

More than Metaphors: Jonathan Edwards and the Beauty of Nature

Stephen J. Nichols

God is not negligent of the world he made.

– Jonathan Edwards

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS is Research Professor of Christianity and Culture at Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Nichols frequently speaks in churches and at conferences and has written widely on church history, historical theology, and the church and culture. Among his many books are *Heaven on Earth: Capturing Jonathan Edwards's Vision of Living in Between* (Crossway, 2006), *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Crossway, 2007), and a recent book for children, *Church History ABCs: Augustine and Twenty-Five Other Heroes of the Faith* (Crossway, 2010).

“‘TIS EVIDENT,” EDWARDS writes in Miscellany 1304 during his tenure at Stockbridge, “That God is not negligent of the world that he has made. He has made it for his use and, therefore, doubtless he uses it, which implies that he takes care of it and orders it and governs it, that it may be directed to the ends for which he has made it.”¹ It is equally evident that Edwards, following the lead of his God, also was not negligent of the world that God made. Doubtless, Edwards used the world God made.

Jonathan Edwards also took care of it. Edwards also ordered it and governed it—in the way that a vice-regent could, that is. Finally, Edwards did all

of this in the direction for which this world was cre-

ated, the glory of the Creator-Redeemer, the glory of the Triune God.

This article explores Edwards's use of the beauty of nature in a variety of his writings from sermons to the “Miscellanies.” While Edwards's ultimate, or as he would put it, “chief,” use of nature was the glory of the triune God, his “subordinate ends” are multiplex. These subordinate ends of Edwards's use of nature squarely place him in a theological context that views the world as God-given and as revelational. Creation, or nature, is as Calvin put it, “the theater of God's glory.” This emphasis in the Reformed tradition especially served Edwards well as he sought to give expression to the glory of God in his ministry at Northampton and at Stockbridge.

Looking at nature in Edwards's writings and locating Edwards in the Reformed tradition on general or natural revelation, however, are the “subordinate ends” of this paper. The chief end of the paper is to bring the trajectory of Edwards's thought forward to those who are looking for a theological rationale for ecological engagement and for an “aesthetic apologetic”—for

those who think that beauty is a compelling argument for the presence of God. These seem to be two trendy topics, environmental or ecological engagement and a revival of aesthetics. And, as is usually the case with trendy topics, we can be sometimes governed and at the least influenced by more cultural concerns than theological ones. We can be driven to talk about good things, like creation care and beauty, by bad motives and bad thinking. Such is the case in the topics of ecology and aesthetics.

As a corrective to these culture-driven influences we can find help by escaping our present horizon and listening to the wisdom of voices from the past. One such voice full of wisdom on these issues is Jonathan Edwards. The task of appropriating historical figures for contemporary discussions, however, is rather tricky. Indeed, Jonathan Edwards is “Exhibit A” of misuses and abuses. But, for those convinced that the past has something meaningful to say to the present, such risky undertakings may be warranted.

Jonathan Edwards means a lot of things to a lot of people. He is revivalist. He is the uncompromising harbinger of sin and hell and gloom and doom. He is smart—so he gives us evangelicals all hope that we can have our faith and academic credentials too. He is a model pastor, theologian, thinker, and even a model husband and father. And he is also a model for thinking theologically and apologetically about nature and beauty—at precisely the time when we need such thinking.

Edwards on nature and beauty also makes for a meaningful lesson for pastors. Congregants live in the world. How do they exegete it? Sermons can be helpful models for teaching congregants to exegete, on their own, Scripture. A solid pulpit ministry, over time, models healthy and sound hermeneutics, not only instructing through the words of the sermon itself, but also instructing by communicating and modeling a hermeneutic of the text. We also believe, however, that God’s world is revelational.

Just as congregants “live in the word” and are in need of a sound hermeneutic, so, too, they live in the world and so, too, they are in need of a sound hermeneutic. Sermons and the pulpit ministry could also over

time model a healthy and sound hermeneutic of the world, of general revelation.

Jonathan Edwards can help here, too. We see Edwards as a model first by glimpsing at his use of nature. Secondly, we look at Edwards’s understanding of both the creation mandate and the beauty and clarity of general revelation. Finally, we look to Edwards for his contribution to the current discussions of nature, or as we frame it today, environmental and ecological concerns. We’ll also explore Edwards’s “aesthetic apologetic,” his use of beauty as an argument for God.

EDWARDS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: NATURE IN EDWARDS’S THOUGHT AND WRITINGS

A most intriguing place to look for nature in Edwards’s writings concerns those writings from the Stockbridge era, spanning from January 1751 until January 1758. This is his time after Northampton and before his departure to Princeton for his (all-too-brief) stint as president. Rachel Wheeler has figured that Edwards preached approximately 226 times during his tenure at Stockbridge.² More important than her statistic is her argument. Prior to Wheeler, and also Marsden’s biography which gives due attention to Edwards’s Stockbridge years, friends of Edwards neglected to see his sermons and ministry at Stockbridge as substantial and worthwhile. He was, the interpretation ran, too busy with his major treatises. I distinctly recall hearing a paper read at a scholarly conference on Edwards at Stockbridge in which his seven years there were referred to as a sabbatical.

Rachel Wheeler challenges that view by looking at the original sermons Edwards preached for Stockbridge, the ones he composed especially for his congregation, and the ways in which he reworked the Northampton sermon batch. We could add that Edwards not only took his sermonizing seriously, he also took his interaction with the Stockbridge Indians on other matters quite seriously too. What ties these together—his sermonizing and his pastoral if not civil action on behalf of his congregants—is, curiously enough, nature. Edwards floods his sermons with

nature allusions and references.

This is quite understandable, given the world of his congregants, and on one level not all that remarkable. We wouldn't marvel at sermons from a New York City pastor that make frequent references to the subway or skyscrapers or corporate world. We would take those references as they come to us, reflective of the interior world of that community. But I still think we need to see the ways in which Edwards appropriated nature as remarkable. These nature references are, for Edwards, more than metaphors as they reflect both an ontology and an ethic. In his *Types Notebook*, Edwards plays the role as his own defense attorney:

I expect by very ridicule and contempt to be called a man of very fruitful brain and copious fancy, but they are welcome to it—I am not ashamed to own that I believe that the whole universe, heaven and earth, air and seas, and the divine constitution and history of the holy scriptures, be full of divine things as language is of words.³

This Divine Being, who so permeates the universe, is, Edwards informs us, “distinguished from all other beings and exalted above ’em chiefly by his divine beauty.” This beauty is known in and through the world, and the world is, in an ontological sense, the communication of God’s being.⁴ Edwards doesn’t merely employ nature to help one see God. In Edwards’s scheme of things God is communicated in that which is seen.

The connection of this ontological sense of Edwards to his ethics may be seen in the argument he runs through the *Two Treatises*. He posits the ontology in *The End for which God Created the World*, then he constructs his ethic in *The Nature of True Virtue*, the first and second respective treatises.⁵ In this light, the references to nature are not merely there for illustration’s sake.

An easy glance through the Stockbridge sermons reveals the profusion of nature references. Speaking of God’s attributes, Edwards declares that “God’s goodness is like a river that overflows all of its bounds.” On

Ps 1:3, he says similarly, “As the waters of a river run easily and freely so [does] the love of Christ.” Preaching on John 15, he speaks of Christ as the fountain, like a spring, of all spiritual life and nourishment. In a sermon to the Mohawks at Stockbridge, Edwards urges, “We invite you to come and enjoy the light of the Word of God, which is ten thousand times better than [the] light of the sun.”⁶

As might be expected, he would appeal to the heat of intense fires when speaking of hell, on one occasion even saying that the devil might “roast you in the fire that will burn forever and ever.”⁷ As Edwards progressed in his ministry at Stockbridge, the harangues on sin and judgment tended to give way to extolling the glories of grace and salvation. Darkness waned, in other words, and light waxed. To put the matter even more directly, the congregation now knew they were thirsty. Edwards had told them as much and they had been convicted of it as much. Then he spoke to them of the living waters that would quench their thirst and meet and satisfy their need.

Wheeler contends that Edwards’s “preaching at Stockbridge displays a decisive move away from metaphysical reasoning and towards a reliance on metaphor, images, and narrative.” Wheeler goes as far as to say that metaphors “dominate” the Stockbridge sermons.⁸ Indeed, his sermons drew largely from the gospels and especially the parables, a genre replete with metaphors and imagery drawn from nature and from an agrarian economy and culture.

Fishermen, sowers of seed in the fields, and tenders of vineyards are the main characters in these parables, providing Edwards with plenty of fodder to illustrate vividly the doctrines he desperately wanted his Stockbridge congregants to know. His sermons from John followed the apostle’s suit in using light and darkness as an extended conceit to illustrate righteousness and unrighteousness.

In addition to the Stockbridge sermons, we also need to consider Edwards’s Stockbridge “Miscellanies.” The “Miscellanies” written at this time overflow with nature references. “God is not negligent of the world he made,” Edwards declares in “Miscellany 1304.” This miscellany reflects Edwards’s conversation

with the Deists on the one hand and his work with the Stockbridge Indians on the other: "Tis evident that, as God has made man an intelligent creature, capable of knowing his creator and discerning God's aims in creation." Edwards tells us exactly what we can discern as the Miscellany continues, namely God's moral government. It will take revelation, by which Edwards means scripture, to move one from a knowledge of God as Creator to knowledge of God as Savior, but Edwards begins with what all have been given: creation.

As many, such as Douglas Sweeney, Gerald McDermott, Michael McClymond, and Kenneth Minkema, have pointed out, Edwards is intensely reading in the deists at that moment, as reflected in the predominant subject matter of the Miscellanies from this time period. Edwards is not only working within the bounds of their writings, or within the bounds of whatever he can find on world religions in his quest to tease out the notion of the *prisca theologal* (ancient theology), he's also working with the material he sees as he looks out his second floor study window: the environment. This setting shapes his world.

This setting also gives Edwards words, words replete with richly textured analogies. As Edwards works with these words, crafting and shaping them and bringing them to life, he reflects the creative act itself. In his book on aesthetics David Bentley Hart sounds as if he could be speaking of Jonathan Edwards when he writes, "Analogy is the art of discovering rhetorical consonances of one thing with another, a metaphorical joining of separate sequences of meaning, and thus 'corresponds' to the infinite rhetoric of God; it is to discover in the implication of every created thing with every other the way in which all things are images and gifts of an eternal glory." Hart then adds, "To speak more truly, more beautifully of God is to participate with ever greater pertinacity in the plentitude of God's utterances of himself in his word."⁹

Aesthetic speech, beautiful words, of this aesthetic reality, beauty itself, is a divine semiology. Nature, being God's accommodated language of himself, is indeed "the music of the spheres," as the hymn writer put it. And to this music, to this speech, or to this language as it were, Edwards was well attuned.

Edwards's aesthetic language led to an ethic, to action, for in addition to this eminent place of nature and the environment in his writings, Edwards's activities on behalf of the Stockbridge Indians extended to the environment in which they lived. This music of the spheres could also be driven deeply into the soil under the feet of the Mohicans. To put the matter directly, Edwards talked the talk and walked the walk when it came to nature and what would be labeled today as environmental concerns.

The work of historians Shirley Dunn and Lion Miles has drawn attention to the ways in which the colonials both subtly and overtly moved the Native Americans out of their way through successive bids for their land. Forced out, these Native Americans kept moving west. This is true of the Stockbridge Indians. After they had no more land in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, they first settled in New York at a place they dubbed "New Stockbridge." Again, after successive bids for their land, they removed again, settling eventually in Wisconsin. Along the way, they lost their native tongue and much of their native identity.

Lion Miles's work in particular, however, sheds much light on Edwards's role during all of this. Prior to 1750, the English parceled out all of the land, largely apart from any involvement of the natives themselves. By 1750, the Stockbridge Mohicans informed the "Settling Committee" of the Massachusetts General Assembly that the originally agreed upon amount of acreage to be settled by the colonials had doubled in a period of just ten years. By 1776, that originally agreed upon amount of land for the English had ballooned to more than double. In fact, by 1776, the only land the Stockbridge Mohicans still owned consisted of little more than the area around their burial ground.

Without any land of their own, the Mohicans went to New York. Miles refers to the years of 1759 to the mid 1770s as "the great land grab." The years from 1739, the date of Stockbridge's charter, until 1750 were also years of land grabbing. The silence of Miles regarding the intervening years, 1751 to 1758, which correspond directly to Edwards's tenure, reveals the lack of such a land grab under Edwards's watch. Edwards knew the meaning of the land to the Stock-

bridge Indians.¹⁰

Edwards's references to nature in these Stockbridge sermons and miscellanies, as well as his actions on behalf of his congregation, stem from his embedded appreciation for nature and nature's God. This appreciation goes back to Edwards's first writings. The world is so illustrative of God because God has designed it that way.

Douglas Sweeney expresses Edwards's understanding this way: "Because for Edwards God creates the world *ex nihilo*, 'out of nothing,' or out of nothing (Edwards would say) but God's own Trinitarian life, all that is reflects that life (from one degree to another)."¹¹ There is a harmony between the light of nature and the light of Scripture, and a harmony between the God in his being and the world God made. One of Edwards's extended miscellaneous works, "Images of Divine Things" (from 1728), speaks of "the great and remarkable analogy in God's works," an analogy that is "apparent."¹²

The perpetual brightness of the sun's rays, ever-flowing rivers, thunder clouds, sea billows, easily bent young twigs, growing grass, "the spiders taking of the fly into his snare," and—let's not forget—the "beautiful rainbow" all make observable in the visible world that which is invisible. This "fitness" factors heavily in Edwards's theologizing and philosophizing, which is at the root of his sermonizing.

Just as many interpreters of Edwards have argued for the thematic straight lines that shoot through his miscellanies on to his sermons and on to his treatises, so Edwards's employ of nature is no exception. Edwards's appreciation of nature as revelatory goes back even further than his initial "Miscellany entries." It pulses through the Reformed tradition of which he was a part.

EDWARDS AND GENERAL REVELATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION: TAKING NATURE SERIOUSLY

Much could be said about the various figures in the Reformed tradition and their influence on Edwards; we will simply focus on Calvin and his understanding

of nature as the theater of God's glory. Calvin's commentaries, especially on the Psalms, and his sermons on Job are fruitful places to examine. Reflecting on Psalm 135, Calvin notes, "The whole world is a theatre for the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power." He adds, developing the conceit, "but the church is the orchestra." Edwards, and I'll keep the metaphor alive, was in concert with his predecessor.

Nature is revelatory, but not revelatory enough for redemption for Calvin, for Edwards, and for the Reformed tradition. But it is still revelatory. Calvin's commentary on Psalm 8 bears this out. Here he can't speak well or highly enough of the goodness of God, revealed solely through nature and available universally to all. And in his sermon on Job 39:22-35, Calvin has this to say, "If a small portion of God's works [in nature] ought to ravish us and amaze us, what ought all his works do when we come to the full numbering of them?"

Calvin is overwhelmed at the threshold of nature, of creation, in its revelation of the goodness of God. He even frames his appreciation in ways that will sound similar to later expressions by Edwards. On Ps 104:5, Calvin observes, "The stability of the earth proclaims the glory of God, for how does it hold its place unmoved when it hangs in the midst of the air and is supported only by water? ... Even in this contrivance the wonderful power of God shines forth."¹³

While it is true that Calvin said all these things, it is also important to add that Calvin ultimately viewed nature as "precarious," constantly in danger of teetering into chaos—all of which underscores his doctrine of providence, unless you want to follow the route of some interpreters, that is. In the words of Richard Mouw, these interpretations of Calvin's view of the world stem from his own personal fears of chaos. In a Freudian-looking projection model, Calvin was a fearful, close to neurotic, person, who in turn saw the world as barreling downward into oblivion.¹⁴

In response to these (mis)interpretations, Richard Mouw, in a rather tongue-in-cheek fashion, quips, "If so the Reformer's neuroses have resulted in some fairly healthy theology."¹⁵ Calvin's understanding of nature as veering near chaos has indeed produced some

healthy theology. Such theology could also produce, and arguably has produced, some rather healthy action as well. The notion of impending chaos called Calvin not to abandonment or neglect, but to renewal and engagement. To put the matter differently, the creation mandate isn't abrogated by the fall; instead, it's rather intensified by the fall. Our obligation to subdue the earth is intensified by the problems brought about by the fall.

C. S. Lewis brings some reinforcement to Calvin's understanding of nature's attenuated state, because of the fall, and our consequent obligation to work to set it aright. The Christian, Lewis contends, "thinks God made the world." But the Christian "also thinks that a great many things have gone wrong with the world that God made and that God insists, and insists loudly, on our putting them right again."¹⁶

There are significant implications to this nuanced view of nature and beauty. A naïve view fails to connect with people, fails to match up with their sense of reality. Life is not always pretty flowers and rainbows. Consequently, we should avoid a theology of nature and beauty that has no place for the fall. But we should equally avoid a view that has no place for beauty, for the goodness of creation.

This multiplex and complex world, "the theater of God's glory," calls for a response. Calvin wrote, in reflecting on Psalm 113, of the "criminal apathy" of disregarding the displays of God's glory in the natural order. To cure us of our negligence and apathy, perhaps we should hear those words from the Psalm:

Praise the Lord!
Praise, O servants of the Lord,
praise the name of the Lord!

Blessed be the name of the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore!
From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the Lord is to be praised!

The Lord is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!
Who is like the Lord our God,

who is seated on high,
who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?

He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the Lord!

Interpreters of Edwards tend to look to the platonic and neoplatonic influences on Edwards on the score of his aesthetics, view of nature, and even his typology. These streams indeed influenced Edwards. But interpreters, if they wish to get Edwards right, must also look to the influences from the Reformed tradition, especially looking at the influence of Calvin. By doing so, the clear biblical and theological contours of Edwards's thought come through clearly.

Terrence Erdt, for instance, shows the influence of Calvin's *sensus suavitatis* (sense of sweetness) on Edwards's development and expression of the new sense, whereas many interpreters simply look to Locke and Newton as Edwards's source for the New Sense.

Calvin writes in *The Institutes* that regenerating faith "cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it ourselves." Calvin further calls the *sensus suavitatis* a "taste of divine quality," bringing to mind Edwards's insistence on relishing the knowledge of God. Terms we once thought the sole propriety of Edwards, Erdt subtly argues, were borrowed from Calvin.¹⁷ Calvin looked at nature theologically, as *revelation*. What is true for Calvin on this point is equally true for Edwards.

It is important to pause here for a moment. As mentioned above, the roots of Edwards's aesthetics are often traced back to the platonic tradition, giving a distinctly philosophical flavor to Edwards's aesthetics and his take on nature. But if we trace the roots of Edwards's aesthetics to Calvin and to Calvin's robust

theology of general revelation the result is a distinctly theological and biblical flavor to Edwards's thoughts on nature and creation care. Edwards is a theologian first and foremost, in other words. And a theological aesthetics and view of nature is patently different from a philosophical view (as in the Platonic approach, for example) and is patently different from a cultural one (as in a postmodern approach or a "Western" approach). The theological approach is always the higher ground over the philosophical or cultural.

EDWARDS AND NATURE FOR CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALS: THE ENVIRONMENT AND BEAUTY IN APOLOGETICS, PREACHING, AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

In bringing Edwards and his thought on these matters forward to our times, it seems helpful to tease out two strands. The first concerns an aesthetic apologetics, and the second concerns creation care.

EDWARDS AND "AESTHETIC APOLOGETICS": WHAT'S BEAUTY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

The more popular schools of contemporary evangelical apologetics tend to emphasize rational arguments and historical evidences, from the popular writings and campus debates of the likes of Josh McDowell and Ravi Zacharias to the more academically oriented members of the Society of Christian Philosophers or of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, with their respective journals, *Faith and Philosophy* and *Philosophia Christi*. Proponents of this perspective have long found an ally in Edwards, given his philosophical prowess in *Freedom of the Will* and his forays into rational arguments. What is not as appropriated is Edwards's (or for that matter Calvin's) argument from beauty.

From the beginning, or at least from the time he was twenty-two, beauty factored significantly for Edwards. The reason even the miserable among us cling to life, he mused, is "because they cannot bear to lose sight of the beauty of the world."¹⁸ The beauty of the world led Edwards to put forth what could be termed the "pleasure argument." One should consider Christianity,

Edwards develops the line of the argument, because of the sheer pleasure it brings—and not in the world to come, but in this world.¹⁹

The beauty of the world even leads spiders to smile. As the words of the "Spider Letter," again from his early years, resound, God as Creator "hath not only provided for all the necessities, but also for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects."²⁰ The role of beauty in Edwards's thought has been significantly developed by Roland Delattre, Clyde Holbrook, and Robert Jenson. It is something that evangelicals would do well to pursue.

Consider, by way of just one example, the words of Roland Delattre. He offers a fairly comprehensive, yet concisely stated summary of Edwards's aesthetic apologetics when he writes, "It is out of God's own beauty that creation proceeds; it is by his beauty that creation is ordered; it is according to his beauty that God governs the world, both natural and moral; it is by beauty that God redeems." Delattre concludes, "Beauty provides the model for Edwards's understanding of the structure and dynamics of the restored and redeemed life of God's people as a community of love and justice."²¹

One should realize in the pursuit of nature and beauty as an apologetic, though, the complexity of Edwards's employ of nature. It's not just the prettiness of nature that Edwards appeals to. Thunder storms and out of control seas and intensely hot fires also come into play. This reminds one of Melville's *Moby Dick*. In chapter sixty-six, "The Shark Massacre," the whalers have harpooned some great white sharks. Melville narrates what happens from there:

Killed and hoisted on deck for the sake of his skin, one of these sharks almost took poor Queequeg's hand off, when he tried to shut down the dead lid of his murderous jaw. "Queequeg no care what god made him shark," said the savage, agonizingly lifting his hand up and down; "wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin."

Melville was saying something to those who only see God in the rainbow and in the flower. Edwards too had enough room for the revelatory nature of the dark side. As mentioned earlier, Edwards's view of nature is multiplex and complex.

Beauty, despite the complicated nature of aesthetic discussions, is compelling. Edwards employed such compelling moments revealed in nature in his sermons at Stockbridge, and in doing so proves a valuable model for contemporary apologetics, infatuated as it is with rational arguments. Nature declares the glory and the goodness of God. Nature also displays God's beauty, and beauty in turn displays desire. This is not the baser type of desire that Edwards or even a figure like C. S. Lewis referred to, the type of desire that holds one captive with the promise of satisfaction. But the type of desire that Edwards and Lewis speak of is a desire that truly satisfies. Taste and see, writes the Psalmist, that the Lord is good. Honey, Edwards reminds us by way of the writer of Proverbs, "is sweet." Such beauty, evoking desire, is compelling.²²

The African American spiritual has "Over my head, I hear music in the air," answered by the refrain, "There must be a God somewhere." As a riff on the traditional spiritual, I would venture, "I see beauty in the air," answered by "There is a God somewhere." In fact, we see beauty everywhere. And we only see it because there is a God somewhere.

Beyond concerns for evangelicals to recapture aesthetics, there is also a sense in which the broader horizons of contemporary culture have also lost their aesthetic way. We have become a culture obsessed with efficiency, obsessed with utility. We have become a culture that has settled for baser forms of entertainment or amusement at the expense of art.²³

Beauty needs to be restored, returned to the conversation, and Edwards provides ample resources to draw upon. In his ethic, Edwards could speak of an ethic for the regenerate, what he termed "true virtue," and an ethic for the unregenerate, what he termed "common morality." In the words of Paul Ramsey, for Edwards this common morality was no small thing, but instead "a rather splendid thing." The same may be said for Edwards's aesthetic. There is in his thought a

"common beauty," a beauty known through nature and through common grace, a beauty that can be known by the regenerate in and through the new community of the church and by the unregenerate in and through culture and the community of humanity. And this common beauty is a rather splendid thing.²⁴

**EDWARDS AND CREATION CARE:
ENVIRONMENTALISTS AREN'T
ALWAYS WRONG**

Edwards on nature and the environment also has much to say to evangelicals looking to engage the environment and ecology, especially those looking for a biblically and theologically-minded engagement.

Evangelical environmentalism, though, will look different than the environmentalism of others, precisely because in the evangelical frame of things this world is God's world. In that vein, I suggest evangelicals begin thinking theologically about the environment, perhaps calling such thinking an "ecothology." Figures from the past, like Edwards and Calvin, would very well help us in such a task.

An ecotheology begins with understanding nature as divine semiology, nature as a grammar and language of theology. An ecotheology also demands having a broader view of the Christian task that includes the cultural mandate, stemming from Gen 1:26-28. Perhaps as residue from a fundamentalist past, or perhaps stemming from the tendency to isolate oneself from culture as the way to fulfill the command of Christ in John 17:14-15, evangelicals can at times construe their task rather narrowly.

The cultural mandate points us in a different direction, seeing broad parameters to the church's task. Harkening back to Calvin and to Edwards for that matter, we are reminded that the fall, that sin's curse and its cosmic extent, do not mean the abandonment or neglect of the cultural mandate. Instead, the curse demands our obedience, however difficult and attenuated such obedience may be, to the cultural mandate.

An ecotheology also entails an ethic of cultivation over and against the ethic of "consumption" that so drives much of Western culture. As stewards of the creation we should be concerned with cultivating

natural resources. We should also be concerned with cultivating human relationships as opposed to viewing interactions with people as mere business transactions. This entails the cultivation of our own humanity, pursuing an economics, a politics, and even an educational philosophy that fosters human identity and dignity, not one that reduces human identity and ultimately human life to its economic productivity.

Consider what automated tellers, automated check-outs, online commerce, online education, and even online church says about our cultural drive to suppress (or even to abandon) the need for each other, the need to relate *in the flesh*.

In addition to Edwards as a helpful interlocutor on these points, the work of John Cavanaugh comes to mind. He reminds us that consumption ethics leads to a “commodity form of life,” which ultimately creates human beings of “empty interiors,” human beings who have lost a sense of self, identity, and dignity. An ethic of cultivation leads to “personal forms of life,” where human beings aren’t reduced to consumers.²⁵ The implications here go deep and wide, impacting the areas of business, government, education, and, especially, the church.

Finally, Edwards has one more element to consider for an ecotheology, that of *appreciation*. For Edwards nature and beauty are to be appreciated, to be savored, to be enjoyed. Appreciation means value, and ultimately that which one values will work itself out in an ethic, in behaviors and actions. Edwards reminds us to merely appreciate beauty.

As just one case in point, consider his nearly rapturous nature writing from his “Personal Narrative.” Edwards’s conversion, which this text recalls, occurs as Edwards, according to his memory, “walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father’s pasture, for contemplation.” Once converted, he now has a new outlook on nature, not to mention an intense appreciation of it. He casts this as a new way of seeing, exclaiming, “The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be a, as it were, a clam, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything.” He then applies this new way of seeing to everything: “In the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the

grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and in all nature.”²⁶

Such experiences of nature were in no way limited to his time of conversion. For exercise, Edwards took to horseback riding (and chopping wood) throughout the Connecticut River Valley and later, as he went to Stockbridge, in the Housatonic River Valley. All the while, he “fix[ed] his mind” on nature in deep appreciation. George Marsden describes his riding habits, “In the afternoons after dinner he would ride two or three miles to a secluded place where he would walk for a while.” Then Marsden explains why: “He had great love of natural beauty and enjoyed the blue mountains that graced the horizon of the river valley, and he loved the views he could gain by climbing the surrounding hills.” And when he climbed those hills, he looked in appreciative wonder.²⁷

“The work of creation,” Edwards writes in a “Miscellany” from the Stockbridge era, “is spoken of as one of the great wonders done by him who is God of gods and Lord of lords.”²⁸ Creation is a work that makes an argument for God’s power, goodness, and peculiar glory. God not only created the world, he also preserves and governs it. Further, the “Miscellany” argues that creation is the theater in which God sets the drama of redemption—all of which gives Edwards cause for thanksgiving and for contemplation.

In short, Edwards finds much in nature worthy of his attention. Further, Edwards viewed his appreciation of the theater of creation as an act of worship. Appreciating nature, for Edwards, becomes an act of obedience and service to God. Such appreciation ultimately becomes foundational to an ecotheology. And such appreciation ultimately works itself out in the way we live.

The Reformed tradition to which Edwards belonged has long given significance to nature as the theater of God’s glory. Nature facilitates the communication of the gospel; nature reveals God as creator, a necessary first step leading to the revelation and knowledge of God as redeemer. The beauty of nature is compelling, this line of argument runs. In the mix of responding to people like Richard Dawkins or the fervor over Intelligent Design, evangelical apologetics tends to be overrun with rational arguments, losing sight of beauty.

To be sure, Edwards knew the value of rational arguments, but he also knew the value of beauty. And, while Edwards held the creation to be subordinate and even to be overrun with sin, he still saw the beauty in this world to be worthwhile, something worth living for and something worth working in, and, when it came to the Stockbridge Indians, something worth fighting for. Edwards, in other words, advocated both an aesthetic apologetics and a theology of and for creation care.

CONCLUSION

References to nature permeate Edwards's writings. Such references, not surprisingly, abound in the Stockbridge sermons, written as Edwards imbibed the ethos of the plain nestled along the bend in the Housatonic River and set against the backdrop of the Berkshire Mountains. These frequent references to nature were more than metaphors. Borrowing from Clyde Holbrook's essay on Edwards and nature, nature provided the frame through which Edwards saw (sensed), understood, and relished (via the new sense) God.²⁹ The mountains, the valleys, and the river all provide the visible and visceral materials.

The beauty of nature leads us to relish God himself and God's revelation of himself in nature. The beauty of nature is compelling, offering persuasive testimony of God's presence and goodness. And in the end, the beauty of nature obligates us. While sitting at his desk at Stockbridge, Edwards once wrote, "God is not negligent of the world that he has made." Edwards, recognizing himself to be God's creature bearing God's own image, was not negligent of the world God made. Neither should be we.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 1304," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 23: The "Miscellanies" 1153-1560* (ed. Douglas A. Sweeney; New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 255.
- ²Rachel M. Wheeler, *Living upon Hope: Mahicans and Missionaries, 1730-1760* (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1999), 162.
- ³Jonathan Edwards, "Types" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 11: Typological Writings* (ed. Wal-

lace E. Anderson and Mason I. Lowance, Jr., with David Watters; New Haven: Yale University, 1993), 152.

⁴Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2: The Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University, 1959), 298.

⁵Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 8: The Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University, 1989). The *Two Treatises* was originally published posthumously in 1765.

⁶Edwards, MS sermon on Exodus 34:6-7 (January 1753), Beinecke Library, Yale University; Edwards, MS sermon on Psalm 1:3 (August 1751), Beinecke Library, Yale University; Edwards, MS sermon on John 15:5 (n.d.), Beinecke Library, Yale University; *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, 109.

⁷Edwards, MS sermon on Luke 19:10 (June 1751), Beinecke Library, Yale University. The date of this sermon is important. As Edwards progressed in his preaching at Stockbridge, he had less to say about sin and hell and more to say about grace and heaven.

⁸Wheeler, *Living upon Hope*, 166-67.

⁹David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 307.

¹⁰Shirley Dunn, *The Mohican World, 1680-1750 and The Mohicans and Their Land, 1609-1730* (Fleischman's, NY: Purple Mountain, 1994); Lion G. Miles, "The Red Man Dispossessed: The Williams Family and the Alienation of Indian Land in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1736-1818," *The New England Quarterly* 68 (1994): 46-76.

¹¹Douglas A. Sweeney, "Editor's Introduction," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 23: "The Miscellanies,"* 32.

¹²Jonathan Edwards, "Images of Divine Things," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 11: Typological Writings*, 53.

¹³John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Psalms*, Psalm 135:10, Psalm 8, and Psalm 104:5, *ad loc.*; Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, Job 39:22-35, *ad loc.*

¹⁴See the chapter on "Calvin's Anxiety" in William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 32-48.

- ¹⁵Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 47.
- ¹⁶C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 45.
- ¹⁷Terrence Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards, Art, and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 11, 32; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; ed., John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.2.15. See Calvin's whole discussion in book 3, chapter 2.
- ¹⁸Jonathan Edwards, "Beauty of the World," *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema; New Haven: Yale University, 1995), 15.
- ¹⁹See Jonathan Edwards's sermon, "The Pleasantness of Religion," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 14: Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 97-115; see also Stephen J. Nichols, *Heaven on Earth: Capturing Jonathan Edwards's Vision of Living in Between* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 48-60.
- ²⁰Jonathan Edwards, "Spider Letter," *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 5.
- ²¹Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University, 1968), 162.
- ²²Jonathan Edwards, "The Pleasantness of Religion," *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney; New Haven: Yale University, 1999), 13-25. A fruitful line of investigation to add to Edwards's potential contribution here might very well involve teasing out the connections and line of influence of the Eastern Orthodox tradition on beauty on Edwards's thought and expression.
- ²³See *It Was Good: Making Art for the Glory of God* (ed. Ned Bustard; Baltimore: Square Halo, 2007) and *Objects of Grace: Conversations on Creativity and Faith* (ed. James Romaine; Baltimore: Square Halo, 2002).
- ²⁴Paul Ramsey, "Editor's Introduction," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 8: The Ethical Writings*, 44.
- ²⁵John Cavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 3-19.
- ²⁶Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 16: Letters and Personal Writings* (ed. George S. Claghorn; New Haven: Yale University, 1998) 793-94.
- ²⁷George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003) 135.
- ²⁸Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 1358," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 23: "The Miscellanies,"* 611-13.
- ²⁹Clyde Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, The Valley and Nature: An Interpretive Essay* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1987), 124.