

Rhetorical Influences upon the Preaching of Jonathan Edwards

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Abstract: *Much has been written concerning the New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards, addressing his multifaceted activities as a theologian, preacher, revivalist, pastor, polemicist and missionary. In particular this study focuses upon the rhetorical influences that shaped his preaching ministry: his personal faith experiences, the preaching of his father and grandfather, the Puritan preaching tradition, and the rhetoric of Peter Ramus. While he preached within the sometimes narrow constraints of his New England Puritan tradition, Edwards nonetheless found some freedom to experiment with the classic inherited Puritan tripartite sermon form. Although he never truly departed from this sermon format, his attempts at innovation within his tradition serves as a model for preachers today. Such a legacy may well inspire preachers operating within the confines of hermeneutical or denominational tradition, but who seek to reconfigure elements of their inherited preaching influences.*

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) lived during a unique time in American history. As an English colonial loyal to the British crown, Edwards could not be classified as an “American” in any modern sense of the word. Rather, he operated within an eighteenth-century New England Puritan context that was an extension of a broader British and European intellectual and religious world.¹ As a rigorously intellectual Calvinist scholar, Edwards was influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and his English Puritan forebears alike.² Most famously he is associated with the Great Awakening revival of the 1730s-40s and the landmark sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” delivered in 1741.³ His reputation is multifaceted: although deservedly recognized as a polemicist, an apologist on behalf of Reformed doctrines, a sacred historian,⁴ a pastor, a missionary, a biblical theologian, a philosopher and pioneering psychologist, the popular conception of him as a preacher is essentially correct. This study seeks to address this conception of Edwards the preacher.⁵ Viewed in the larger context of Edwards’ life, ministry and voluminous writings, “his career in the pulpit and the attendant body of sermons he produced constitute the hub of his diverse interests and activities. All things, like so many spokes of a wheel, met and were structured through their use” in his sermons.⁶

This study of the rhetorical influences that shaped the preaching of Jonathan Edwards reveals a preacher who stood firmly within the lineage of an inherited preaching tradition that had been assiduously developed for nearly a century beforehand. During the course of his thirty-plus years of preaching, Edwards fully exploited the potential of the Puritan preaching form while never substantially departing from its tradition.⁷ Yet despite his tendency toward formalism, Edwards was no mere slave to convention. The widely-read Edwards displayed the unique “ability to reshape ideas inherited from abroad in light of the needs and interests of

¹ Marsden, “Biography,” 19.

² Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 27.

³ The full text of this sermon can be found in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742* (WJE 22).

⁴ Smith, *Jonathan Edwards*, 2.

⁵ In a recent work, Carrick states that despite the resurgence of interest in Edwards in the twentieth century, scholars have focused firstly upon his philosophy, secondly upon his theology, and his preaching last. This has resulted in scholars “belittling or minimizing the importance of his preaching” (*The Preaching of Jonathan Edwards*, 19).

⁶ Kimnach, “General Introduction,” 3.

⁷ Kimnach, “The Sermons: Concepts and Executions,” 243.

the American situation.”⁸ Throughout his life he demonstrated a “characteristic propensity to rethink every important aspect of his life ‘from the ground up,’ regardless of his background and training.”⁹ Although he utilized a fixed homiletical form, displayed an opposition to formal innovation and held to a strict consistency of doctrine, Edwards nonetheless found room to experiment and innovate within his preaching.¹⁰

This study demonstrates that an amalgam of both informal and formal experiences contributed to the shaping of Edwards’ preaching ministry. In addition to examining his personal faith experiences, the study focuses upon the following three rhetorical influences that shaped Edwards’ preaching ministry: first, the preaching of his father and grandfather; second, his Puritan preacher forebears; and third, the rhetoric of Peter Ramus.¹¹ Finally, based upon the example of Edwards’ personalized reformulation of his influences, the study concludes with a multiplicity of suggestions for preachers seeking to reconfigure elements of their inherited preaching influences. This is accompanied by a critical exploration of the dimensions of personal, ecclesial, intellectual and rhetorical influences.

Edwards’ Early Formative Years

Jonathan Edwards’ struggles with his faith as a young man provided the impetus for a lifelong passion for both preaching and theology. Until his coming of age in his early twenties, Edwards wrestled with the issue of authentic regeneration. In part, this struggle came about due to the controversy of his day regarding the New England Puritan church and the changing standards for baptism and membership. First-generation New England Puritans upheld the standard that prospective church members must be able to relate a genuine and definite conversion experience in order to obtain full church membership. However, second- and third-generation Puritans raised in an atmosphere of Puritan piety did not necessarily share in this same conversion experience. As a result of their failure to account for their conversion experience, these later-generation Puritans were subsequently denied church membership and baptism for their offspring.

The Half-Way Covenant, ratified in 1662, provided a compromise of sorts to this dilemma. Under the Covenant, potential applicants who had experienced an “indefinite conversion” were granted partial membership. Importantly, this new status allowed for their children and grandchildren to be baptized.¹² Edwards found himself caught up in the midst of the debate between the positions of his father and grandfather, both of whom were influential ministers. On the one hand his grandfather Solomon Stoddard tended toward a more theologically liberal position and promoted the relaxed standards of the Half-Way Covenant at his Northampton church. On the other hand, Jonathan’s minister father Timothy Edwards disagreed and continued to hold to the more traditional way of assessing the spiritual state of

⁸ Smith, *Jonathan Edwards*, 1. Smith observes: “Behind Edwards’ sermons there stands a vast body of scholarship, including Scripture commentary and interpretation, history both sacred and secular, church history and the writings of the Church Fathers, works of theology and philosophy and, not least, the religious writings of his contemporaries in New England and abroad, especially in England and Scotland” (142).

⁹ Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 22. In terms of his habits of study, Sereno Edwards Dwight reports that even as a young boy he studied with a pen in his hand “...not for the purpose of copying off the thoughts of others, but for the purpose of writing down, and preserving, the thoughts suggested to his own mind, from the course of study which he was pursuing” (*The Works of President Edwards*, 33).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹¹ As this study will demonstrate, these influences are interrelated to a certain extent. For example, Ramean rhetoric influenced the Puritan preachers Edwards studied; Ramean rhetoric made an impact at both Harvard and Yale; and both Timothy Edwards and Solomon Stoddard were graduates of Harvard and thus upheld classical Puritan preaching traditions.

¹² For more information on the Half-Way Covenant see Withington, “Vibrations in Theology,” 388ff.

potential members. In contrast to the position of Stoddard, Timothy Edwards believed that prospective communicant members of his church should “be able to give a precise account of their journey from rebellious sinner to regenerate (“born again”) convert.”¹³ Perhaps ironically, as noted below, several years later when Edwards was the sole pastor of his grandfather’s church this issue came again to the fore and served as a contributing factor in his dismissal in 1751.

Such a potentially conflicted environment led the young Edwards to agonize over the state of his soul and his status as a genuine believer. Despite his best efforts to develop a personal piety he was apparently unable to demonstrate the heartfelt love of God that served as the hallmark required for genuine converts.¹⁴ Raised in a pious Puritan home, Edwards had not lived a truly reprobate life and therefore found it difficult to point to a definitive moment in time whereby he could demonstrate the transition from rebellious sinner to that of genuine convert.¹⁵ As a result of this experience, throughout his teenage years Edwards wrestled with a burning question: had the sovereign God indeed transformed his heart so that he could respond to the love and grace of God as revealed in Christ, or was he nothing more than a self-deluded hypocrite?

Edwards discovered the solution to this Calvinist paradox in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, following a serious illness while a student at Yale. His sudden insight was that everything, including inanimate matter, constituted a form of communication from God. Edwards came to believe that a personal and sovereign God expressed himself in many ways, from the beauties of nature down to the ever-changing relationship of every atom to each other. This dramatic insight became the key to every other aspect of his thought¹⁶ and these experiences would serve to shape his lifelong passion for preaching and theology. Furthermore, these issues of regeneration and the hallmarks of a genuine conversion experience became the overarching question pervading his life.¹⁷

Edwards’ later pulpit ministry reflected the strength of these experiences. In his sermons he consistently sought to convey the truth of the sovereign God’s revelation by appealing to the “affections” of his audience. These appeals involved both the unconverted and converted alike.¹⁸ Edwards hoped that sinners, blinded to true beauty by their own self-love, might by God’s grace have their eyes opened truly to see the truth. Edwards held that once the eyes of sinners were opened, their hearts would be changed and their lives would

¹³ Marsden, *A Short Life*, 13 (parenthesis his). Ironically, years later as pastor of his grandfather’s Northampton church, Edwards would make the “fateful half step in a sectarian direction,” thus countering the views of his minister predecessor and mentor Stoddard. As a result his position, allied with other controversies, would see him voted out by his embittered and disillusioned congregation in 1750 (Marsden, “The Quest for the Historical Edwards,” 10).

¹⁴ Marsden, *A Short Life*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23. For example, even following his apparent spiritual transformation, during his pastorate in New York Edwards kept a diary detailing his efforts at personal piety and the subsequent highs and lows he experienced in this effort.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14. For example, in the Preface of his *Religious Affections* Edwards demonstrates his passion for the subject when he states: “There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, that this, What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards? Or, which comes to the same thing, What is the nature of true religion? and wherein do lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness, that is acceptable in the sight of God” (84).

¹⁸ However, Edwards held that if a person had much affection that does not necessarily prove that he has true religion; conversely, if one has no affections that proves he has no true religion. Thus for him, “true religion lies much in the affections” (*Religious Affections*, 121). However, there is a caveat: not all preaching results in genuine conversion, he states. As examples, he cites the preaching of both John the Baptist and Christ in order to illustrate that while some of their listeners displayed signs of “external religion,” their preaching did not always result in true religion.

subsequently be dedicated to loving and serving God and others. Thus for Edwards, one of the major purposes of preaching was “as a fit means to affect sinners, with the importance of the things of religion, and their own misery, and necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided.”¹⁹ As a fit means of delivering the truths contained within the Holy Scriptures, sermons therefore served as a “great and main end” by which to impress “the divine things on the heart and affections of men.”²⁰

Simply delivering the sermon itself, however, did not automatically guarantee genuine conversions on the part of the listeners. Edwards held the belief that the effective preaching of the Word engendered a fit or suitable condition in which the sovereign God might bring about conversion.²¹ Based upon this belief, Edwards strove mightily in his weekly sermons and lectures to create powerful and perfect images from the Word in order that the sermon might become a “fit” vehicle transmitting saving grace to his listeners.²²

Influences of Timothy Edwards and Solomon Stoddard

Edwards’ own churchgoing experiences served as the first direct influence upon his preaching. The preaching of his father and grandfather served as initial and determining influences in Edwards’ later conception of the sermon.²³ Edwards grew up listening regularly to the sermons of his father, who served as a living exemplar of a preacher for the young Jonathan. The dozen or so extant sermons of Timothy Edwards reveal the same basic tripartite formula that Jonathan would later adopt in his own preaching.²⁴ Timothy Edwards’ sermons contain the basic divisions of Text, Doctrine, and Applications, “each structured internally through a succession of brief, numbered heads.”²⁵ These sermons demonstrate that Timothy Edwards made use of the more complex seventeenth-century Puritan preaching mode of multiple doctrines and many subheads. However, at times he also utilized the more simplified eighteenth-century tripartite Puritan preaching form of a text, a doctrine with several points and a single application with multiple admonishments.²⁶

Following his graduation from Yale, from 1726 to 1729 Edwards served as the associate pastor at his maternal grandfather’s church in Northampton, Connecticut, where his grandfather further influenced the young journeyman preacher during these formative years. Both Timothy Edwards and Solomon Stoddard were Harvard graduates²⁷ and thereby would have encountered Ramean logic through the preaching philosophy of William Ames.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 115. Beyond the conviction of sinners’ consciences, for the already-converted the purpose of preaching was “to stir up the pure minds of the saints, and quicken their affections, by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting before them in their proper colors, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them already” (115-116).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

²¹ Filson, “Fit Preaching,” 92.

²² Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 205. Kinnach notes that early in Edwards’ preaching career, he believed that he could sway the minds and opinions of his listeners through the sheer power of his logical arguments. However, perhaps due to his own personal religious experiences, combined with a growing doubt in the all-sufficient power of reason, logic and language, after 1723 he developed further the notion of “the heart” (or “the affections”) and explored the mysteries of the human psyche (200-202).

²³ Kinnach, “The Sermons: Concept and Execution,” 250.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁶ Valeri, “Edwards’ Homiletical Method,” 13.

²⁷ Marsden notes that “New England’s Congregational clergy were the most revered men in the provinces. They were the best educated and had long held a near-monopoly on public speaking, preaching at least two sermons a week. Their churches were ‘established’ as state institutions supported by taxes. They were usually full, due to either law or custom” (*A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, 5). Valeri adds that “In Northampton, as in most towns in colonial New England, the sermon was the central event of worship, and accordingly crucial to the corporate religious life of its people” (“Edwards’ Homiletical Method,” 15).

Although both Timothy Edwards and Stoddard made changes to inherited preaching forms, nonetheless both followed Puritan homiletical tradition and based their sermon styles upon the classic tripartite model of explication, confirmation and application.

Like Timothy Edwards, Stoddard made use of the simplified eighteenth-century development of the threefold format at his Northampton church, but reduced the number of subheadings under the single main doctrinal point.²⁸ While not deviating from the “classic Puritan sermon form that Timothy Edwards employed, Stoddard discovered hidden rhetorical resources in the ‘plain style’ by insisting upon the evaluation of rhetoric in psychological terms that were more comprehensive and subtle than either the old logic or the new Reason.”²⁹ As a preparationist who held that God underwent a distinct process for preparing sinners for conversion, Stoddard believed the psychology of “fear was an important emotion for awakening the conscience of the slumbering sinner.”³⁰

In his youth Edwards’ father and grandfather had a sequential impact upon his future preaching by impressing upon him most importantly the notion of the sermon as a heart-piercing device, represented by the image of an arrow or a spear piercing the heart of unrepentant sinners.³¹ One sees a change in Edwards’ preaching style prior to his tenure at Northampton: typically his sermons focused on the pleasantness of religion and the beauty of God and of faithful believers. However, after 1726 Edwards’ sermons began to contain much more of an imprecatory tone which can be directly attributed to Stoddard’s influence. Both by writing and personal example, Stoddard encouraged Edwards “to complement the rhetoric of delight with the rhetoric of terror.”³² The challenge Edwards faced, despite earlier seasons of revival under Stoddard’s ministry,³³ was that by 1727 when Edwards came to Northampton to assist his grandfather in pastoral ministry the congregation appeared to be “very insensible” to religion, and had been in this state for nearly ten years.³⁴ In comparison to earlier levels of religious fervour, Miller notes that by this time “the emotional intensity of New England Puritanism had considerably slackened.”³⁵ This dry and tedious situation reflected the general condition of the Puritan churches in New England by the end of the seventeenth century.³⁶

The well-established Northampton congregation, inured to years of Stoddard’s preaching, expected its familiar pattern to continue following Stoddard’s death in 1729. Edwards was installed as the pastor at the age of twenty-three and perhaps unsurprisingly continued to preach in the same mode as his departed grandfather. The Northampton church consisted of the largest and wealthiest congregation in the colony and expected stability in its

²⁸ Valeri, “Edwards’ Homiletical Method,” 13.

²⁹ Kinnach, “The Sermons: Concept and Execution,” 253.

³⁰ Minkema, “Introduction,” 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

³² Minkema, “Introduction,” 28.

³³ Kinnach notes that “At Northampton itself, his grandfather gathered in ‘five harvests, as he called them,’ in 1679, 1683, 1690, 1712, and 1718, some greater than others, and in each ‘the bigger part of the young people in town’ seemed to be drawn to them.” (“Preface to the Period,” 8).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ Miller, *New England Mind*, 301.

³⁶ Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Vol. 5, 253. Old states that the problem was not that the pews were empty during Edwards’ time as a preacher and pastor; they were full, but people were falling asleep. He notes that “Edwards had a vision of Christian society that surpassed by far what had already been accomplished by New England even in the days when its vision was most fresh and its devotion most ardent. Edwards was eager to press on to an even more godly society. He wanted to see people awaken to the most profound realities of the spiritual life. The hopes of the founding fathers had not yet been realized; the millennium had not come, but the hope was still very much alive, and Edwards’s yearning for spiritual awakening was evidence that the New England vision was indeed still very much alive” (253).

preaching, thus they would not necessarily have been open to an obvious innovator.³⁷ Perhaps predictably therefore, at Northampton the newly-installed pastor adopted Stoddard's tripartite sermon form but found some freedom to modify it by degrees.³⁸ This continued use of the formal sermon structure established shared expectations between audience and preacher. As his grandfather had done to the Puritan preaching tradition, Edwards continued its evolution, formally simplifying it by reducing drastically the number of subheadings under the single main doctrinal point. This permitted a fuller development of each point and facilitated a more focused overall line of argument.³⁹ However, although Edwards experimented with various modifications between 1730 and 1733 by adding multiple doctrinal points and applications, in his entire preaching career he never varied from this basic tripartite structure.⁴⁰

Edwards' biblical exegesis for sermon preparation tended to follow a three-part formula that lent itself well to the tripartite sermon format. As a Biblicist and convinced Protestant theologian, Edwards "viewed the Bible as the authoritative source of Christian theology and the inspired Word of God."⁴¹ Edwards "consistently turned to the Bible of both testaments as the authoritative source of his critical and constructive reflections."⁴² For Edwards, the Bible plus theological intellect equalled biblical truths. His exegesis first involved garnering a variety of observations taken from the text, second stating propositions distilled from the text and third development by exegesis, treating the doctrine in an expository fashion as he carefully built up the sermon.⁴³ His aim was to extract a theological axiom from the biblical text and in the sermon dispute that axiom in a creedal order. By this method of exegetical analysis, the text was broken down into its constituent elements and then set out in propositional form within the sermon.⁴⁴

Based upon this exegetical pattern Edwards typically divided his sermons into a tripartite structure. The first section clarified the biblical text, the second section elaborated the doctrine implicit in the text and the final section concluded the sermon with applications of the text and doctrine to the lives of his listeners.⁴⁵ This structure formed a significant part of its appeal for audiences in that it facilitated note-taking and enabled attentive audience members to follow along more easily.⁴⁶

³⁷ Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," 71. Kinnach states that "Edwards became a master of his inherited sermon form, but in the 1730s, at the zenith of his mastery, he began experimenting artistically with the sermon. He apparently did everything he could do without actually abandoning the old form entirely, and the only possible conclusion one can draw from the manuscript evidence of his experiments is that he was searching, consciously or unconsciously, for a formal alternative to the sermon itself" ("General Introduction," 40-41).

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³⁹ Edwards, *Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xiii.

⁴⁰ The only variation Edwards introduced was the "lecture" sermon, which propounded more abstract theological doctrines with a few brief points of application, and had no formal Application section (Kinnach, Minkema and Sweeney, "Editor's Introduction" in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xiii).

⁴¹ Stein, "Editor's Introduction," 83.

⁴² Cherry, "Symbols of Spiritual Truth," 263.

⁴³ Turnbull, "Jonathan Edwards—Bible Interpreter," 429.

⁴⁴ Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 57.

⁴⁵ Cherry, "Symbols of Spiritual Truth," 264.

⁴⁶ Kinnach, "General Introduction," 33-34.

Puritan Preaching Heritage

In terms of the second direct rhetorical influence upon his preaching, as noted above Edwards was a product of colonial America and a natural heir of New England Puritanism.⁴⁷ As a young Edwards “undertook preparation for the pulpit, he began by assimilating the rich traditions and conventions of English pulpit oratory and sermon literature” further shaped by nearly a century of New England Puritan thought.⁴⁸ Even as a young man, Edwards encountered various preaching manuals that influenced his understanding of preaching, many of which are mentioned in his works.⁴⁹

Puritan preaching traces its roots to the work of the Cambridge scholar and preacher William Perkins (1558-1602). Perkins stands as a seminal figure in the development of Puritan preaching as one who laid “the foundations for so much of the Puritan preaching for all time.”⁵⁰ His treatise on preaching, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, shaped Puritan preaching well into the eighteenth century.⁵¹ Turnbull reports that “of William Perkins this can be said: No other exerted a greater influence upon Edwards as a literary model.”⁵² Building upon a foundation of Ramean logic and rhetoric, Perkins held that the preacher’s central task involved the correct interpretation of the revealed Word of God in ways that were both logically sound and practically applicable.⁵³

Perkins promoted the Puritan “plain style” of preaching, believing that publicly the preacher should hide ostentatious displays of human wisdom and instead manifest the work of the Spirit. Only privately, in the task of exegesis and sermon preparation, should the preacher make use of the general arts and philosophy.⁵⁴ Perkins’ development of sermon application revived the tradition of Gregory the Great’s *Regula Pastoralis* and aimed to apply the doctrines of Scripture to various sectors of the congregation appropriate to their circumstances, place and time.⁵⁵ However, although Perkins advocated “plain” sermons, by no means were they to be simplistic or doctrinally watered-down.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Old, *Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures* Vol. 5, 248.

⁴⁸ Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 10. Stout classifies Edwards as a “fourth-generation” New England Puritan preacher in the period of transition from those preachers who trained in England, then at Harvard, and then at Harvard and Yale. Fourth-generation preachers like Edwards “learned anew the importance of delivery both in theory and in fact” (*New England Soul*, 6).

⁴⁹ Kinnach notes that Edwards, as a careful scholar, probably studied “at least one” of the many available preaching manuals of his day. Certainly the works of Mather and Edward are listed in his “Catalogue” of books, and both find expression throughout his works (“General Introduction,” 10, 16). Marsden notes that Edwards “read widely and voraciously and borrowed freely,” and was primarily grounded in seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Puritan sources (“The Quest for the Historical Edwards,” 7-9). See also Smith, Section 4, “Learned Background: Edwards’ Reading,” pp. 52-73 in *WJE Volume 2*.

⁵⁰ Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, 207-208.

⁵¹ Turnbull, “Jonathan Edwards—Bible Interpreter,” 430. Perkins’ work was first published in Latin in 1592 and then in English in 1606.

⁵² Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 54.

⁵³ Lischer, “William Perkins,” 298; Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, 206.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *The Art of Prophecyng*, Section X, “Preaching the Word.” Perkins quotes the Latin saying attributed to Ovid’s *Artis amatorae*: “As the Latin proverb says, *Artis etiam celare artem*—it is also a point of art to conceal art.”

⁵⁵ Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Vol. 5, 253; See Perkins, *The Art of Prophecyng*, Section 7, “Use and Application.” A discussion of various applications can be found in Chapter 1 of the *Regula Pastoralis*, which indicates all forms of “admonitions” to many different types of people by the preacher.

⁵⁶ Blacketer, “William Perkins,” 47. Blacketer summarizes Perkins’ understanding of the “plain” style of preaching: “While the preacher must use the arts [of grammar and rhetoric] to get at the meaning and application of the biblical text, they must be concealed in the delivery of the sermon, so that the only thing on display is the Spirit of God, and not the eloquence of the preacher. Greek and Latin terms should be absent from the sermon. Thus the plain style of preaching required the use, but not the display, of learning” (46).

One of Perkins' students at Cambridge, the Puritan scholar William Ames, advanced Perkins' notions of preaching in light of Ramean rhetoric. Most American Puritans encountered Ramean logic through Ames, most notably at Harvard.⁵⁷ Ames' 1638 work *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* defended the plain style of preaching, and was a standard text in use at both Harvard and Yale until the middle of the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ In addition to the work of Ames, Edwards was familiar with preaching manuals that developed further the Puritan notions of preaching including⁵⁹ John Wilkins' *Ecclesiastes* (1646), which "advocated a plain, natural, and clear way of preaching;"⁶⁰ Richard Bernard's 1627 work *The Faithfull Shepherd*, which offered the most penetrating discussion of the tripartite preaching form;⁶¹ John Edwards' *The Preacher* (1705); William Chappell's 1656 publication *The Preacher and the Art and Method of Preaching*; and finally Cotton Mather's *Manductio ad Ministerium* (1726), which also taught the plain style of preaching. Listed in Edwards' *Catalogue*, Mather's text was much used in Edwards' day by students of divinity.⁶²

As previously noted in this study, Edwards did not merely uncritically adopt the findings of his Puritan preacher forebears. At times upholding Puritan tradition, he also made certain changes to inherited preaching forms. The scholarly Edwards utilized intellectual sermon-building materials from a variety of authors and also reacted to particular ideas and theories in developing his own conception of preaching.⁶³ For example, in line with Perkins' conception of plain preaching Edwards sought to avoid ostentatious displays of his learning in his sermons. His aim in doing so was to deflect the focus of his sermon away from human learning to that of God.⁶⁴ However, he made changes to traditional Puritan preaching forms early in his preaching ministry by reducing the number of headings, subheadings and Scripture citations. Over the years he would develop the full potential of this form, experimenting with the added psychological dimensions of the awakening sermon by 1741 "when his own congregation no longer responded adequately to his exhortations."⁶⁵

The Rhetoric of Peter Ramus

As previously noted, while a student at Yale the young Edwards encountered a third direct rhetorical influence upon his preaching—the philosophy and rhetoric of sixteenth-century scholar Peter Ramus.⁶⁶ By the seventeenth century, editions of Ramus' works had

⁵⁷ Miller, *New England Mind*, 339. In addition New Englanders were familiarized with Ramean logic through William Dugard's 1648 work *Rhetorices Elementa* (Kimmach, "General Introduction," 4).

⁵⁸ Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 53.

⁵⁹ Though the Puritan "plain style" underwent changes at the hands of successive Puritan preachers, generations of student-preachers viewed Wilkins' 1646 work *Ecclesiastes* as a work of homiletical authority. This work "dichotomizes and distributes all things into their proper categories. Thus, it is not only clear in its exposition of the sermon form, but it gives a vivid impression of the mentality which gave birth to the classical Puritan sermon" (Kimmach, "General Introduction," 28).

⁶⁰ Jones, "The Attack on Pulpit Eloquence," 113.

⁶¹ Kimmach, "The Sermons: Concept and Execution," 250.

⁶² Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 52.

⁶³ Kimmach, "General Introduction," 3.

⁶⁴ Turnbull, "Jonathan Edwards—Bible Interpreter," 431-432.

⁶⁵ Kimmach, "The Sermons: Concept and Execution," 254. Smith observes that Edwards' preaching career can be divided into three phases. His early sermons "are notable for their stress on Edwards' personal religious odyssey, his meditations, thoughts and recounting the times when he had the most vivid sense of the presence of God." During his middle years, his sermons became "highly theological in content and pastoral in tone," while the sermons in his later years "suggest that his concern for preaching was on the wane, a result of his being distracted by the preparation of his treatises" (*Jonathan Edwards*, 139).

⁶⁶ Though a student of Yale, Edwards was highly influenced by Harvard thought: his grandfather Solomon Stoddard graduated from Harvard in 1662 and his father in 1691 (Kimmach, "General Introduction," 4). Editions of Ramus' works spread all over Europe, and "both British and Continental editions make their way to the

spread across Europe and had subsequently made their way to across the Atlantic to Harvard. Edwards' tutors at Yale were primarily Harvard graduates who viewed themselves as standing very much in line within Ramean humanism and English Puritan traditions, both of which subsequently formed the core of American Puritan thought.⁶⁷

Classical rhetoricians such as Cicero viewed the five dimensions of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, delivery and memory—as a single productive unity. By progressing through this sequence the orator could form a comprehensive view of the speech that is both coherent and persuasive as the circumstances allow.⁶⁸ By the late medieval period, however, Ramus believed that the teaching of the subjects of the *trivium* had degenerated into vagueness and repetition. His dissatisfaction with the situation led Ramus to propose the novel solution of dividing up the traditional five dimensions of classical rhetoric into two areas: logic and rhetoric.⁶⁹ Ramus assigned invention and disposition to the province of logic, allocated style and delivery to the realm of rhetoric and simply ignored memory. Although in theory the teaching of logic and rhetoric were separate, in practice they worked together. According to the new Ramist scheme an argument must first be proven true by logical means; only secondarily should the speaker adorn the speech with stylistic elements in the attempt to arouse the affections of the hearers.

Ramus' comprehensive new development of logic and rhetoric gained lasting favour among Calvinist scholars and preachers alike and his humanism formed the philosophic backbone of much of Calvinist theology by the late sixteenth century.⁷⁰ Puritan scholars adopted Ramean rhetoric primarily because it was advantageous to their creed. The dialectic of Ramus “seemed a more efficient method than the logic of the schools for interpreting Scripture, and his rhetoric more suited to preaching the unadulterated Word.”⁷¹ On this basis Ramus became the most direct and decisive influence upon the development of Puritan preaching. In the Ramean tradition the content of oration became a matter of reason, logic and method, while rhetoric served as a subservient and stylistic vehicle by which one delivered the content of the oration. According to this reasoning the affections of the listeners “would be moved most cogently if presented with that which is in itself true and has been proved dialectically to be as the thing is, with no other enhancement than pleasing figures of speech and appropriate gestures.”⁷²

In proper Ramean fashion, according to Puritan homiletical theory the preacher had two distinct aims: the first and “most important was to impress doctrinal propositions upon

British Colonies in America, and especially to Harvard” (Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 15). Many of Edwards' tutors at Yale were graduates of Harvard.

⁶⁷ Kuklick, “Seven Thinkers,” 126.

⁶⁸ May and Wisse, *Cicero: On the Ideal Orator*, 10. Edwards studied at Yale College in Wethersfield, which was at the time led by his cousin Elisha Williams who followed the Port-Royal logic of Arnauld and Nicole. Theusen notes that “Arnauld and Nicole were part of a longer tradition of logic, beginning with the sixteenth-century French humanist Petrus Ramus” (“Editor's Introduction,” 4-5).

⁶⁹ Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 556.

⁷⁰ Kuklick, “Seven Thinkers,” 126. He notes that in the late sixteenth century at Cambridge, Ramean philosophy and rhetoric was important to the writings of Richardson and Ames. Amesean ideas and texts became central to American Puritanism, forming the core of their thought following the founding of Harvard in 1636. Philosopher Samuel Johnson, one of Edwards' tutors at Yale, saw himself as standing very much in line with this tradition. Edwards inherited a Ramist framework, but “modernized” Calvinist theology through the lens of Locke comprehended in a Cartesian context, through the Newtonian rationalist view of Samuel Clarke. Old points out that while at Yale, Edwards had “read John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which provided a philosophical matrix for him to understand his religious experience” (*Reading and Preaching Vol. 5*, 249).

⁷¹ Miller, *New England Mind*, 328-329. He notes: “But it is eminently worth noting that Puritans were herein not following a course of their own setting, but one laid out by scholars rather than by divines, and not as primarily determined by piety” (329).

⁷² Miller, *New England Mind*, 317.

the understanding of his congregation” and then only “secondarily was it his task to rouse the emotions and raise the affections.”⁷³ As advanced and defined by Perkins, in the execution of the “plain style” of preaching “the logical act was always prerequisite to the rhetorical, and the art of an oration was to be not so much ‘concealed’ as not permitted to obscure the theme.”⁷⁴ Puritan scholars believed that the use of this Ramist methodology was ideally suited for sermons that were relatively easy to follow, more easily understood and hopefully acted upon by their listeners. In the minds of Puritan divines, the preacher should utilize the tools of rhetoric only if the audience were recalcitrant. They believed that the plain style, which in effect is a non-rhetorical style, would alone be acceptable to the reason of men.⁷⁵

This potential outcome for the sermon resonated with Edwards’ aims as a preacher. In his treatment of preaching, the sermon became a tool of rhetorical power by which to promote a more activist religion and further the importance of the conversion experience.⁷⁶ The Puritan plain sermon would ideally impress the hearers’ minds first with its logic, while also arousing their hearts to action by secondly appealing to rhetoric.⁷⁷ However, Ramus’ formal separation of logic and rhetoric tested Edwards’ theological convictions regarding religious affections and motivations. As observed previously in this study, though deeply involved in the study of religious affections and the hallmarks of genuine conversion, Edwards’ inherited homiletical style was neither designed primarily to stir the emotions nor to be grandiloquent. While a major source of his rhetorical power involved the use of biblical imagery and metaphor, he also believed that these images should always be subservient to the points of logically-proven doctrine.⁷⁸

This point, however, must be held in tension with another of Edwards’ beliefs; namely that religious affections motivated human behaviour. In his work *Freedom of the Will* he argued that for one to be a free moral agent means to be free from rational persuasion. Solely appealing to the rationality of the sinner would surely be ineffective; one’s will or heart had to be moved first in order for the intellect to comprehend and respond.⁷⁹ Perhaps the way he reconciled these seemingly opposing positions can be found within his theological tradition. As a true Calvinist, Edwards felt that religious affections arose solely at the initiative of a sovereign God. Only through the ministry of the Word, the sacraments and prayer could the preacher expect the Holy Spirit to do his work, although there could be no guarantee that God would indeed provide an infusion of divine light upon the hearers. Old maintains that infusing “his preaching with emotional appeal would have been much too Arminian, much too Pelagian, much too manipulative for Edwards.”⁸⁰

As noted earlier, Edwards apparently reconciled the tension between the free will of humanity and the sovereignty of God by distributing shares of responsibility in the sermon event to the preacher, the listener and to God. If God should will it the preacher’s words would become God’s words and the hearer’s heart would be filled with a “divine light” which would then permit the cognition of the reality and truth of that Word. In Edwards’ conception of preaching, there is a burden on the preacher to make sure his logic and rhetoric are as effective as they can be, a burden on the listener to make sure he/she is both earnest and attentive to the words of the preacher and finally a burden upon God to infuse the listeners with his divine and supernatural light such that a genuine conversion results.⁸¹

⁷³ Buckingham, “Stylistic Artistry,” 137.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 326.

⁷⁵ Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 284.

⁷⁶ Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 15.

⁷⁷ Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 55.

⁷⁸ Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 217-218.

⁷⁹ Yabrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 11.

⁸⁰ Old, *Reading and Preaching Vol. 5*, 254.

⁸¹ Kinnach, “General Introduction,” 203.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Edwards was indeed molded in his preaching by a variety of influences in his environment—personal, rhetorical, theological, ecclesial and psychological—and furthermore preached within a distinct cultural and social context as part of a “school” of preaching.⁸² His sermons were in the main stream of literary effort of his day and his exegetical ideals were also based upon well-established literary models. Within the Puritan succession, there were clear and definite ideas to guide the would-be preacher.⁸³ Operating within the Puritan sermon genre of his day meant that Edwards was constrained to preach within the limits of certain conventions by which the sermon genre was defined, and predetermined sermon style and form.

Positively, these conventions ideally allowed his listeners to anticipate what might be coming, take sermon notes and thus more readily absorb his messages, accustomed as they were with its familiar patterns of biblical exegesis and homiletical structure. The formal sermon structure he utilized throughout his ministry established a shared set of expectations with the hearers as the form itself identified the genre, subject and structure of argument.⁸⁴ This study furthermore notes that while Edwards operated within these conventions, neither challenging nor changing his inherited preaching tradition, his efforts nonetheless elicited great creativity. Edwards simplified the sermonic form he inherited from his father and grandfather, infused his sermons with a wide variety of both biblical and everyday images and metaphors, and sought to interpret theologically the religious experiences of his hearers. His metaphysical or philosophical preaching displayed the unique quality of pursuing the implications of doctrine and extending those implications into new dimensions of thought and realization.⁸⁵

Negatively, however, the congregation at Northampton at times grew inured to such a steady diet of preaching form, style and structure. Despite Edwards’ artistic and linguistic abilities as an exegete and preacher, the lack of homiletical variety may have contributed to boredom on the congregation’s part.⁸⁶

Preachers both preceding and following Edwards have faced the challenges of interacting critically with their inherited preaching traditions and reconfiguring their preaching forms and styles utilizing available resources. As in Edwards’ time, contemporary preaching embodies a wide variety of stylistic variations governed, for example, by preaching examples established by respected pastors and preachers, denominational tastes for biblical exegesis, the conventions of the age and the historical context.⁸⁷ This paper concludes by

⁸² Old points out that Edwards was a part of the “New England School” of Puritan preaching. With its emphasis on prophetic and evangelistic sermons, “this double emphasis has, ever since the first generation of New England preachers, continued through the whole history of the American church” (*The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures Volume 5*, 169).

⁸³ Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher*, 55. He notes that in light of Edwards’ background preparation and reading, “How large a part culture played in producing the sermons of Edwards we cannot determine, but the background of preparation is obvious” (55).

⁸⁴ Kinnach, Minkema and Sweeney, “Editor’s Introduction,” xii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁸⁶ For example, *Sinners* represents Edwards’ attempt in 1741 to fan the waning flames of revival in Northampton. Stout observes, “It is not clear what effect this *Sinners* had on his own congregation. Probably not much. They, after all, had heard its substance only two weeks before. Awakening sermons often require unfamiliar audiences and spontaneous delivery. Certainly no reports exist of exceptional responses. But the next time he preached it, at Enfield, Massachusetts, on July 8, the effects were extraordinary” (“Preface to the Period,” 33).

⁸⁷ Kinnach, Minkema and Sweeney, “Editor’s Introduction,” xii.

advancing some suggestions for preachers interested in reconfiguring their preaching styles and forms, asking a variety of questions designed to help homiletics critically interact with a variety of potential influences: personal, ecclesial, intellectual and rhetorical.

Reconfiguring Influences: Thinking Critically about Preaching

First, in terms of personal influences upon preaching forms and styles, preachers could begin by identifying preachers that they may have grown up listening to, as Edwards did with his father and grandfather. In addition to preachers heard within church contexts, this may include radio or television preachers that have influenced preaching styles. One could further attempt to discover those preachers' denominational, exegetical, theological or homiletical commitments; theological educational background; or any connections to a certain "school or preaching," exegetical method, form, structure or style. Second, regarding ecclesial contexts, one could focus upon his or her denominational background and its possible influences or conventions placed upon exegesis, preaching forms, structure or style. In addition, examining both the homiletical and theological history of a particular denomination or church can be helpful, especially in terms of possible reactions or splits from other churches or denominations. A further helpful step would be to evaluate the current societal context of the church or denomination and the resulting influences upon current homiletical practices. Identifying the culture of the current setting in which the preacher gives sermons may also give helpful clues related to the possible receptivity or closed attitudes toward preaching innovation.

Third, the preacher could engage in an evaluation of the variety of intellectual influences upon her preaching by drawing up a list of the last half-dozen or so books or articles she has read discussing homiletical theory and practices. When analyzing this list, the preacher may discover that she tends to read only those authors whose positions reinforce her current preaching theory and practice. Conversely, reading from a wide variety of authors representing divergent theological and homiletical points of view can help to widen out one's points of view and may challenge previously-held notions regarding exegetical and homiletical theories and practices.

Finally, in terms of rhetorical influences, one should have a contextual understanding of the history of preaching and its historical relationship with classical rhetoric. Observing the variety of trends, reactions and counter-reactions that have historically taken place in the history of preaching can help one place current preaching forms into a more understandable frame of reference. For example, the discussion within this study of Ramist logic and its influence upon Puritan preaching forms may cause preachers to evaluate the direction and movement within their own sermons. Despite incisive critiques by homiletics of deductive sermon forms,⁸⁸ many sermons today still progress in a linear fashion from the logical presentation of biblical propositions and conclude with a variety of emotional appeals and applications. One possible way to change this practice might be to let the wide variety of the forms and genres of the biblical text exert a greater influence over the final form of the sermon itself.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See for example Craddock's analysis of deductive preaching in *As One Without Authority*, 45-47. Craddock felt that deductive modes of preaching display both a "downward movement" and "condescension of thought" in its preaching patterns, which ultimately reveals the authoritarian status of the preacher (47).

⁸⁹ This is not a new concept within preaching. As far back as 1958, homiletics H. Grady Davis in his work *Design for Preaching* called for an organic unity of sermon form and function, and focused upon the shape and movement of the sermon in connection with its content. As recently as 2005 Long argued rather than preaching that attempts to mine Scripture for "propositional nuggets" regardless of genre and form that instead "preaching is biblical when the text serves as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon" (*Witness of Preaching*, 67).

In conclusion, this examination of the variety of rhetorical influences upon the preaching of Jonathan Edwards reveals that above all else he was a product of his time operating within the sometimes narrow confines of New England Puritanism. However, despite his formality in abiding to the conventions of the preaching form and style he inherited, he was nonetheless a deeply passionate man who was able to integrate his religious affections with his intellect.⁹⁰ Identifying Edwards' influences, however, does not necessarily identify the man himself. One must consider that Edwards responded to his background, rigorously and personally reformulated it and was able to put the inherited sermon form to use.⁹¹ Inspired by his vision of a Christian society, Edwards eagerly pressed on in his attempts to bring this about. Driven by the desire "to see people awaken to the most profound realities of the spiritual life," the preaching of Edwards not only represents the flowering of New England Puritanism,⁹² but in addition has left us with an enduring and truly international legacy.⁹³

⁹⁰ Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, 142.

⁹¹ Kinnach, "General Introduction," 21-22.

⁹² Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Vol. 5, 235.

⁹³ For more on the international scope of Edwards' legacy, see Bebbington, "Remembered Around the World" in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad*, 177-200.

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