcile the difficulties that are in them, though otherwise they seem plainly to be doctrines contained in the Scriptures, certainly [it] must be from secret pride and atheism of heart; for men do in fact commonly give one another greater credit than such men do God omniscient. As we see when any person that we have long known and had much experience of his discretion and veracity, testify to us any matter of fact as what they have been eyewitnesses to and have had full and certain knowledge of; and especially if there be many that testify, though it seems a very strange thing to us and we don't see how it is possible that it should be: yet how ready are we to suspect our understanding in such cases and to submit to the force and weight of their positive testimony, though still the matter [is] a great mystery with us.

And even in things that are not matters of fact but matters of judgment, how ready are men to trust to the determinations of a man universally reputed a man of a great genius, of vast penetration and insight into things, if he is positive in anything that appears mysterious to us and is quite contrary to what we thought ourselves clear and certain in before. How are we ready in such a case to suspect ourselves, especially if it be a matter wherein he has been very much versed, and has had much more occasion to look into it

than we, and under greater advantages to know the truth. And why then don't we yield a submission that is in some sort proportionable to that Being, in comparison of whom the greatest earthly genius is an infant and a worm, and his understanding foolishness and darkness?

Second. Ministers are not to make those things that seem right to their own reason a rule in their interpreting a revelation, but the revelation is to be the rule of its own interpretation; i.e., the way that they must interpret Scripture is not to compare the dictates of the Spirit of God in his revelation with what their own reason says, and then to force such an interpretation as shall be agreeable to those dictates, but they must interpret the dictates of the Spirit of God by comparing them with other dictates of that Spirit. As the Apostle is express in the text, they must teach the things the Holy Ghost teaches, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." We must interpret the Scripture by itself, and not by the dictates of our own hearts.

Thus to make what seems right to our reason our rule in interpreting the Scriptures, is still to make our mere reason our highest rule in our search after truth, and God's revelation but a subordinate rule; which certainly is to suppose that our own mere reason is a better rule or a better guide to us than God's revelation, which is contrary to what all that pretend to revealed religion suppose to be the ground of the necessity of a revelation, which is the great imperfection and darkness of man's reason in his fallen state, which makes us to stand in need of a better guide. But if, when the revelation is given, it is [to] be no better a guide, but still reason is the best guide and the superior rule, then how is this defect supplied

by a better guide? Revelation was given to be [a] rule to reason, a guide to our understanding, and not our understanding to be a guide and rule to that. If man's own reason be a superior rule to revelation, we stand in no need of a revelation, having a rule that is better already, and 'tis not worth the while to expect one or admit one.

Indeed, reason must be used in judging whether a pretended revelation be indeed a divine revelation. But when reason has once received and established this, that 'tis indeed a revelation from God's infinite infallible understanding, it is unreasonable after not to make it a rule to our infinitely inferior reason, and to receive it with all its mysteries and difficulties without wresting it at all to conform it to our reason. If a pretended revelation has not credit or evidence enough to be received with all the difficulties that are reasonably to be expected in a divine revelation, and such as, comparing one part of it with another, we find to be indeed contained in it, it han't evidence enough to be received as a divine revelation at all.

This method of first determining what is agreeable to reason and then interpreting the Scripture by it, is making the Scripture wholly of no use to us in those things wherein we so interpret it. The Scripture, it manifests nothing, it declares nothing at all; the manifestation is from something else, viz., reason, and the Scripture is only a clog to that manifestation. Without it, we should have but one thing to do, viz., to determine what the voice of reason was. But now we have double work: first, to determine what the voice of reason is, and then to find out a way how to interpret the Scripture agreeable to it. The deists, that wholly reject revelation and will have no rule but reason, act more reasonably than those who receive revelation, [only]

to set another rule over it. If we won't rely upon a revelation when we have embraced it, let us disclaim it as not worthy of being regarded as such.¹⁵

Third. Ministers are not only not to reject those doctrines of revelation that are difficult to their reason themselves, but are to teach them to their hearers. To say as some do concerning these and those mysterious doctrines that are taught in the Holy Scriptures, that they are things that are attended with great difficulties and are hard to be understood, that have puzzled the heads of the most learned divines, and therefore 'tis imprudent for ministers to meddle with them in their preaching; there are plain practical truths enough for 'em to insist on; 'tis not best for ministers to trouble their people's heads with matters of such nice speculation: to say this is greatly to reproach the wisdom of God and to make ourselves wiser than he. God in his wisdom thought it best that those mysterious doctrines should be taught, otherwise to what purpose did he teach them? Or else we must return to the tenet of the Papists, who suppose the Scriptures were given only for the learned men, and that there are so many things that are mysterious in it that it is not fit to be in the hands of the common people, and therefore don't suffer 'em to have the Scriptures in a known tongue. And certainly if those doctrines ben't fit to be taught the common people, the divines of our nation have done very imprudently in translating those parts of the Scripture that contain them into English.

If God had left it to ministers' discretion what doctrines they had best to teach their people, it would be another case. But God has not done so. Ministers are only sent on his errand; God han't left it to their discretion what their errand shall be. They

are to preach the preaching that he bids 'em (Jonah 3:2). He has put into their hands a Book containing a summary of doctrine, and bids 'em go and preach that word. And what daring presumption would it be for them afterwards to pick and choose among the doctrines contained in that summary, and to say, "These are fit for me to preach, and these are not fit; this part of my errand is fit to be done, and this not"?

God don't need to be told by his messengers what message is fit to deliver to those to whom he sends them, but they are to declare his counsel and are not to shun to declare his whole counsels, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear. Acts 20:27, "For I have not shunned to declare to you all the counsel of God."

Application

[The application] may be in one or two inferences, and a brief exhortation.

First [Inference]. Hence we learn that rule of interpreting Scripture so much insisted upon by many of late, viz., first to determine by our own reason what is agreeable to the moral perfections of God and then to interpret the Scriptures by them, is an unjust and fallacious one. Thus to do is certainly to do the thing that has already been shown to be absurd, viz., to make the dictates of our own reason the highest rule in judging of the things of God and to make it a rule to revelation itself. Reason is to determine that there is a God, and that he is an infinitely perfect holy Being, and that the Scripture is his word. But when we have determined this, modesty and humility and reverence to God requires that we allow that God is better able to declare to us what is agreeable to that perfection than we are to

declare to him or ourselves. Reason tells us that God is just, but God is better able to tell what acts are agreeable to that justice than we are.

The supreme legislative authority of a nation don't ask children what laws are just for them to make or what rules are just for them to proceed by, nor do they wait for the judgment and determination of every subject in order to oblige them to submission. Much less does the infinitely great and wise sovereign of heaven and earth wait for the decision of our judgment and reason what laws or rules of proceeding in him are just in order to require our submission to him.

Divine revelation in these things don't go a-begging for credit and validity by approbation and applause of our understanding. On the contrary, the style in which these revelations are often given forth is this: "Thus saith the Lord," and "I am the Lord," and "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear," and "Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?"

If that be a good rule now, to reject whatsoever to our reason don't seem agreeable to the moral perfections of God, then it always was so: and then why does the Apostle mention such an objection, that some in his days made against something in divine revelation, as unreasonable, as in Rom. 9:19, "Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisteth his will?" That is mentioned as an objection of some against something in divine revelation—whatever that was—and the objection was, that they could not see how it was agreeable to the moral perfections in God. But yet the Apostle sharply reproves it as a daring presumptuous objection. "Nay," says he, "but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that

formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" [Rom. 9:20].

Second [Inference]. If ministers ought to proceed by such a rule in their preaching, no wonder that such confusion has followed on their proceeding by a contrary rule. Seeing that man's own reason, blind as it is, has of late been so much set up as man's highest rule in judging of divine things—and even a rule superior to revelation itself—no wonder that Arminianism and Arianism, deism and atheism have come in like a deluge. When once men come to that, as to set up their reason as their highest rule, 'tis no wonder that they hasten to the same state of darkness that they were in when they had no other rule, when they had no revelation and nothing else to guide 'em but their own reason, when they were in a state of heathenism.

When men come to make God's revelation to be only the handmaid or bondmaid, and to set reason over it as its mistress, no wonder that it soon comes to that, that the mistress casts out the bondmaid and all her progeny, insisting that the mistress' offspring shall inherit alone.

[*Exhortation.*] Before I conclude, I would address myself in a few words to those that are more immediately concerned in the solemn affair of this day. And,

1. To the person that is to be set apart to the sacred work of the gospel ministry this day: Sir, I would now humbly and earnestly recommend to you that Holy Book which God is about to commit into your hands, as containing that message which you are to deliver to this people in his name. God gives you this word—which is his word—to preach that, and not the dictates of your own reason. You are to preach the dictates of God's infinitely superior understanding, humbly submit-

ting your reason as a learner and disciple to that, renouncing all confidence in your own wisdom and entirely relying on God's instructions.

God is now about to deliver to you a summary of doctrines already discovered and dictated to your hand, which you are to teach and zealously to maintain. And if the time should come that you should be reproached for so doing, with such kind of reproaches as are in these days commonly cast on such as earnestly preach the mysterious doctrines of revelation, and you should be called a bigoted zealot; one whose zeal runs before your knowledge; one that durst not indulge a freedom of thought; one that dare not presume to think otherwise than your forefathers thought; one of those that judge of God by themselves, that think that God is a morose, ill-natured sort of being because they are so; one that is a person of little sense or reason: if such proud contemptuous reproaches are cast upon you, merely because you rely more on God's testimony than the dictates of your own reason, the time will soon come when they will be wiped away. Your Lord and Master, that commanded you to preach those doctrines, will defend you and will show in his time who has proceeded with greatest wisdom: you, [who] have relied on God's wisdom; or they, who have been wise in their own eyes, and have leaned to their own understanding and have despised others, that han't trusted more to God's instructions.

2. Let me now earnestly beseech God's people in this place—many of which I have special cause to be concerned for by reason of the distinct relations I have heretofore stood in towards them¹⁶—when they have such doctrines delivered to them from the word of God as are myste-

rious and difficult to their reason, nevertheless meekly to receive them as the word of God. Don't allow yourselves in a caviling, objecting disposition. Consider how that God is infinitely wiser than men. You are certainly safe in following his instructions, however mysterious his instructions are, and there is no safety in any other way. For you to oppose your reason to God's word is the way for you to go backwards and fall, and be broken and snared and taken, to fall into utter confusion and ruin.

And if you should be ridiculed by others in this day of growing error for embracing certain doctrines of revelation that are above man's comprehension, as if you were fools and put out your eyes to receive absurd doctrines by an implicit faith, care not for it, but be willing to become fools for Christ's sake, remembering that he that would be wise must become a fool, that he may be wise and glory in that which they call your foolishness, which you have by God's instruction, remembering that "the foolishness of God is wiser than men."

In thus adhering to the word of God rather than your own wisdom, both pastor and people shall hereafter shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of your Father, and shall appear to be some of those truly wise that shall shine as the brightness of the firmament.

ENDNOTES

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) bk. IV, ch. 18, § 10, p. 696.

² Locke, *Essay*, bk. IV, ch. 18, § 6, p. 693.

³ For the deist controversy, see Gerald R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Peter Gay, *The*

Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Vol. I, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966); Peter Gay, ed., *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1968); Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

⁴ Helen P. Westra, *The Minister's Task and Calling in the Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986) 148. See also Westra, "Jonathan Edwards on 'Faithful and Successful Ministers,'" *Early American Literature* 23 (Winter 1988) 281-90; and Westra, "Jonathan Edwards and 'What Reason Teaches,'" *JETS* 34 (December 1991) 495-503. For a general introduction to Edwards's sermons, see *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 10, Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 3-258; on his views of reason and faith, see esp. pp. 192-199.

⁵ *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 16, Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 83.

⁶ *Christian History* 1 (1743) 178-80; reprinted in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 16*, 111-112.

⁷ Edwards to First Church of Northampton, Dec. 7, 1749, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 12, Ecclesiastical Writings*, ed. David D. Hall (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 532.

⁸ The standards used in preparing Edwards's sermons in the Yale Edition are listed as followed in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 10*, xi-xii: "The text of Jonathan Edwards is reproduced in this Edition

as he wrote in manuscript, or if he published it himself, as it was printed in the first edition. In order to present this text to modern readers as practically readable, several technical adjustments have been made. Those which can be addressed categorically are as follows:

1. All spelling is regularized and conformed to that of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, a step that does not involve much since Edwards was a good speller, used relatively modern spelling, and generally avoided "y" contractions. His orthographic contractions and abbreviations, such as ampersands, "call'd," and "thems." are spelled out, though pronounced contractions, such as "han't" and "ben't" are retained.
2. There is no regular punctuation in most of Edwards's manuscripts and where it does exist, as in the earliest sermons, it tends to be highly erratic. Editors take into account Edwards's example in punctuation related matter, but all punctuation is necessarily that of the editor, including paragraph divisions (especially in some notebooks, such as the "Miscellanies") and the emphasizing devices of italics and capitalization. In reference to capitalization, it should be noted that pronouns referring to the deity are lower case except in passages where Edwards confusingly mixes "he's" referring to God and man: here capitalization of pronouns referring to the deity sorts out the references for the reader.
3. Numbered heads designate important structures of argument in

Edwards's sermons, notebooks, and treatises. Numbering, including spelled-out numbers, has been regularized and corrected where necessary. Particularly in the manuscript sermon texts, numbering has been clarified by the use of systematic schemes of heads and subheads in accordance with eighteenth-century homiletical form, a practice similar to modern analytical outline form. Thus the series of subordinated head number forms, 1, (1), I, a, (a), in the textual exegesis, and the series, I, First, 1, (1), I, a, (a), in Doctrine and Application divisions, make it possible to determine sermon head relationships at a glance.

4. Textual intervention to regularize Edwards's citation of Scripture includes the correction of erroneous citation, the regularizing of citation form (including the standardization of book abbreviations), and the completion of quotations which Edwards's textual markings indicate should be completed (as in preaching).
5. Omissions and lacunae in the manuscript text are filled by insertions in square brackets ([]); repeated dashes sometimes represented by Edwards with a long dash are inserted by curly brackets ({}). In all cases of uncertain readings, annotation gives notice of the problem. Markings in the text designate whole word units even when only a few letters are at issue.
6. Minor slips of the pen or obvious typographical errors are corrected without annotation. Likewise, Edwards's corrections, deletions, and internal shifts of material are

observed but not noted unless of substantive interest.

7. Quotations made by the editor from the Bible (AV) and other secondary sources are printed *verbatim ac literatim*. Edwards's quotations from such sources are often rather free but are not corrected and are not annotated as such unless significant omissions or distortions are involved."

⁹ JE inscribed the MS at the top of p. 1: "Ordination of Mr. Billing. Appointed May 7, 1740."

¹⁰ Here JE deleted the following passage: "so that they treated it with the like haughty contempt as many that call themselves men of reason in these days do those doctrines of divine revelation which are above their reason and beside their philosophy. Therefore the drift of the Apostle throughout this chapter and the latter part of the foregoing, is to show the vanity of man's wisdom or reason when he set up in opposition to or competition with this divine revelation which God has given in the Gospel. He observes how the Greek philosophers objected against the doctrine of a crucified Lord and Savior as foolish and inconsistent."

¹¹ JE deletes "By 'spirit of the world' the Apostle means the spirit of human wisdom and philosophy, as is evident by the context."

¹² JE made two false starts on this head, which he deleted with vertical lines:

"1. 'Tis their duty not to reject any doctrine that, by comparing one scripture with another, appears really to be held forth by the voice

of revelation, though their own reason don't teach it."

"1. 'Tis their duty not to reject any doctrine that is taught by divine revelation, though man's reason don't teach it. If men are to receive no doctrines of revelation that are above reason, or none that are taught by revelation but what their reason can reach and teaches 'em in the first place, [this] is to render a revelation wholly useless, and indeed makes it in effect to be no revelation: for nothing is revealed, nor is anything at all received, because it is revealed by God, but because it is taught by man's own reason; and then there is no need of its being revealed in order to its being revealed. If no doctrine is to be received but what reason teaches, then men must first see whether their reason teaches it before they receive it. And at this rate, 'tis impossible that God's revelation should ever really be the ground of our receiving any one doctrine whatsoever, because no doctrine is received till we have first consulted reason to know whether that teaches it: so that our receiving it is always in this way prior to our hearing the voice of revelation; so that the foundation of our faith is man's reason or wisdom, and not divine revelation, in direct opposition to the rule of the Apostle in the fifth verse of the context: 'that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.'"

¹³This passage could well have been drawn from "Miscellanies" no. 652, "Christian Religion, Mysteries in Religion" (c. 1734), in which JE is

responding to the objection that revelation contains many things beyond the scope of human reason. In the entry, JE describes how he demonstrated to a thirteen-year-old boy the apparently mysterious fact "that a piece of matter two inches square was eight times so big as one but one inch square." The final sentence of the entry bears a striking similarity to the final sentence of this paragraph: "Doubtless, there is a vastly greater distance between our understanding and God's, than between this boy's and that of the greatest philosopher or mathematician."

¹⁴Archaic for "undiscoverable" or "unsearchable."

¹⁵JE deletes with a vertical line: "Though we make the dictates of man's reason to have the force of a rule in interpreting Scripture, and so to make it comply with reason, wrest it from the proper signification of the words as appearing by comparing scripture with scripture, treat God so as it would be accounted ridiculous to treat men. Whenas men whose language and manner of speaking we have been acquainted with."

¹⁶Cold Spring, later Belchertown, was originally settled in 1737 in part by inhabitants of Northampton.