

DAVENANT PRESS

Communicating God's Trinitarian Fullness

An Exposition of Jonathan Edwards'
End For Which God Created the World

JOE RIGNEY

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Praise for *Communicating God's Triune Fullness*

This is a book for heart and for head. It quenches our spiritual thirst by looking into the heart of the triune God. Carefully, Joe Rigney peels out Jonathan Edwards' insights about the triune God. In doing so, he reveals God's love for Himself that leads Him to communicate this inexhaustible fullness to his creatures. God's glory does not compete with our happiness, but it makes us share in God's own knowledge, love and joy. I like this book, this stuff, this depth, this logic, and this warmth."

—**Prof. Dr. Willem van Vlastuin**, *Director Jonathan Edwards Center Benelux | Chair Theology and Spirituality of Reformed Protestantism, Free University of Amsterdam*

"I love reading books that have clear goals. And Joe Rigney's *Communicating God's Trinitarian Fullness* does just that. It is in the first instance a commentary on Edwards' End for which God created the world. But more than this, it is also a critique of competing interpretations of Edwards' philosophical theology, providing a confident path through the debates. And it contains a concise contribution in its own right to Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity, the basic bedrock for his eschatology. It isn't a big book, but it does pack a punch beyond its weight."

—**Rhys Bezzant**, *Ridley College, Melbourne*

“In his work *Communicating God’s Trinitarian Fullness: An Exposition of Jonathan Edwards’ End of Creation*, Joe Rigney demonstrates a careful approach to scholarship, making a distinctive contribution to the field of Edwards studies. Rigney not only provides a comprehensive examination of the theological underpinnings behind Edwards’ argument in *End of Creation*, but also offers a comprehensive exposition of this treatise, showcasing an exemplary level of engagement with existing scholarly discourse. Given the ongoing critical assessment of the writings of Jonathan Edwards, Rigney’s scholarship emerges as indispensable in the scholarly evaluation of America’s preeminent theologian.”

—**Adriaan C. Neele**, *Vice President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary* | *Research Scholar, Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University*.

“Joe Rigney offers readers an exceptional study of Jonathan Edwards’ complex *End of Creation*. Traversing Edwards’ dissertation and its theological background in a manner which is both comprehensive and accessible, this book offers an insightful analysis of Edwards’ view of God’s purpose in creating the world. Rigney’s work is a must-read for those wishing to understand the depths of Edwards’ thought — An invaluable resource for any student of theology.”

—**Robert L. Boss**, *Director of JE Society.org* | *Author of Thunder God, Wonder God: Exploring the Emblematic Vision of Jonathan Edwards*

“Edwards’ *End of Creation* has for a long time both dazzled and puzzled readers: it contains such a breathtaking vision of God and the world he created, yet some of its statements appear to suggest that Edwards struggled to affirm a classical articulation of the Christian God. In this tightly reasoned and wonderfully compact book, Joe Rigney artfully compiles a superb set of arguments

demonstrating Edwards' fidelity to classical orthodoxy in *End of Creation*. It is an outstanding handbook that shines much light on Edwards' classic!"

—**Dr. Robert Caldwell**, *Professor of Church History* |
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"In *End of Creation* Edwards swims in very deep waters and quite a few of his modern readers have surely felt like they were drowning in them! This work builds on the author's own outstanding wider academic research in this area and on the work of a number of clear-eyed interpreters. One of the great strengths of this work is that the author guides his readers back into the original sources and provides the tools they need to wrestle intelligently with the text. In addition the author offers a wise and punchy examination of the myriad modern voices who have offered their own conflicting interpretations of Edwards."

—**Dr. Michael McClenahan**, *Principal and Professor of Systematic Theology*, *Union Theological College, Belfast*

"Jonathan Edwards' *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* is a rare theological work in terms of its theoretical elegance, argumentative rigor, and depth of systematic insight. Joe Rigney is to be thanked for providing a clear and penetrating analysis of this text which showcases Edwards' brilliance. *Communicating God's Triune Fullness* is an invaluable resource for students of Edwards as well as for theologians, ministers, and Christian laypersons from various theological traditions who want to inquire into the end for which God created the world."

—**Jordan Wessling**, *Assistant Professor of Religion*, *Lindsey Wilson College*

"This book is gold: one of the sharpest minds I know, setting himself to understand and explain what may be the best American

mind of them all—and what may be his greatest work. Unfortunately, as Stephen Holmes laments, ‘there is so little attention paid to this Dissertation in the secondary literature.’ Well, here is some long overdue and wonderfully helpful attention. And such aid is warranted. Even Edwards’ disciple and close friend, Samuel Hopkins, thought the dissertation was ‘something above the level of common readers,’ and as Joe Rigney observes, that ‘has only increased in the centuries since.’ So, come sit at Edwards’ feet, taking the hand of an able contemporary of your own. The dissertation is Edwards at his best. And this book is Rigney at his.”—**David Mathis**, *Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; Adjunct Professor, Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis*

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To Walter Schultz,
for teaching me that the center of reality is not the
doctrine of the Trinity, but the triune God himself

Acknowledgements

I first read Jonathan Edwards' *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* in college. It was included in John Piper's *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*, along with Piper's reflections on the monumental significance of Edwards' insights.¹ To my twenty-year-old self, Edwards sounded like a more complicated and wordy, eighteenth-century version of Piper himself. I read him, comprehending some, but without, I think, understanding much.

A few years later, I sat in a seminary class at The Bethlehem Institute, under the tutelage of Dr. Walter Schultz. The class was devoted entirely to Edwards' *Dissertation*, and, to be frank, I was not excited. At the time, I was far more energized by Greek exegesis and biblical theology. However, I still recall the emotion in Dr. Schultz's voice and the tears in his eyes as he described how, at John Piper's recommendation, he had devoted the previous thirty years of his life to studying this work. It had reoriented his thinking, awakened his affections, and changed his life.

Schultz told us that this book, more than any other outside of the Scriptures, had shown him that the Trinity was the center and goal of everything. Not the *doctrine* of the Trinity, but God-as-Trinity. The triune God, in all of his fullness and glory,

1. John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

was the center of everything. In that first class, something began to stir in me, and over the coming weeks, as Schultz led us paragraph by tightly-argued paragraph through Edwards' work, foundations were laid and vistas were opened that I had not yet imagined.

Since then, I've had the privilege of teaching various iterations of that class a dozen times, sometimes with Dr. Schultz (though I call him Walter now) and sometimes by myself, to seminary students, college students, and lay people. My love of Edwards' vision led me to pursue doctoral studies on Edwards' doctrine of God and his attributes. And it led me to write this short book in which I try to make Edwards' arguments and assumptions as plain and clear as possible.

Which brings me to gratitude. I'm grateful to God for the students who have walked through Edwards' dissertation year after year, sharpening me with their questions and comments. I'm grateful for Michael Reeves, my doctoral supervisor, who recognized that an exposition of *End of Creation* didn't fit in my dissertation, but did have value in its own right. I'm grateful for Mark Hamilton at Davenant Press, who welcomed this project under their banner and whose editorial eye improved the book. I'm grateful for my assistant Clint Manley, who read the manuscript, gave valuable feedback, and helped track down a number of citations.

I'm grateful for my wife and sons, who have encouraged me to pursue this kind of rigorous academic study. I'm deeply grateful for John Piper for introducing me to Edwards all those years ago, and for faithfully heralding Edwards' vision of God's God-centeredness in our own day. And, as my story above indicates, I'm grateful for Walter Schultz, for inviting a young seminarian to take the time to slowly and rigorously and devotionally read a dense eighteenth-century theological treatise and to marvel at the God described in it. It's to him that I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

Citations from Edwards' writings will refer to the 26 vols. of Yale's letterpress edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Yale University Press, 1957–2008) and use the abbreviation *WJE* along with the subsection and pagination and (e.g., *WJE* 1.150). Citations from Edwards' writings contained in digital volumes 27-73 will be cited as *WJEO* (*WJE Online*).

- Vol. 1 *Freedom of the Will*, Paul Ramsey, ed. 1957
- Vol. 2 *Religious Affections*, John E. Smith, ed. 1959
- Vol. 3 *Original Sin*, Clyde A. Holbrook, ed. 1970
- Vol. 4 *The Great Awakening*, C. C. Goen, ed. 1972
- Vol. 5 *Apocalyptic Writings*, Stephen J. Stein, ed. 1977
- Vol. 6 *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, Wallace E. Anderson, ed. 1980
- Vol. 7 *The Life of David Brainerd*, Norman Pettit, ed. 1984
- Vol. 8 *Ethical Writings*, Paul Ramsey, ed. 1989
- Vol. 9 *A History of the Work of Redemption*, John F. Wilson, ed. 1989
- Vol. 10 *Sermons and Discourses, 1720–1723*, Wilson H. Kimnach, ed. 1992
- Vol. 11 *Typological Writings*, Wallace E. Anderson and Mason I. Lowance, eds. 1993

- Vol. 12 *Ecclesiastical Writings*, David D. Hall, ed. 1994
- Vol. 13 *The 'Miscellanies,' a–500*, Thomas A. Schafer, ed. 1994
- Vol. 14 *Sermons and Discourses, 1723–1729*, Kenneth P. Minkema, ed. 1997
- Vol. 15 *Notes on Scripture*, Stephen J. Stein, ed. 1998
- Vol. 16 *Letters and Personal Writings*, George S. Claghorn, ed. 1998
- Vol. 17 *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733*, Mark Valeri, ed. 1999
- Vol. 18 *The 'Miscellanies,' 501–832*, Ava Chamberlain, ed. 2000
- Vol. 19 *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*, M. X. Lesser, ed. 2001
- Vol. 20 *The 'Miscellanies,' 833–1152*, Amy Plantinga Pauw, ed. 2002
- Vol. 21 *Writings on the Trinity, Grace and Faith*, Sang Hyun Lee, ed. 2002
- Vol. 22 *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, eds. 2003
- Vol. 23 *The 'Miscellanies,' 1153–1360*, Douglas A. Sweeney, ed. 2004
- Vol. 24 *The 'Blank Bible,'* Stephen J. Stein, ed. 2006
(Parts 1 and 2 in two vols.)
- Vol. 25 *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, Wilson H. Kimnach, ed. 2006
- Vol. 26 *Catalogues of Reading*, Peter J. Thuesen, ed. 2008
- Vols. 27–73 *Online Only Volumes* (further manuscript notebooks, sermons, correspondence, etc., available online: <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/browse>)

Introduction

Few theologians in the history of the church have thought as deeply about God's purpose in creation as Jonathan Edwards. From 1722 to 1753, Edwards addressed the question of God's end in creation in at least fifty entries in his *Miscellanies* notebooks, exploring the question from multiple angles and considering a number of different options. His lifelong reflections on the subject culminated in the writing of the *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* in 1755. This work (hereafter, *End of Creation*) was the first of a two-part work exposing the foundations of the fashionable schemes of divinity that were gaining ascendance in Edwards' day. The second work sought to answer the question, "What is the nature of true virtue?" *End of Creation* took up a more fundamental question: "Why did God create the world?"

Edwards was not the first thinker to take up these questions. In fact, the central concerns of the two dissertations had been addressed by a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theologians and philosophers, including Johannes Wollebius, John Owen, Francis Burgerskijck, Adrian Heereboord, Baruch Spinoza, Nicholas Malebranche, Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and Thomas Bayes.¹ These concerns included God's motive and purpose in

1. Johannes Wollebius, *The Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626); John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648); Franco Burgersdijck, *Institutionum Logicarum* (1651) and *Monitio Logica, or An Abstract and Translation of His Logick* (1697); Adrian Heereboord, *Meletemata Philosophica* (1654) and *Ermencia Logica* (1663); Baruch Spinoza, *Thoughts on*

creation, the relationship between divine aseity and divine action, the question of divine freedom and necessity, and the implications of these for human virtue and benevolence.² Edwards took up the question because of his deep conviction that the common answers given to these questions were deeply flawed and had dramatic effects on our understanding of God, salvation, the church, and human society.

One common answer was that God created the world for the sake of his creatures. In fact, early in his life, Edwards himself suggested that God, out of his goodness, created the world in order to make his creatures happy.³ However, as his thinking matured, Edwards recognized the significant challenges in viewing creaturely happiness as God's end in creation.⁴ On the other hand,

Metaphysics (1663) and *Ethics* (1677); Nicholas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth* (1674–75) and *Dialogues on Metaphysics* (1696); Samuel Clarke, *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1704), *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* (1705), and *Of the Goodness of God* (1738); John Balguy, *The Foundation of Moral Goodness* (1728); Thomas Bayes, *Divine Benevolence* (1731); and Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (1739). See also the discussion in Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 50–64.

2. “What is God's end in creation and what explains God's acting to achieve it? Furthermore, if God is a se, then how could it make sense for God to have purposes at all, much less to act from motives in the first place? Is God free? How does creature compliance or non-compliance with God's will relate to God's purposes?” Walter Schultz, “Jonathan Edwards' Philosophical Argument for God's End in Creation,” *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 4, no. 3 (2014): 297.

3. *WJE* 13:199–200.

4. “There is a significant change from his earlier position, established from 1723 to 1729 to his later view of 1749. His initial view was that creature happiness *alone* was God's purpose and that God was motivated to bring this about by his goodness—as Edwards had understood *God's goodness* at that time. In his final account, Edwards locates the motive to create in God's

the common answer among Reformed orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century was simple—God creates for the promotion and display of his own glory.⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, Edwards recognized challenges in this answer as well. Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott quote a poem by seventeenth-century philosopher and poet John Norris that captures these challenges well.

In himself compendiously blest, . . .
 Is one unmov'd self-center'd Point of Rest,
 Why, then, if full of bliss that ne'er could cloy,
 Would he do ought but still enjoy?
 Why not indulge his self-sufficing state,
 Live to himself at large, calm and secure,
 A wise eternal Epicure?⁶

McClymond and McDermott go on to write:

If God were eternally complete and self-sufficient in himself, why would God create a world at all? On the other hand, if God were not complete and self-sufficient, would this not impugn the perfection of God?

infinite self-love, which is a second-order dispositional attribute. However, this just is one aspect of Edwards' mature view of God's goodness." Walter Schultz, "Jonathan Edwards' *End of Creation* and Spinoza's Conundrum," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 32.

5. "This often stood as a simple assertion that was neither argued for nor discussed . . . the bare assertion, 'God created for His own glory,' was common amongst the Reformed; detailed descriptions of what is meant by 'the glory of God' are less common." Stephen Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory* (Edinburgh, SC: T&T Clark, 2000), 62.

6. Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 209.

Some have called this the 'full bucket paradox.' If the 'bucket' of divine glory was already brimful prior to God's creating the world, what—if anything—would the creation of the universe contribute to God? Yet if creating the world added nothing to God's glory, why would God have chosen to create? A further issue relates to God's freedom. Did God have a motive or reason for creating? If not, would the world be anything but a cosmic accident? On the other hand, did God have an option of not creating a world at all? If not, how could the creating of the world be a free action expressing God's grace and goodness?⁷

Thus, given the inadequacy of the standard answers, Edwards spent considerable effort throughout his life attempting to identify a robust and biblical alternative. Stephen Holmes, whose survey of Edwards' *Miscellanies* on God's end in creation is among the most comprehensive, offers these as possible answers (Miscellany number in parentheses): to make intelligent creatures happy (87 and 92); to communicate goodness (96 and 104); to gain a bride for his Son (271); to "discover himself in his works" (243, 247); to allow for his infinite and supreme excellency to shine forth (332); that goodness might communicate itself (445); that God's internal self-glorification in the Trinity might flow forth *ad extra* (448); the exercise of all of God's attributes (553).⁸ After a significant lapse of time, Edwards again takes up the question in a number of additional miscellanies, beginning with Miscellany 1066. These latter miscellanies more or less express the mature view that he sets forth in *End of Creation*.

7. McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 210.

8. Holmes, *God of Grace*, 35–44.

The primary aim of the present work is to expound and unfold Edwards' mature view of God's purpose in creation as reflected in the dissertation. Though not incredibly long, *End of Creation* is quite dense. In the preface to the first publication of this work following his death, Edwards' protege and close friend, Samuel Hopkins, wrote that "the manner in which these subjects are treated is something above the level of common readers."⁹ He went on to note that "some readers may find the labor hard to keep pace with the writer, in the advances he makes, where the ascent is arduous."¹⁰ The difficulty in comprehending Edwards' argument has only increased in the centuries since *End of Creation* was written. Nevertheless, Edwards' account of God's end in creation is worth the arduous effort that it takes to comprehend it.

To that end, this book unfolds in three parts. In the first part, I provide some useful theological background to understanding Edwards' argument, particularly with respect to his doctrine of the Trinity. While Edwards' argument in *End of Creation* is written in such a way so as to appeal to a broad range of theists, including those who would question or deny the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, there is still a deep trinitarian sub-structure to the work. Thus, the first section attempts to identify the core elements of Edwards' understanding of the Trinity that will prove illuminating in the exposition itself. Additionally, in this section, I offer a summary of Edwards' goal and methodology in *End of Creation*, based, in part, on the scholarship of Walter Schultz, a philosopher who has devoted much of his life to teaching and expounding Edwards' work.

The second and main part of this book is an exposition of *End of Creation* itself. Here, I walk through the treatise, section by section, unfolding the various stages of Edwards' argument and

9. *WJE* 8:401.

10. *WJE* 8:402.

how they relate to each other. Ideally, this section should be read in tandem with Edwards' dissertation itself, so that the reader might confirm my exposition with the original.

The final section analyzes and clarifies a number of aspects of Edwards' theology in light of the exposition. Over the years, scholars have drawn a number of erroneous conclusions about Edwards' theology based on their misunderstandings of his argument in *End of Creation*. Such conclusions include his view of reason and revelation, his affirmation of divine aseity, the question of God's essential creativity and creation's necessity, and the challenge of God's freedom in creating. I conclude the work with my own summary of Edwards' view of God's supreme end in creation.

My prayer for this work is the same as Hopkins's prayer in the original preface: "May the Father of Lights smile upon the pious and benevolent aims and labors of his servant and crown them with his blessing!"¹¹

11. *WJE* 8:402.