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Remind, Rebuke, Refocus: Three Correctives after Investigating Edwards's Use of 'known by God'

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WHERE JONATHAN Edwards is known at all, the most common association is with a sermon entitled, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'. It has been anthologized often and mocked almost as frequently as portraying a God in whom no modern person could expect to believe. The image of a spider hanging by a thread over the maws of hell, its most identifiable and ostensibly pre-modern trope, is disconnected from the sermon's deliberate scientific moorings in Isaac Newton's modern understanding of gravity. Indeed, its carefully crafted pastoral application, which is overlooked, that God is not presently releasing us to perdition but instead is preserving our life from destruction, is designed instead to teach us grace.

This is not hell-fire preaching as traditionally conceived. What most contemporary readers fail to see is that Edwards preached this sermon on a hot summer's day, with great success it must be said, while an itinerant in a friend's church, but did not return to this style of preaching. It was the exception which has nonetheless determined his reputational rule. We

might be justified in thinking that, for Edwards, God is distant, unconcerned, capricious or taunting.

In this paper, shaped by the oft-neglected Biblical phrase, 'known by God' and written with the concerns of mainly biblical colleagues in mind, my goal is to recast our vision of Edwards, and reflexively to recast our own assumptions about epistemology, hermeneutics, and spirituality in the light of Edwards's insights, and thereby to remind, rebuke and refocus. Such a small phrase as 'known by God' nonetheless opens up major themes which shaped Edwards's worldview and ministry. These include the mind of God as the centre of all reality, the purpose of biblical commentary to expound the unifying themes of the Scriptures, and the goal of personal discipleship or spirituality as a personally transformative encounter with the Lord God himself.

Given Edwards's philosophical location in European discourse during the early Enlightenment, we might expect discussion of this phrase in his epistemologically saturated project. However, while this concept is everywhere,

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it turns out also to be nowhere at all. By setting up this phrase as our interpretative lens, we will see the contours of Edwards's world and our own with more clarity.

I Known by God as Metaphysical Reminder

1. Idealism and materialism

One of the most striking encounters in contemporary readings of Edwards is his commitment to philosophical idealism (perhaps immaterialism). This is the branch of metaphysical reflection which begins with the category of knowledge to work back to a defence for the existence of God, in whose mind all things exist and cohere. For Edwards, the motto, 'known by God', could be used as the philosophical foundation of all experience:

How is it possible to bring the mind to imagine? Yea, it is really impossible it should be, that anything should be, and nothing know it ... Supposing there were another universe only of bodies, created at a great distance from this, created in excellent order and harmonious motions, and a beautiful variety; and there was no created intelligence in it, nothing but senseless bodies ... I demand in what respect this world has a being, but only in the divine consciousness ... There would be figures and magnitudes, and motions and proportions—but where? Where else, but in the Almighty's knowledge.¹

By contrast, modern evangelicals, some of the most avid readers of Edwards's writings, have been profoundly shaped by Enlightenment assumptions of rationality, the possibilities of sense perception, and the missiological imperative of incarnation, which draw (unwittingly) from the well of Descartes or Locke or Hobbes. The idealist project sits uncomfortably with us.² Even if we do not go as far as Hobbes and make material existence the most real, we are prone nonetheless to pitch the material against the spiritual in a kind of unhealthy dualism.

It can be argued, however, that this is a minority report in terms of the history of Christianity. The idealism which Edwards represents has a fine, often Platonically inspired, pedigree. Snowden helpfully defines idealism in this way:

Philosophical idealism is the view of the world that holds that there is only one kind of ultimate reality, spirit or mind, and that matter is a mode of activity or manifestation of mind. It does not deny the existence of matter, but discovers and shows its true nature as a mode of divine activity.³

The Platonic thread in theological reflection has actually been a dominant concern in western Christianity, stressing as it does the ideal, or the world of

Jonathan Edwards 6; ed. W. E. Anderson; New Haven: Yale University Press 1980), *WJE* 6: 204.

2 The tide turned against idealism in the twentieth century with the publication of G. E. Moore's *Refutation of idealism* in 1903.

3 James H. Snowden, 'Philosophical Idealism and Christian Theology', *The Biblical World* 46/3 (1915): 152-158, especially 152.

1 Jonathan Edwards, 'Of Being', in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (The Works of

forms, against which the things of this world are held to be, at best, approximations. This strand has highlighted the continuities between our experience of the world and the creative character of God, who has left his imprint on all that he has made.

In this philosophical mode, metaphysical assumptions about the existence of God have been defended in various ways, sometimes through appeal to atomism and physical causation, sometimes by arguing on the basis of logical deductions from the nature of being/existence, and on yet other occasions with respect to an understanding of mind and ideas.⁴ This view has been mediated in the West most spectacularly through the writings of Augustine of Hippo, or Thomas Aquinas who said that 'The knowledge of God is the cause of all things'.⁵ Even John Calvin begins his *Institutes* with reference to the central category of knowing God and knowing ourselves.

This 'whole Platonic and Augustinian tradition into which Edwards was born' represents not an aberration but a well-attested participationist ontology evident in much Christian theological reflection.⁶ Rupp agrees: 'As a theological affirmation that the more like God a being is, the more 'real' he

is, this corollary stands in a venerable theological tradition.'⁷

2. Strengths and weaknesses

The idealist tradition has distinct advantages over its materialist competitors. It is, first of all, profoundly *personalist*, for the relationship between God and all that he has made entails some measure of continuity, within which knowledge as a subset implies our personal engagement with God and his engagement with us, given that we are both conscious beings. A rock cannot have knowledge in any commonly understood way.

In so far as this is true, philosophical idealism can claim to be anti-pantheist, for God's knowledge of his creation assumes some kind of conscious distinction from his creation. Medieval thinkers debating the characteristics of God asked whether arbitrary freedom of God over his creation, or alternatively the consistent activity of God within the creation, constraining divine freedom, was primary. The appeal to an idealist metaphysic can to some degree address this tension, for if all things subsist in the mind of God, both divine freedom in relation to the creation and also order and consistency in acting within it are possible.⁸

Importantly, philosophical idealism does not allow for a crude contrast

4 Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially 107-115 for an overview.

5 As quoted in McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 114.

6 Wallace E. Anderson, 'Editor's Introduction,' in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 6; ed. W. E. Anderson; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 81-82.

7 George Rupp, 'The "Idealism" of Jonathan Edwards', *Harvard Theological Review* 62/2 (1969): 209-226, especially 17.

8 See Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: University Press, 2003), 116-117 for further explanation.

or dualism to be posited between that which is physical and that which is spiritual, for all things, both material and non-material, find their existence dependent on the mind of God. Snowden again:

Idealism is emphatically a system of personalism ... it guards itself against the pit of pantheism that swallows up all personality and makes real religion impossible. And idealism equally affirms the knowability of God by finding him to be a spirit kindred to ourselves, and thereby it refutes agnosticism.⁹

For Snowden, idealism functions as a guiding theme in the Scriptural witness, and defends the unitary nature of the universe, presenting the creation and redemption of the world as providentially working towards the same ends, thus confirming the doctrine of divine sovereignty.¹⁰

Theological idealism has, however, not gone uncontested. Chief amongst its weaknesses is the notion that in this model the Creator and the creation are not sufficiently distinguishable. Codified in early Trinitarian debates, it was decided that the most theologically satisfying case for the relationship of the Son with the Father was to assert the Son's unbegottenness. He was consubstantial with the Father from eternity

past, and therefore eternally begotten. The Son could not be understood as belonging to the creation, which was the position taken by those supporting the Arian cause.

This separation of the divine from the creaturely had flow-on effects in discussions of Christology, where the Antiochene party asserted the contrast between the divine and the human in Christ, and the Alexandrians the closeness between them. Furthermore, idealism might suggest a kind of divine immanence, which would disallow apocalyptic rupture or inbreaking power, and so negate significant biblical themes. Medieval nominalism pushed back against the Platonically inspired commitment to idealist participative ontology, which seemed to devalue historical contingency, language, and the power of human agency.

3. Edwards and idealism

Edwards's idealist thought appears early in his oeuvre, especially evident in his scientific writing, where the phrase, 'known by God', and cognate terms take a central role. His essay, 'Of Being' is of particular note. Writing in 1721, Edwards begins his metaphysical investigations with questions of the first order.

He begins with a conclusion: 'that there should absolutely be nothing at all is utterly impossible', and makes a case for the necessity of being based on the concept of space, implying solidity and resistance, which are relational terms. If space is the irreducible minimum, he can aver: 'Space is this necessary, eternal, infinite and omnipresent being ... space is the very thing that we can never remove and conceive of

9 Snowden, 'Philosophical Idealism and Christian Theology', especially 154-155.

10 Snowden, 'Philosophical Idealism and Christian Theology', 156. See also Miklos Vetö, *La Pensée de Jonathan Edwards* (Ouverture philosophique; Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 82, and William Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition; ed. E. N. Zalta; <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/edwards/>: 2012), section 2.2.

its not being ... I have already said as much as that space is God.¹¹

Foundational reality is not material in this scenario:

It follows from hence, that those beings which have knowledge and consciousness are the only proper and real and substantial beings, inasmuch as the being of other things is only by these. From hence we may see the gross mistake of those who think material things the most substantial beings, and spirits more like a shadow; whereas spirits only are properly substance.¹²

Knowledge, not materiality, defines substance, posing a significant challenge to Aristotle's views of metaphysics.¹³

Edwards's thinking in 'Of Being' is extended in the set of miscellanies of 1723 entitled 'The Mind,' where knowledge involves the *quality* of a relationship between ideas, not just the relationship itself: 'Knowledge is not the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, but rather the perception of the union or disunion of ideas, or the perceiving whether two or more ideas belong to one another.'¹⁴ Knowledge is essentially relational and necessarily aesthetic.

Mindful of challenges to idealist philosophy, pursued by Thomas Hobbes for example, Edwards provides

some disclaimers:

When we say that the world, ie, the material universe, exists nowhere but in the mind, we have got to such a degree of strictness and abstraction that we must be exceedingly careful that we do not confound and lose ourselves by misapprehension ... Though we suppose that the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea, yet we may speak in the old way, and as properly and truly as ever: God in the beginning created such a certain number of atoms, of such a determinate bulk and figure, which they yet maintain and always will ...¹⁵

He does not wish to undermine the traditional metaphysical system which generated agreement concerning Trinitarian relations in the fourth century, but does want to bolt onto it new conceptions of idealist ontology. Indeed, Edwards ultimately appeals to intra-Trinitarian relations to explain the creative power of God and the world as an 'extension of the intra-Trinitarian life'.¹⁶

In Edwards's mind the creation is not something ephemeral and worthless but profoundly known and valuable.¹⁷ Nor is he falling prey to an

11 Edwards, 'Of Being,' *WJE* 6: 202, 203.

12 Edwards, 'Of Being,' *WJE* 6: 206.

13 Anderson, 'Editor's Introduction,' *WJE* 6: 83.

14 Jonathan Edwards, 'The Mind,' in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 6; ed. W. E. Anderson; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 385.

15 Edwards, 'The Mind,' *WJE* 6: 353-354.

16 Kin Yip Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God: The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 155.

17 Note the value of experience of the created order in Edwards's *Personal Narrative*: Jonathan Edwards, 'Personal Narrative', in *Letters and Personal Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 16; ed. G. S. Claghorn; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

unintended pantheism, because in Edwards,

the relation between God and the world is construed as a relation between a creative volition and its immediate effects. Edwards' model is not a whole and its parts, or a substance (a bearer of properties) and its properties, or an essence and its accidents, but agent causality.¹⁸

The imposition of the category of will enables sufficient distinction between Creator and creation. All of these insights are part of contemporary debate on Edwards's philosophical commitments, in which the writing of Miklos Vetö serves as adjudicating voice:

Even in their most idealist or pantheistic occurrences, Edwards makes continual recourse to Biblical material, and this cannot be seen as literary artifice alone. Edwards appears to confess a continuity between God and the creation, but paradoxically this continuity results from an extreme contrast. It is precisely because the creature is nothing and useless in itself, that it appears so submissive before him and in uninterrupted continuity with him.¹⁹

Being known by God is at the heart of the epistemological project that Edwards undertakes, aware that he is swimming against the tide of philosophical materialism. It is certainly a biblical phrase, but it represents much more than a biblical concept, positioning him in a sequence of leading think-

ers, many of whom but not all were Christian, whose philosophical commitments now appear to us as strange.

It is unfashionable to adopt this metaphysic, but commentators and theologians have also been negligent in expounding constructively upon its possibilities. Edwards, the fountainhead of much of evangelical theology and experience, provides us with a reminder of the value of the notion of being 'known by God' and its significant part in the story of Christian philosophy.

II Known by God as Hermeneutical Rebuke

Edwards's ministry as philosopher launched his popularity in the mid-twentieth century, and his ministry as revivalist sustained the interest as the twentieth century closed. However, at the dawn of the new century the focus of academic work on Edwards has shifted to his work as pastor and preacher. Each week he preached up to three times, whether in his home church or as an itinerant elsewhere, and of his regular responsibilities it was working closely with the Scriptures in writing and teaching that took up most of his time.

His early exegetical work on the book of Revelation, designed for his own personal use and conceived as one of his first attempts at exegetical notebooks, was one of the first volumes published in the twentieth century Edwards renaissance.²⁰ The more

¹⁸ Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards' section 2.3.

¹⁹ Vetö, *La Pensée de Jonathan Edwards*, 81. Translation mine.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 5. Edited by Stephen J. Stein; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

substantial volumes in the Yale edition dealing with his broader biblical reflection, for example *The 'Blank Bible'* and *Notes on Scripture*, have by contrast only recently seen the light of day.²¹

In these volumes we see detailed and sustained reflection on biblical texts, although many of his miscellanies published elsewhere also expound a verse or phrase, even if they are not ordered according to their place in the biblical canon but chronologically after the sequence of composition. Edwards's extant sermons, which number approximately twelve hundred, are the chief evidence for his scriptural commitment and were the chief point of access for believers in Edwards's day to his biblical hermeneutics.

1. Known by God—in exegesis

Perhaps surprisingly, in all this voluminous work, the stand-alone phrase, 'known by God', is sparsely attested. Of the eleven scriptural occurrences of this phrase listed by Rosner,²² Edwards makes no comment in *The 'Blank Bible'* on the Old Testament references except when commenting on 2 Samuel 7:20, where he parallels the theme of God knowing his servant with God's electing his servant.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Blank Bible"* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 24; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Jonathan Edwards, *Notes on Scripture* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 15; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²² Brian S. Rosner and Loyola M. McLean, 'Theology and Human Flourishing: The Benefits of Being "Known by God,"' in *Beyond Well-Being: Spirituality and Human Flourishing* (eds. M. Miner, M. Dowson and S. Devenish; Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 71.

In reference to the New Testament occurrences, Edwards comments on the Greek of 1 Corinthians 8:3 without any substantial explanation; when dealing with Matthew 7:23 and 25:12 he picks up the theme of foreknowledge and points us to cross-references; and in relation to 1 Corinthians 13:12 does not address the theme of knowledge at all, but deals more thoroughly with the phrase, 'in a glass darkly'. Effectively, in *The 'Blank Bible'*, the few comments on the phrase 'known by God' mean something akin to election.

In his other major compilation of exegetical comments, *Notes on Scripture*, the story is not very different. Edwards equates 'known by God' with foreknowledge or election in Jeremiah 1:5, or with God's care for his people in the wilderness when treating Hosea 13:5. An added nuance is provided when expounding Galatians 4:8-9, connecting 'known by God' with the theme of adoption, and when commenting on 1 Corinthians 13:12, the theme taken up is not 'the glass darkly' but the allied thought of 'seeing' God.

In these two major sets of writing, when he does make any comment at all, Edwards connects the phrase, 'known by God', to doctrines of grace without any particular pastoral or philosophical framework for application.

2. Known by God in sermons

When seeking out sermons on these same texts, we are not much more enlightened. Edwards's approach to homiletics takes up the Puritan pattern of distilling a biblical passage into a single line doctrinal statement which is explained in relation to that theme throughout the Scriptures, and is in

turn applied to personal or congregational needs, called 'improvements'. The overall dramatic sequence therefore moves from the eternal Word, to temporal systematic distillation, then to very present needs, providing a structure that is designed to create something personally powerful, not merely logical or beautiful.²³

This homiletical tradition means that, though Edwards might have preached from a biblical text in which the phrase 'known by God' appears, that does not necessarily mean that he would expound the phrase itself as might be expected from an expository sermon in contemporary homiletics.

Edwards preached a series from Matthew 25:12 in which the phrase appears in the negative ('Truly I say to you, I do not know you'), though his interest does not focus on the theme of 'known by God', but rather on the evidence for true or false religion, visibly demonstrated. He preaches a series of sermons on 1 Corinthians 13, known now as *Charity and its Fruits*, but these formally stop short of including verse 12, and their concern is the eschatological ethics of love. Edwards does preach a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13:12, sustained over three preaching units—perhaps three weeks—but here the theme is summarized by the doctrine:

The extraordinary influences of the Spirit of God, imparting immediate revelations to men, were designed only for a temporary continuance while the church was in its minor-

ity, and never were intended to be stately upheld in the Christian church.²⁴

Turning to Edwards's sermons based on Jesus' words to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3, we might expect some comment on the theme of 'known by God', for Jesus several times says to the people of those churches that 'I know you....' In *The Dangers of Decline*, preached as an election day sermon in 1730 and based on Revelation 2:4-5, Edwards emphasizes human responsibility, but does not make Jesus' knowledge of his church a sustained theme, except in so far as that knowledge is a prelude to their indictment!

The same is true of sermons preached from Revelation 3:5, 3:15, 3:20, where references to knowledge in Edwards's treatment almost exclusively concern our wrong knowledge of God, not his knowledge of us, elective or damning.²⁵ Jesus' critical words to the seven churches are taken up by

24 Jonathan Edwards, 'Extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit are Inferior to Graces of the Spirit', in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 25; ed. W. H. Kinnach; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

25 Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon on Revelation 3:15', in *Sermons, Series II, 1729* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online 44; ed. Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University); Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon on Revelation 3:5(a)', in *Sermons, Series II, 1731-1732* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online 47; ed. Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University); Jonathan Edwards, 'Sermon on Revelation 3:20 (a)', in *Sermons, Series II, 1734* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online 49). It should be noted that other manuscript sermons of Edwards on Revelation 2 and 3, which are not yet published, are not consulted here.

23 Wilson H. Kinnach, 'Edwards as Preacher', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. S. J. Stein; Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 105.

Edwards to reinforce his own timely appeal to the church in Northampton to take responsibility for its life before God.

So the theme of 'known by Jesus' is barely more illuminating in his sermon corpus than the phrase, 'known by God'. Though my investigations of his use of the word 'known' are not exhaustive, they are nonetheless indicative of a relative paucity of concern for the phrase under consideration.

3. Mission and biblical authority

It would therefore be easy to conclude that Edwards was not sufficiently modern in his exegetical labours, for he does not concern himself in the first instance with 'the minute details of exegesis'²⁶ that have come to characterize contemporary writing of commentaries. Also he does not devote himself to the reconstruction of background conditions for a text, which in modern commentary often assumes diversity of historical origins or editorial hands, especially pertinent in commenting on Old Testament texts.²⁷ He maintains a commitment to Puritan-style preaching and pre-critical method, based on Ramist logic, theological supernaturalism and distilled doctrinal thematics, which makes for significant lacunae along the way.²⁸

The chief witness to Edwards's traditional hermeneutics is seen in his commitment to read the Scriptures in a redemptive-historical fashion, which highlights the unity of the divine purposes, into which the individual believer has been called. Edwards highlights the 'overarching thrust of the Scriptures' and emphasizes 'the core doctrines of the Christian faith in a world changing due to Enlightenment challenges'.²⁹ His own use of typology pushed this view further, arguing not just for a unity in the Scriptural deposit, but the power of the natural realm to convey the unitary purposes of God as well as his Trinitarian character.³⁰ All reality eloquently speaks of the divine.

We should note, however, that this is only one side of Edwards's approach to the Scriptures, namely the homiletical. He does indeed want to engage with the thought of the Enlightenment for intellectual, apologetic and missiological reasons. In so doing he wants to take his place in debates of his own day in order to deny critics of the biblical worldview the possibility of 'calling into question the historical authenticity of the Bible' which would then 'effect a cultural disestablishment of their society's foundational narrative, and thereby the hegemony of its religious institutions'.³¹ Edwards

²⁶ David P. Barshinger, *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms: A Redemptive-Historical Vision of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 375.

²⁷ Douglas A. Sweeney, 'Edwards and the Bible', in *Understanding Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to America's Theologian* (ed. G. R. McDermott; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

²⁸ Kinnach, 'Edwards as Preacher', 122.

²⁹ Barshinger, *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms*, 375.

³⁰ Sweeney, 'Edwards and the Bible', 75.

³¹ Robert E. Brown, 'The Sacred and the Profane Connected: Edwards, the Bible, and Intellectual Culture', in *Jonathan Edwards at 300: Essays on the Tercentenary of his Birth* (eds. H. S. Stout, K. P. Minkema and C. J. D. Maskell; Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), 41.

does engage Enlightenment debates on epistemology and offers a plausible appreciation and critique, but these are conducted carefully, for they will have far-reaching social implications.

As Brown suggests, 'Deists and other skeptics were particularly keen to employ the results of the emerging field of biblical criticism in their attempts to undermine the Bible's social authority.'³² It remains true nonetheless that Edwards would rather choose to modify scientific applications in order to defend biblical authority than to allow biblical authority to be compromised through capitulation to modern categories or assumptions.³³

4. Modern and pre-modern

On occasions, his appropriation of the discourse of the Enlightenment is clearer to see: 'The epistemological supremacy of the 'fact' permeates his biblical commentary.'³⁴ Edwards kept a notebook called 'Defense of the Authenticity of the Pentateuch as a Work of Moses and the Historicity of the Old Testament Narratives'.³⁵ Edwards is not providing the kind of exegetical notes that we might demand of him, but this does not mean that in his own

day he was obscurantist or unconcerned about textual detail.

Also, in preaching, Edwards reflects a modern trajectory. Kinnach, the doyen of interpreters of Edwards's homiletics, makes the point:

Edwards characteristically expresses the implications of his concepts in a radical, personal idiom which can only be described as Romantic rhetoric ... Edwards presents a very individualized experience that is not frequently found in Puritan or Neoplatonic writing.³⁶

While the infrequent connections he makes between the phrase, 'known by God', and the doctrines of grace are probably not surprising, the bigger surprise when we look through the lens of 'known by God' is to discover an Edwards who inhabits a liminal world on the cusp of the modern when it comes to exegesis. We look into his world but as much as we may squint, we do not see the reflection of our own. In his hermeneutics and homiletics, Edwards is a modern thinker with pre-modern sensibilities.³⁷

Our investigation of the phrase, 'known by God', in Edwards offers an exegetical rebuke as well as an epistemological reminder. He may not atom-

³² Robert E. Brown, 'The Bible', in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. S. H. Lee; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 92.

³³ William M. Schweitzer, *God is a Communicative Being: Divine Communication and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology London: T&T Clark, 2012), 106-111.

³⁴ Brown, 'Sacred and the Profane Connected', 41.

³⁵ See Sweeney, 'Edwards and the Bible', 65 for more on this.

³⁶ Wilson H. Kinnach, 'Frightful Inspiration, Sweet Elevation: The Application of Homiletics by Jonathan Edwards, Jonathan Mayhew, and their Successors of the Late Eighteenth Century', in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary: Essays in Honor of Sang Hyun Lee* (ed. D. Schweitzer; New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 210, 211.

³⁷ Douglas A. Sweeney, 'Edwards, Jonathan', in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. D. K. McKim; Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 399.

ise linguistic or textual concerns in the way we have grown accustomed to expect, but instead he assumes systematic and existential unities within his exegetical work, which we have grown accustomed to ignore.

III Known by God as Spiritual Refocus

God's knowledge of his creatures is a primary category in Edwards's idealist metaphysics. His handling of the Scriptures reflects a particular moment in historical development, where he is open to critical questions but ultimately committed to defending Scriptural authority and harmony. From the perspective of both philosophy and hermeneutics, then, God and the unity of his purposes are central to Edwards's labours.

In this section, we build upon these foundations and find in Edwards's understanding of glorification related in the beatific vision a further application of the theme of being known by God, which in the end is an eschatological category.

1. The beatific vision

He makes the connection between being known by God and eschatological reality in one of his earliest known sermons from the period in New York, and in another preached around thirteen years later in 1733:

But the dwelling in such a glorious place is but the least part of the happiness of heaven. There is the conversation with saints: with holy men of old, Moses, Job, David, Elijah, etc.; with the prophets [and] apostles, and besides that, with the

man Christ Jesus who was crucified for mankind at Jerusalem. Neither is that the chief thing, the Beatific Vision of God: *that* is the tip of happiness! To see a God of infinite glory and majesty face to face, to see him as he is, and to know him as we are known; there to be admitted into the most intimate acquaintance with him, to be embraced as in his arms: this is such a privilege as Moses himself could not be admitted to while on earth. The vision and fruition of God will be so intimate and clear as to transform the soul into the likeness of God.³⁸

But when we get to heaven, if ever that be, there we shall be brought to a perfect union with God. There we shall have the clear views of God's glory: we shall see face to face, and know as we are known. There we shall be fully conformed to God, without any remains of sin: "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." There we shall serve God perfectly. We shall glorify him in an exalted manner, and to the utmost of the powers and capacity of our nature. Then we shall perfectly give up ourselves to God; then will our hearts be wholly a pure and holy offering to God, offered all in the flame of divine love.³⁹

The *textus classicus*, which expounds the theme of being known by

38 Jonathan Edwards, 'The Value of Salvation', in *Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 10; ed. W. H. Kinnach; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 324.

39 Edwards, 'True Christian's Life', *WJE* 17: 437.

God eschatologically, is 1 Corinthians 13:12, upon which this quotation is based. Here Paul makes an explicit connection between our knowledge of God, which is still fragmentary, though it will be complete at the culmination of history when God's knowledge of us is experienced fully. Using Paul's illustration of a mirror, Edwards unpacks the nature of this spiritual knowledge, which is partially clear to us now, but one day will be grasped without distortion and without mediation, for we shall see God 'face to face'. Being known by God now has its climax in our personal and visual encounter with him later.

In this world, according to his *Notes on Scripture*, our vision of God is mediated by the structures of ministry, though it will in the end be grasped immediately:

And herein the sight that the saints have of the glory of Christ in this world, differs from that sight that the saints have in heaven; for there they see immediately, face to face, but here by a medium, by an intervening looking glass, in which the glory is but obscure in comparison of the immediate glory seen in heaven.⁴⁰

Edwards, using Moses as his counterpoint, makes the connection that seeing God is for the next world: 'It was not face to face, which is reserved for the heavenly state (1 Corinthians 13:12), but it was God's back parts.'⁴¹ Similarly, in *The 'Blank Bible'*, Edwards makes use of 1 Corinthians 13:12, but not so much to comment upon the rela-

tionship between knowledge and vision in heaven, as to reinforce the accommodated vision of God we have in this world.⁴²

2. The God who knows us

Edwards however, takes it a step further. He asks the more fundamental question: if we are known by God, who is this God who knows us? The answer is that any knowledge of God, including knowledge of God appropriated spiritually in his immediate presence in heaven, is through union with Jesus Christ by his Spirit:

there is no creature [that] can thus have an immediate sight of God, but only Jesus Christ ... God converses with them by voluntary manifestations and significations of his mind ... by impulses of his Spirit; and this also is by Christ.⁴³

Edwards's account of the vision of God requires reflection on the Father's knowledge and love of the Son, and our union with Christ. Edwards wrote in an unpublished sermon on Romans 2:10:

They being in Christ shall partake of the love God the Father [has] to Christ, and as the Son knows the Father so they shall partake with him in his sight of God, as being as it were parts of him as he is in the bosom of the Father.⁴⁴

⁴² Edwards, *WJE* 24: 1055.

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, 'Misc. 777', in *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. 501-832)* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 18; ed. A. Chamberlain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 428, 430.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, '373. Unpublished Sermon on Romans 2:10 (December 1735)', in *Sermons, Series II, 1735* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 19; ed. A. Chamberlain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 373.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *WJE* 15: 321.

⁴¹ Edwards, *WJE* 15: 221.

Strobel writes: 'It is within the person of Christ, the true mediator between God and humanity, that believers can now see and be seen, as they know and are known.'⁴⁵

When appealing to Christology or adoption to establish God's knowledge of us and our knowledge of him, Edwards is not merely fine-tuning theological niceties, but wants to defend the value of the beatific vision to hold together apologetic and ethical commitments. It of course functions first of all to promote a Reformed theocentric agenda:

Motivated by a spiritual foretaste of beatific vision rooted objectively in Holy Scripture, Edwards projected the major unifying theme of his life and works—the glory of God—against the backdrop raised by the man-centred moral philosophers of his day, and against a rising Arminian tide.⁴⁶

3. The life of love

But secondly, being known by God functions as a theological canopy for our own ethical participation in a life of love. Being known by God cannot remain, in Edwards's casting, an individual or intellectual aspiration for the

last day, a vision designed to promote solitary contemplation as some medi-vals might have suggested. It impacts our understanding of discipleship even when we can see only in a glass darkly.⁴⁷ Given the sustained theme and significance of 1 Corinthians 13, Strobel summarises both the link between sight and knowledge, and the link between sight and love:

Our knowledge of God in regeneration is somehow connected to the knowledge of God in glory ... a point not often attended to, is that our knowledge of God is connected to our being known by God. This is the thrust of the latter half of that verse. 'Face to face' knowledge, therefore, is not simply a depiction of proximity, but of relationality. Relational knowledge entails knowing as you are known, and this is the kind of knowledge we are presented with here. Knowledge of God is not knowledge of an object, but is personal knowledge—knowledge available within a relationship of love ... The beatific vision is the vision of love, and as such, it is both knowing and being known in love. The fruit of this is that the believer will know himself or herself as the one who is beloved of God.⁴⁸

an Edwards Online 50; ed. Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2015), L.44v-45r.

⁴⁵ Kyle Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology: A Reinterpretation* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology Volume 19; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 143.

⁴⁶ David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-love, and the Dawn of the Beatific* (American Academy of Religion Academy Series No. 73; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 1-2.

⁴⁷ Bauckham, Richard J. 'Vision of God'. Pages 710-711 in *New Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright. Leicester: IVP, 1988, see especially 711.

⁴⁸ Kyle Strobel, 'A Spiritual Sight of Love: Constructing a Doctrine of the Beatific Vision', *Union* <www.uniontheology.org/resources/bible/biblical-theology/a-spiritual-sight-of-love-constructing-a-doctrine-of-the-beatific-vision#_ednref4> accessed August 2015.

The vision of God at the last day motivates us towards godly living, in so far as we begin to conform ourselves to that reality as a token of our place in the purposes of God,

of which the transforming experience of regeneration and sanctification in this present life is the spiritual dawning ... such a life is an expression, albeit an imperfect one, of the heavenly from which it radiates.⁴⁹

Our experience of God now and our awaited future experience are 'not utterly unrelated'.⁵⁰ Edwards writes:

We should follow Christ in the path that he has gone; the way that he traveled in was the right way to heaven. We should take up our cross and follow him. We should travel along in the same way of meekness and lowliness of heart, in the same way of obedience, and charity, and diligence to do good, and patience under afflictions. The way to heaven is an heavenly life. We must be traveling towards heaven in a way of imitation of those that are in heaven, in imitation of the saints or angels therein, in their holy employments, in their way of spending their time in loving, adoring, serving, and praising God and the Lamb.⁵¹

We should endeavor continually to

be more and more as we hope to be in heaven, in respect of holiness and conformity to God. We should endeavor to be more & more {as we hope to be in heaven}, with respect to light and knowledge, should labor to be continually growing in knowledge of God and Christ, and divine things, clear views of the gloriousness and excellency of divine things, that we come nearer and nearer to the beatific vision.⁵²

4. Present implications and continuities

Being known by God in Edwards, a theme refracted here through his exposition of the eschatological goal of the vision of God in glory, mediated by Christ, has present implications, for being known by God, even without idealist assumptions, gives shape to our spiritual experience and our theological confidence. In the personal vicissitudes of life and the socially fragmented experience of late-modern capitalism, being known by God assumes an approach to all reality which allows for continuities between this age and the next when we will be completely transformed. The ultimate vision of God provides some measure of anticipated integration for our identity now.

For Edwards, the ultimate knowledge of God, knowing and being known, focuses on the beatific vision, which is also the moment of the believer's greatest joy. Being known by God in Christ functions as the basis for our

⁴⁹ Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan*, 3.

⁵⁰ McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 301.

⁵¹ Jonathan Edwards, 'The True Christian's Life a Journey towards Heaven', in *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 17; ed. M. Valeri; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 433.

⁵² Edwards, 'True Christian's Life', *WJE* 17: 434-435.

joy in Christ,⁵³ for joy is a concomitant of glory:

In rejoicing with this joy, their minds were filled, as it were, with a glorious brightness, and their natures exalted and perfected: it was a most worthy, noble rejoicing, that did not corrupt and debase the mind, as many carnal joys do; but did greatly beautify and dignify it: it was a prelibation of the joy of heaven, that raised their minds to a degree of heavenly blessedness: it filled their minds with the light of God's glory, and made 'em (sic) themselves to shine with some communication of that glory.⁵⁴

The theme of being known by God in Edwards's writings has shown us here by way of the beatific vision a concept which is necessarily Trinitarian, ethically fruitful, and personally satisfying. We are known by a God who has embraced us in his life, and has empowered us in our living.

IV Focus on God's Purposes

Edwards saw his role in eighteenth

century terms as inverting the theological trend towards Arminianism and defending the primacy of God in creation and redemptive history. Some have maintained that Edwards prioritized subjective experience of religion, focusing on 'Christ in us more than Christ for us'.⁵⁵ However, sustained engagement with the theme of known by God, in philosophical reflection, exegetical assumptions, and eschatological hope, might suggest at least some qualification of Ortlund's claim. In fact, being known by God in this set of observations highlights God's unitary purposes irrespective of my affections.

We are reminded of Edwards's idealism, rebuked by his sense of Scriptural coherence, and asked to refocus on his vision of God in Christ, which has sadly become blurry in much evangelical spirituality. While the phrase, 'knowing God', is associated with spiritual growth in common evangelical patois, it is no less true that the challenge of being 'known by God' operates as a spiritual reality check.

Edwards provides resources for biblical scholars, systematic theologians and pastoral practitioners to reflect on their own assumptions and aspirations, and thereby to enrich their own scholarly reflection. Edwards starts a conversation that reminds, rebukes and refocuses us, so that we might start everything with God.

⁵³ Dane C. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God* (Theologians on the Christian Life; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 77.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 2. Edited by John E. Smith; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 95.

⁵⁵ Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life*, 179.