

Silence With Full Submission?: Jonathan Edwards, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Rhetoric of Misogyny in the Great Awakening

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In 1742/3, Jonathan Edwards published a work which is usually abbreviated by scholars as *Some Thoughts*.¹ The full title, in typical 18th century-style, is rather longer than this, and continues: *Concerning the present Revival of Religion in New-England, And the Way in which it ought to be acknowledged and promoted*. It goes on from there. Edwards' work, as a theologian and thinker, as a writer, and as a prime-mover in the religious revivals of the 1730's and '40s, is the subject of wide and rich scholarly interest. Much of this scholarship, it seems, has been at least partially motivated by a desire to recuperate and complicate Edwards' reputation after the rough handling it received in groundbreaking studies by Perry Miller and others.² For Miller, while Edwards was a giant intellect and a masterful American writer, he was nonetheless rooted in "a primitive religious conception which often seems hopelessly out of touch with even his own day."³ One feels that C. C. Goen, editor of the *Great Awakening* volume of Yale's *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, is so stung by precisely this sort of response to Edwards that in fact he projects the scholarly squabble back into the debates raging in 18th century New England between Edwards and his critics. In sitting down to pen *Some Thoughts*, Goen tells us, a saddened but clear-eyed and courageous Edwards was throwing "himself into the midst of the fray in one last heroic effort to make peace."⁴ The "fray" concerned religious revival,

¹ The book bears the date of 1742, but was apparently published in March of the following year. See Goen, *The Great Awakening*, p. 189. All citations of Edwards' work are from Goen. When possible I have consulted original editions for all other 18th texts at 18th Century Collections Online (Gale). I accessed the 16th century translation of Calvin's sermon on 1 Timothy at Early English Books Online (Chadwyck-Healey).

² For a recent reappraisal of Miller and Peter Gay on Edwards' historiography, for example, see Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, pp. 94-95. See Hatch and Stout, *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, pp. 3-5, for more general comments on Miller's critical legacy in Edwards' studies.

³ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. xiii.

⁴ Goen, *The Great Awakening*, p. 65.

particularly its social effects. Conservative critics, like Charles Chauncy, minister at Boston's First Church, argued that the manic behavior of congregants undergoing revival was akin to an irreligious and solipsistic enthusiasm which New Englanders had thought they'd seen the backside of with the expulsion of Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts a century earlier.⁵

In spite of the differences separating Miller from Goen (in this relatively artificial opposition I have constructed between them) with regard to Edwards as a religious writer, they do have something in common – the apparent inability to recognize the nature of Edwards' rhetorical stance. For Miller negatively, positively for Goen, Edwards' is an authentic religious spirit, and his writings are a relatively straightforward articulation of his complex beliefs and perspectives. But as the longer title of *Some Thoughts* indicates, Edwards was as intent on shaping perspectives as articulating them. In this, of course, he was not so very different from his own critics. Still, studies of Edwards' rhetoric have tended to focus on the artistry of the sermons, or the language of religious experience itself, or some combination of the two.⁶ Only a few scholars, and usually in passing, have noted how thoroughly rhetorical Edwards' theological work's are.⁷ This article is an initial attempt to shift the focus slightly. Rather than discussing theological issues, or breaking new historical ground, it concerns the intriguing rhetorical use Edwards makes of a few key New Testament passages in *Some Thoughts*, his culminating defense of revivalism. As limited as this project is, I nevertheless hope to use my analysis to suggest that it might be profitable to read Edwards' large corpus of works – sermons, treatises, and letters – more

⁵ See Lang, "A Flood of Errors," pp. 168-169.

⁶ See Yarbrough and Adams' *Delightful Conviction* on "the rhetoric of conversion."

⁷ Ava Chamberlain, "Self Deception as a Theological Problem," p. 541, for example, suggests that Edwards "like many great theologians . . . was a polemicist . . . [who did not often publish his] views without the catalyst afforded by theological controversy." However, Miller suggests in an interesting aside, that the success of Edward's *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God . . . in Northampton* (1736) was due in part to the fact that its audience responded to it as they might respond to sentimental literature; see his *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 137.

consistently with an ear for his rhetorical practices. Doing so, I will argue, is not tantamount to questioning Edwards' sincerity. Unlike Goen, who seems rather simplistically to read the tracts of Charles Chauncy as mere rhetoric when contrasted with Edwards' own finer, carefully reasoned theological explanations, I take as a basic presupposition of my paper that a reading of Edwards which is more carefully attuned to his rhetoric can only enhance our understanding of what Edwards was doing in some of his most essential work.⁸

The present article is so narrow in scope, however, not simply because it would be futile to essay a thorough reading even of a portion of Edwards' work in these few pages, although this is certainly true, but also because it takes its cue from some suggestive passages in Steven Mailloux's *Reception Histories* which focus on the roles that readings of select biblical texts play in broader, ideologically-charged contexts.⁹ Mailloux advocates an antifoundationalist view of interpretation, one with a strongly historical flavor, the better to acknowledge that "questions of interpretive validity are rhetorically negotiated in every particular case . . . through particular rhetorical transactions over historically situated topics."¹⁰ Because it is antifoundationalist, Mailloux's work tends to downplay, if not reject altogether, traditional notions of reading v. misreading. That is, without a master key, there is no single, authoritative way to unlock the meaning of texts. But the rhetorical dimension of this theory of interpretation is more complex, and more interesting than that, and suggests that misreadings are never anything other than specifically motivated readings

⁸ Referring to an anonymous text attributed to Chauncy, Goen, in *The Great Awakening*, p. 63, writes that the latter used its "shabby" portrait of religious enthusiasts to "set up [an] appalling scarecrow in the garden of the Lord." Edwards' *Some Thoughts*, on the other hand, was only in the least important of ways about "persuading antirevivalists to quit hindering the larger purposes of God in history"; *ibid.*, p. 71. To Miller, meanwhile, Chauncy and others like him were "men of tact, students of the free and catholic spirit"; *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 168.

⁹ See especially chapter 4, "Ideological Rhetoric and Bible Politics: Fuller Reading Douglass."

¹⁰ Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, p. 80.

in particular rhetorical-political situations. As he puts it, from this point of view “hermeneutic theory becomes rhetorical history.”¹¹

This article is an attempt to follow Mailloux’s lead, examining Edwards’ work while engaging in “rhetorical hermeneutics.”¹² I will be discussing Jonathan Edwards’ use of typically misogynistic passages from the Pauline pseudepigrapha as well as from genuine Pauline texts. I am primarily interested in how Edwards reads one passage in particular, 1 Tim. 2:9-12, in his *Some Thoughts*. Questions about his reading/misreading of this passage will be posed after examining a number of other texts and issues in order to suggest something about the rhetorical situation(s) in which Edwards’ interpretive work participates. In the process I hope to suggest something about how applying Mailloux’s rhetorical hermeneutics to biblical interpretations requires expanding one’s understanding of rhetorical history to include the history of interpretation as well, or rather that the history of interpretation becomes, in some cases, part of the immediate historical, and thus rhetorical, context.

As I have noted, *Some Thoughts* was published in 1742/3, but Edwards had begun writing on revival several years earlier. His *Faithful Narrative* about the revival of 1734-5 in Northampton, itself an expansion of earlier writings, was published in 1737. This work was followed in 1741 by *The Distinguishing Marks Of a Work of the Spirit of God. Applied to that uncommon Operation that has lately appeared on the Minds of many of the People of this Land*. Then, a few years later, we have the text of *Some Thoughts*. The 1734-35 revival had been a time of great excitement, but the spiritual ardor of Edwards’ congregation had seemed to be cooling until the arrival of itinerant preachers in 1740, most prominent among them George Whitefield, was able both to revivify the awakening scene in Northampton and also to link similar small-scale revivals in different localities into a “major intercolonial

¹¹ Ibid., p. 81.

¹² Ibid., p. ix.

event.”¹³ In the meantime, Edwards was also corresponding with friends of the revival and was most assuredly reading the publications of antirevivalists who, especially after 1740, were growing more and more alarmed at the spread of religious fervor. These critics, including Charles Chauncy, were not against religious revival *per se*. Rather, they were concerned with a range of issues they considered highly problematic – from a general sense that religious fervor in the awakenings was dangerously irrational to the more specific fear of conflicts arising between conservative ministers and disruptive, pro-revival elements in their congregations.¹⁴

As is often the case with public discourse, however, the rhetoric of the pro- versus antirevivalist debates was much more intensely charged and, given the theological issues involved, much less pragmatically framed than this summary might suggest. For example, writers like Chauncy chose to focus their attacks on the disruptive, antirationalist tendencies of the awakenings in part by suggesting that revivalists were scandalously pandering to, and inciting women. In a letter of 1742 he describes a typical scene: “the speaker delivers himself with the greatest vehemence of both voice and gesture, and in the most frightful language his genius will allow of. If this has [the?] intended effect upon one or two weak women, the shrieks catch from one to another, till a great part of the congregation is affected.”¹⁵ This in itself is bad enough, but when such behavior leads women to think that they can speak their minds in church, or that they can take upon themselves the role of teachers, then the situation, Chauncy would argue, has gotten dangerously out of hand.¹⁶ Undoubtedly such criticism reflects a certain anxiety with regard to the new ways in which

¹³ Carroll, *The Routledge Historical Atlas*, p. 56.

¹⁴ For a summary of the concerns of pro- and antirevivalist ministers, as well as the actual fallout of the revivals, see Carroll, *Routledge Historical Atlas*, pp. 56-59, and Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, p. 277. A more polemical review can be found in Goen, *The Great Awakening*, pp. 46-65. It should be noted, here, that Edwards was no uncritical supporter of revivalism in all its manifestations.

¹⁵ Chauncy, *A letter from a gentleman in Boston*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ See *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England*, pp. ix, 105, Chauncy’s response to Edwards’ *Some Thoughts*.

women were finding the freedom to express themselves religiously while engaging actively in the life of the church.¹⁷ But the implicit or overt misogyny of antirevivalist ministers also functioned as a potentially powerful rhetorical device since it allowed them to rely upon biblical authority while sidestepping dualistic polemics identifying them essentially as stick-in-the-mud conservatives (the Old Lights), unwilling to recognize the powerful work of God in New England, vis-à-vis the forward-looking, Spirit-inspired proponents of revival (the New Lights).¹⁸ Both sides of the debate, of course, had recourse to the Bible. Edwards seems to have been particularly fond of references to David's ecstatic dancing before the ark in 2 Samuel 6. But the extent to which such passages sanctioned irrationality, a key issue for antirevivalists, was an open question. Far less subject to debate were passages from the New Testament which insist upon the subordination of women to men, especially in religious life. The fact that women were starting to usurp male authority for themselves as 'lay-exhorters' and teachers was, according to Chauncy, "a plain breach of the commandment of the Lord."¹⁹ Others made the same point. An apparently collective letter decrying the itinerancy of George Whitefield, and including "attestations" by Chauncy, among others, complained about "exhorters," not professional ministers mind you, who felt they had the authority to preach. Many of these exhorters were men, certainly, but they apparently targeted women, for they "go from town to town, creep into houses, lead captive

¹⁷ It is a commonplace of studies of early American religious historiography that women outnumbered men in church membership. Cedric Cowing, "Sex and Preaching," however, has shown that during the awakening(s) the number of male converts seems to have increased dramatically, with men joining churches sometimes, and in some areas, at a greater rate than women. Nevertheless, as Susan Juster suggests, *Disorderly Women*, pp. 4-5, the experiences of both men and women during the revivals were often couched in a gendered conceptual language which emphasized the feminization religious life which was profoundly disturbing to advocates of traditionalism.

¹⁸ In his *Enthusiasm Described*, p. 26, Chauncy is clearly sensitive to rhetorically powerful accusations against people such as him who "have been stigmatized as Opposers of the Work of God." And who wouldn't be? In *Some Thoughts*, for instance, Edwards suggests that opposition to revivalism is due to Satanic influence, p. 410, and that the opponents of God's work "shall in an extraordinary manner be given over to a state of spiritual death and ruin, that they shall remarkably appear dead while alive, and shall be as walking rotten corpses, while they go about amongst men," p. 361.

¹⁹ See his *Enthusiasm Described*, p. 13. The "commandment of the Lord" in this context is that of 1 Cor. 14:34-35.

silly women, and then the men.”²⁰ Women are generally described as weaker, in these texts, more susceptible to adverse influence than men. But the adjective “silly,” and the suggestion that these illicit exhorters sneak into houses surreptitiously to snare such women, is a direct reference to 2 Timothy 3:6, which describes how these unscrupulous individuals “are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts” (AV). This is the same epistolary context, we should note, which asserts that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Such criticism gives strong biblical warrant to the critics and disparages uncouth revival behaviors as feminine (read: weak, silly, sinful). Undoubtedly, as in the case of Chauncy’s exhaustive research into actual accounts of revival in towns throughout New England, much of this criticism is simply a response to experiences many found troubling and impossible to ignore. However, it’s also likely that, to some extent at least, this sort of attack was aimed more or less directly at Jonathan Edwards himself. As Frank Lambert as noted, Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative* “quickly emerged as a model for revival accounts elsewhere.”²¹ Lambert argues that the publication of the *Faithful Narrative* actually spurred the writing of dozens of similar books over the next few years.²² As a text which provided a kind of paradigmatic representation of revivalism, then, the *Faithful Narrative* may have been partly responsible for subsequent developments in New England. Certainly, as Yarbrough and Adams point out, “it is difficult to read this document [the *Faithful Narrative*] without sensing that [Edwards] was condoning, indeed promoting, an enthusiastic frenzy, one that no rules could contain and no reason could explain. Given this, it is particularly unfortunate that Edwards chose two exceedingly sentimental cases as his

²⁰ *The state of religion in New-England, since the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield’s arrival there. In a letter from a gentleman in New-England to his friend in Glasgow. To which is subjoined an appendix, containing attestations of the principal facts in the letter, by the Reverend Mr. Chauncy, etc.*, p. 8.

²¹ Lambert, “The First Great Awakening,” p. 654.

²² *Ibid.*

primary examples – a pathetic, dying young woman, Abigail Hutchinson, and a four-year-old upstart girl, Pheobe Bartlett.”²³ Publishing these case histories was ‘unfortunate’ because it may have given some initial inspiration to those antirevivalists such as Chauncy who were more than willing to exploit the issue of women’s participation in revival activities to their own advantage.²⁴

In *Some Thoughts*, Edwards seems clearly to be responding to such critics by acknowledging the dangers of pushing social and gender boundaries too far beyond the pale. He writes, for instance, that “when private Christians, that are no more than mere brethren, exhort and admonish one another, it ought to be in an humble manner, rather by way of entreaty, than with authority; and the more, according as the station of persons is lower. Thus it becomes women and those that are young, ordinarily to be at a greater distance from any appearance of authority in speaking than others: thus much at least is evident by that in 1 Tim 2:9, 11-12.”²⁵ The stress here falls upon maintaining, even in the intensity of religious revival, a proper awareness of social status. But the implication is that women in particular should restrain themselves. Still, even here, after Chauncy had published his attacks against women’s lay-exhorting in *Enthusiasm Described*, Edwards merely suggests that women should be careful ‘ordinarily’ not to ‘appear’ publicly to be exhorting others. A very muted criticism of the practice indeed.²⁶ Edwards’ more liberal

²³ Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, p. 43. See also Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative*, pp. 191-205. Edwards spells the young girl’s name Phebe Bartlet. Cowing, “Sex and Preaching,” p. 629, agrees that these two stories “aided contemporary critics.”

²⁴ Griffin, however, argues that Chauncy, in his 1732 funeral sermon for a young woman named Elisabeth Price, had painted a sentimental portrait of her conversion not unlike the stories presented by Edwards in the *Faithful Narrative*. However, whereas Chauncy might have later felt that the Elisabeth Price story was proof that “one could be saved without a spectacular conversion experience,” he would undoubtedly have taken offence at the fact that Abigail Hutchinson, in Edwards’ account, was sorely tempted to take to the streets to exhort sinners, and was therefore very nearly a proto-type of the female lay-exhorter Chauncy would especially condemn; see *Old Brick*, p. 41. See also Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative*, p. 194.

²⁵ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, p. 486.

²⁶ Edwards consistently downplays the importance of this issue throughout *Some Thoughts*. For example, again with reference to lay-exhorting, he says that “censuring others is the worst disease with which this

attitude would certainly have multiple, overlapping explanations. For starters, his wife had experienced an intense religious awakening which he immortalizes in *Some Thoughts*. Sensitive, one imagines, to the critical reception his earlier stories of female converts had received, Edwards is careful never to name Sarah as the person described in this portion of the text.²⁷ Indeed, he never hints at his subject's gender either. Still, one gets the sense from this account that Sarah, like Abigail Hutchinson, had at least felt the urge to exhort others to their salvation.²⁸ If this were the case, Edwards may understandably have been tentative in his criticism. More general pastoral concerns might also have played a role too, reflecting Edwards' intense desire that the awakenings and the revival spirit spread as broadly as possible, without undue restrictions on who might participate and how.

Still, *Some Thoughts* is interesting for our purposes not merely because it downplays critics' concerns about the active role women were appropriating in the revivals, but also because it shows Edwards' skill at engaging his opponents on their own rhetorical turf. As we have seen, Chauncy and others were using New Testament texts – particularly 1 Cor. 14:34-35, the letters to Timothy and Titus, and 1 Peter – to enforce gender boundaries and to insist upon the stability of a conservative social order. 20th century liberal readers of the Bible can rely upon well-established scholarly traditions showing that these texts are either later pseudepigrapha or editorial insertions that do not reflect general practice in the earliest Christian communities. That is, we have the luxury of combating arguments against women's agency in religious life by denying the authority of the very texts upon which

affair has been attended"; it is a "sinful error," he admits, but at the same time it is "not so inconsistent with true godliness as some imagine," p. 322.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 331-347.

²⁸ Edwards writes that she was "astonished that God's own children should be backward to strive and deny themselves for God . . . [and that she manifested] earnest longings that all God's people might be clothed with humility and meekness, like the Lamb of God." Apparently, however, Sarah was not at all given to censoriousness, since she felt a "great grief" when she noticed this tendency in others. See *Some Thoughts*, p. 338.

such arguments rely. For Edwards this was not an option, of course.²⁹ He could simply choose to ignore such texts, and in *Some Thoughts* this is precisely what he does with 1 Cor. 14:34-35. Carefully excising this material provides him with a certain flexibility in the reading of that letter, but little ammunition to combat the rhetorical force of its use by others. He could, on the other hand, make something of an alternative use of problematic texts. And this is how he handles a very restrictive passage from 1 Timothy: “In like manner also, [I will] that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; [b]ut (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (2:9-12, AV). Edwards, citing this text in *Some Thoughts*, remarkably ignores its misogyny, or rather he democratizes the text, renders it gender neutral, in order to reduce its misogynistic valence. This is all the more remarkable in that he cites the text at length:

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety.” And the Apostle means that this virtue shall have place, not only in civil communication, but also in spiritual communication, and in our religious concerns and behavior, as is evident by what follows: vss. 11-12, “let the women learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” Not that I would hence infer that women’s mouths should be shut up from Christian conversation; but that all I mean from it at this time is that modesty, or shamefacedness, and reverence towards men, ought to have some place, even in our religious communication one with another.”³⁰

The brief caveat, “all I mean from it at this time,” is perhaps little more than a diversionary tactic, since Edwards does not return to flesh out a fuller or more literal reading of the passage. Moreover, this passage is especially charged with unusual meaning in that it occurs in *Some Thoughts* in conjunction with 1 Peter 3:2, which Edwards similarly

²⁹ Robert E. Brown argues, in his *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 177, that Edwards was well aware of the developments in historical-critical biblical scholarship, and that he wasn’t at all reluctant to make use of it when he could. Edwards’ primary task vis-à-vis this criticism, however, remained that of arguing “for the abiding relevance of Scripture history in an age in which its integrity and thus its religious necessity were being openly eroded.”

³⁰ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, pp. 426-427.

denatures through broad application.³¹ Clearly the message is that while the New Testament might have been speaking of women, Edwards means to apply the injunctions to all church members alike, regardless of gender. And, insofar as the text does still speak of women, Edwards makes clear – as do most commentaries – that it has no bearing on women’s “Christian conversation,” understood very generally.

In context, Edwards is addressing the complaints which critics like Chauncy have launched against the revivalists. Part 4 of *Some Thoughts*, “shewing what things are to be corrected or avoided in promoting this work, or in our behavior under it,” recognizes three causes of error: “1. Undiscerned spiritual pride. 2. Wrong principles. 3. Ignorance of Satan’s advantages and devices.”³² Our passage above falls into Edwards’ discussion of the first of these categories, and more specifically concerns a mode of spiritual pride which produces “a certain unsuitable and self-confident boldness before God and men.”³³ These are issues which, since they were so provocatively evoked by opponents, Edwards could not ignore. The task of enumerating such errors, however, was apparently not one he relished, and he begins this part of the book with some of his most scathing attacks on the antirevivalists. Nevertheless, this section is the longest in the book, and Edwards is quite thorough in detailing errors and suggesting ways of avoiding them. And in fact, this seems to be how the passage from 1 Timothy is functioning. It allows Edwards to clarify what he considers the proper demeanor of church members in their communications with one another: they are to be modest, shamefaced (modestly reserved), and reverent. Apparently this conclusion derives from the passage’s language of sobriety, silence, submissiveness, modesty.

³¹ 1 Peter 3:1-2 reads: “Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear” (AV).

³² Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, p. 414.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

That several of these terms refer very specifically, in the letter, to women's dress, seems to matter little. Indeed, the original intent of the passage carries almost no weight at all here. Just how Edwards derives principles of civil communication among men and women from an insistence upon women's silence and submission is not at all clear. Neither does he offer any authority or justification for his creative interpretation. It is doubtful that he could have, had he wanted to. This passage from 1 Timothy has consistently been read in the Christian tradition as a divinely inspired warrant for keeping women in check during public religious gatherings. Actually, the influence of such passages has often been subtler, as theologians and others read them into their broader anthropological concerns. Calvin, for instance, writes in a sermon of 1579 that women wishing to speak and teach in public are fighting against nature.³⁴ True, in the same sermon Calvin suggests that men as well as women might learn from Paul's letter; but in the case of men, submissiveness refers strictly to humility before the word of God, a general suggestion not requiring the text of 1 Timothy for its validation. In an exegetical rather than homiletic context, however, Calvin's reading of the passage in question is much more exclusive. His commentary on 1 Timothy endorses a similar anthropology – women, “by their condition,” are forbidden from teaching.³⁵ But it also evinces a deep anxiety about just what the granting of religious authority to women might mean. Without any textual basis, Calvin seems to claim that Paul is concerned not merely with the natural weakness of women, or with the question of appropriate social boundaries, but rather with a much more dangerous matter altogether: women gaining political authority and ruling themselves. He writes that “to teach implies the rank of power or authority,” but that since “*gunaikokratia* (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing,” women should not

³⁴ “The 17th Sermon upon the second Chapter” of 1st Timothy. See *Sermons of M. John Calvin*, pp. 198-211.

³⁵ See the Christian Classics Ethereal Library web page, at: www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol43/htm/iii.iv.iv.htm.

teach, the better to prevent such ‘government’ from developing in the first place.³⁶ Luther, though not as vehement or as anxious, and, at least in his 1528 Lectures on 1 Timothy, less reliant upon a purely misogynistic anthropology, nonetheless also endorses, for the sake of peace and order, the silence and subordination of women to men in church gatherings.³⁷ Even some of the more liberal commentaries Edwards is likely to have consulted throughout his career do little to ameliorate 1 Timothy.³⁸ Matthew Poole’s 1685 *Commentary on The Holy Bible*, which offers an extensive list of biblical exceptions to v. 2:12, makes plain that in the general order of things “it is the woman’s part silently to learn, showing thereby a subjection to the man.”³⁹ And Matthew Henry’s *Exposition* makes but the merest gesture towards complication, preferring simply to justify the text as it stands.⁴⁰

Still, there is one very curious parallel with which Edwards may have been familiar. Ambrose, in his *Duties of the Clergy*, 1:18:70, writes about the importance of modesty in priestly, i.e., men’s prayer, and cites, in quick succession, 1 Peter 3:4 and 1 Timothy 2:9, a pairing of texts nearly identical to Edwards’ citations above.⁴¹ The texts in this case are not rendered gender-neutral, but specifically applicable to men alone. Does Edwards intend, here, to echo Ambrose? As we have seen, he is also concerned in this context with insisting upon modesty, and uses the passages to counter tendencies towards pride in the experience of new converts, or newly invigorated participants in the revival. It is tempting to imagine that Edwards might have turned to Ambrose, that staunch anti-feminist Doctor of the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See “Lectures on 1 Timothy,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 28, p. 276-7.

³⁸ See Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, pp. 5-13, for lists of texts Edwards is known to have consulted or had access to.

³⁹ Poole, *Commentary*, p. 778.

⁴⁰ See Henry’s *An exposition of the several epistles [sic] contained in the New Testament*, pp. 301-302. For the importance of this massive study for Edwards’ own work, see Stephen Stein, “Jonathan Edwards and the Rainbow,” p. 443, n. 7.

⁴¹ 1 Peter 3:4, speaking of women: “But let it [i.e., your adorning] be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (AV). In the self-consciously inclusive language of the NRSV, the same verse reads: “Rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight.”

Church, as a way of taming responses to his very liberal reading of these texts by linking his reading to Ambrose. On the other hand, 1 Peter and 1 Timothy both concern issues of women's attire, and Edwards would not have needed Ambrose to make the connection between them. Moreover, such an oblique, covert citation of Ambrose is unlikely to have had much of an impact.

It is perhaps better, therefore, to assume that Edwards is going it alone in the passage cited above, with the goal perhaps of establishing a precedent in the use of the Pastorals and other epistles to justify a greater role for women. Rather than engaging in a duel of citations, Edwards goes right to the New Testament source of some of Chauncy's claims about women and revivalism. One might say he engages in a kind of hermeneutics of credulity, an interpretive stance according to which one reads problematic biblical passages *as though* one were unaware either of their social effects or of the polemical interpretive history behind such effects – the imposition, in other words, of an enlightened naiveté. This would imply a certain ironic dimension to the interpretive act, of course, and while one cannot discount the possibility in advance, the idea that Edwards might have mustered the requisite detachment for irony in his reading of scripture seems difficult to maintain. On the other hand, Robert Brown hints that such a possibility might seriously be considered since Edwards was “thoroughly taken with the problems created by the application of” the two dominant forms of biblical criticism emerging in his day: a scientific historical criticism, and an “alternative form of criticism, expressed in the form of satire or wit.”⁴² He suggests that misunderstandings among scholars of Edwards have been engendered by the failure to recognize that “the critical culture in which Edwards operated was a far more textured and religiously cosmopolitan environment than is usually acknowledged.”⁴³

⁴² Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Still, setting this tantalizing approach aside for a future project, I'd like to argue another possibility. What I would suggest is that at issue in Edwards' curiously gender-neutral, and therefore almost entirely untraditional and even, from the perspective of a literal reading, nonsensical use of the passage cited above is a much more profound anxiety over the relevance of the Bible itself at a time of radical social and religious change. The awakenings were, for Edwards, an indication that the *eschaton* was approaching. While he was careful not to put an inordinate amount of stress on his millennialism in *Some Thoughts*, he certainly did hope that what he and his congregation were experiencing as revival might actually be a "forerunner" to the consummation of history in God's all-encompassing plan.⁴⁴ If it were the case, as Edwards passionately believed, that revivalism was the work of God, then, as he argues everywhere in *Some Thoughts*, it would be an ungodly mistake to hamper the revivals – even if it meant that one would have to accept a variety of unusual behaviors and unsettling shifts in the social landscape. As he puts it, "it might be an instance of the divine wisdom, in the beginning of it [i.e., of the End], to suffer so many irregularities and errors in conduct . . . for it will be very likely to be of excellent benefit to his church" later on.⁴⁵ The question for Edwards may have been how to square new behaviors with old texts. Antinomianism was obviously not an option for Edwards, even though Chauncy suggested, specifically with respect to questions of gender, it was.⁴⁶ And so, confronted with sharply polemical, if nevertheless literal and traditional readings of such New Testament passages as we have been considering, Edwards may have felt himself challenged to justify the Bible *via* the new interpretive perspective afforded him by his experience of revival.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, p. 324.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ In "A Flood of Errors," p. 161, Lang argues that Chauncy's *Seasonable Thoughts* "links language and gender in ways which illuminate" the conflict between revivalists and antirevivalists.

Indeed, early in *Some Thoughts* he says quite explicitly that “we have a rule near at hand” for understanding the new work of God, “a sacred book that God himself has put into our hands . . . which book I think we must reject, not only in some particular passages, but in the substance of it, if we reject such a work.”⁴⁷ The stakes, obviously, were quite high. Of course, such language can also be understood as part of the larger rhetorical context. Both sides of the debate, in fact, were making precisely this sort of claim, and in nearly the same language. Chauncy, in his *Seasonable Thoughts*, again on the issue of women’s activity in public worship, says “we must give up all pretence to the scripture as our rule, if we may depart from it in a case, wherein the mind of Christ has been, in so express a manner, made known to us. Read 1 Cor. 14. 34, 35, and 1 Tim. 2. 11, 12”⁴⁸ As a rhetorical ploy, such language is perhaps meant to back one’s opponent against a wall – confront him with justifying scripture and then force him to deny, before all witnesses, the word of God. This certainly seems to be a presupposition at work in Edwards, who claims: “the whole tenor of the Gospel proves it [i.e., that it is indeed the work of God], all the notion of religion that the Scripture gives us confirms it.”⁴⁹ He seems to take it as a foregone conclusion that the Bible, as is, without the need for any careful or creative reinterpretation, already supports and endorses the pro-revival position.

And yet, perhaps this is precisely the problem. The New Testament does, in its broad strokes, indicate that God’s spirit works in the world powerfully to disrupt normal expectations. The apostles in Acts and the members of Paul’s communities experienced remarkable gifts which drew the curious attention, and also elicited the dismay, of outsiders. And what is the Book of Revelation if not a warrant for believing that religious experience might take, in time, the most spectacular forms? Edwards would have had no trouble, therefore, believing that the Bible as his “rule” would hold. That is, until he reread such

⁴⁷ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, pp. 330-331.

⁴⁸ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts*, p. 227.

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, p. 331.

texts as 1 Tim. 2:9-12 in light both of the sorts of criticisms leveled by Chauncy, and of his own recognition of the important, indeed essential roles women were playing in the revival.⁵⁰ Of course, he had to endorse even so counterproductive a New Testament passage as this in order to show that the Bible as a whole supported revivalism. Edwards' commitment, it seems, was to the revival before the Bible, but the Bible was certainly a close second. This might explain the tensions in his reading above. He needed to recognize the literal content of the passage – hence his truncated caveat – certainly in order to do justice to the text but also perhaps to forestall charges of misreading. Chauncy was a careful reader of Edwards' readings, and in his *Seasonable Thoughts* he tracks down Edwards' sources and notes where the minister from Northampton has gone astray.⁵¹ At the same time, Edwards needed to reduce the apparent force of such texts by interpreting them in a different key.

Doing both at the same time may have been the rhetorical equivalent of robbing Peter to pay Paul. But what's important to notice is how our reading of Edwards' creative hermeneutics within a hotly contested, ongoing public debate about revival, enriches our sense of how Edwards read the Bible. Most scholarship on Edwards' use of the Bible has naturally focused on the theological dimension, on Edwards' as a theologian. Perhaps, with Robert Brown's recent work, we have definitively left behind that scholarly era described so picturesquely by Stephen Stein as a time when the exegetical portions of Edwards' major treatises “appear[ed] to readers merely as salt sprinkled on meat, seasoning unrelated to the substance of his concerns.”⁵² Still, more work needs to be done, and more systematically, to complicate our understanding of how Edwards' biblical interpretation arises out of and

⁵⁰ Besides Edwards' wife Sarah, and the two converts – Abigail Hutchinson and Phebe Bartlet – mentioned earlier, Edwards tells us of a young woman who had been, prior to her own conversion, one of the most notorious “company-keepers in the whole town,” *Some Thoughts*, p. 149. Her totally unexpected spiritual about-face had profoundly “affected most of the [other] young people,” p. 192, leading Edwards to believe that “God made” her conversion “the greatest occasion of awakening to others, of anything that ever came to pass in the town,” p. 149.

⁵¹ See *Seasonable Thoughts*, p. 81ff, and the notes in Goen, *The Great Awakening*, pp. 307-12.

⁵² Stein, “Jonathan Edwards and the Rainbow,” p. 440.

responds to specific rhetorical contexts. This is especially so, I think, with regard to Edwards' use of the Bible in his polemical and apologetic tracts. What can and has seemed merely *de rigueur* for a theologian – the frequent recourse to scriptural citation – should be examined more carefully as a rhetorical tactic, a creative interpretive tool in larger ideological debates, one which pits the language of opponents against both the Bible and the interpretive tradition.

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