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Russell J. Allen

Liberty University, rjallen1@liberty.edu

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The Beautiful Mystery: Examining Jonathan Edwards' View of Marriage

Abstract

In contemporary evangelical circles, Jonathan Edwards has gained wide popularity for his theological writings and vital role in the First Great Awakening. However, despite these often romanticized views, Edwards nonetheless stood in the midst of an eighteenth century society that began to develop new norms for sexual practice and new legal guidelines to support them. In order to combat what he saw to be a decaying moral culture, Edwards took a strong stance on marital issues, often to the displeasure of his congregation. What lay behind these convictions was a deep theological understanding of the sanctity of marriage. These views, although not new to the history of Christian thought, were uniquely reinvigorated by Edwards to a Calvinist generation that had recently abandoned them. It is both Edwards' theology of marriage and reinforcement of its practice that not only make him a unique preacher for his time, but also a worthy study for Evangelicals today in the midst of modern marital controversies.

Keywords

Jonathan Edwards, Sarah Edwards, marriage, Martha Root, Elisha Hawley, sexual immorality, homosexuality

“We see how great love the human nature is capable of, not only to God but fellow creatures. How greatly are we inclined to the other sex! Nor doth an exalted and fervent love to God hinder this, but only refines and purifies it. God has created the human nature to love fellow creatures, which he wisely has principally turned to the other sex; and the more exalted the nature is, the greater love of that kind that is laudable is it susceptible of; and the purer and better natured, the more is it inclined to it.”

– Jonathan Edwards¹

In February 1748, Martha Root gave birth to twins in the comfort of her Northampton home, of which only one survived. Yet despite this tragedy, there was an even larger problem facing the new mother – she was not married.² Martha quickly named the father as Lieutenant Elisha Hawley, a well-respected member of the community and brother of lawyer Joseph Hawley III. In the end, Elisha and Martha agreed on a cash settlement for the amount of £150, in “full satisfaction for and towards the support and maintenance of a bastard child, now living.”³ The Council of Ministers, who eventually oversaw their case, supported this decision and recommended that Elisha Hawley be admitted back as a member of the First Church after a “penitent confession of the sin of fornication.”⁴

When examining the desires of both Martha Root and Elisha Hawley in light of the outcome, it appears as if things had gone just as planned. Martha received a large sum of money from a wealthy man, and Elisha was freed of any further parenting responsibilities. The court case took over two years to conclude. What was the issue? Why such controversy? The heart of this dispute lies with one pastor who would not be satisfied with a mere cash settlement. In fact, nothing short of marriage between Martha Root and Elisha Hawley would suffice. If Elisha should refuse, it would follow that he be excommunicated from the church.⁵ Marriage was the only option. The pastor’s name was Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards stood alone as the relentless advocate for marriage in the Martha Root case. Although he was eventually overruled by his fellow ministers, his actions draw warranted attention. Why did he act the way he did? While several historians have hinted at societal and political factors, it is the theological and ideological factors that have often gone overlooked. Edwards’ decision was grounded in his views on marriage. The Martha Root case is only one example of this. After examining how Edwards thought about and articulated marriage, it becomes clear that he held it in high esteem. He highlighted the beauty and sanctity of marriage to a culture that was becoming increasingly apathetic towards it.

In 1729, almost twenty years prior to the Martha Root case, Jonathan Edwards could already sense the growing immorality that surrounded him. In a sermon titled “Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery on a People,” Edwards wrote, “Amongst all sects and professions, debauchery and wickedness, profaneness and unbounded licentiousness in

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “The Love of Christ (1722),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), 331-332.

² George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 358.

³ Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Culture versus Economics: A Case of Fornication in Northampton in the 1740’s,” *The University of Michigan Papers in Women’s Studies*, (October 1977): 36, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfs/acp0359.0003.001/37:5?rgn=main;view=image>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*

sensuality has come in like a torrent and overflowed like a flood.”⁶ He also spoke fervently against judges and “law makers” who “are more influenced by favor or affection than the justice of the cause.”⁷ In light of Martha Root, Joseph Hawley, and the Council of Ministers, these words appear to be almost prophetic. And, while that case may stand as the pinnacle of Edwards’ fears, research shows that this downward trend indeed became more prevalent during his lifetime.

According to Kathryn Kish Sklar, almost one third of New England brides were pregnant at marriage by 1790. This was an astonishing increase from just one in ten around the 1710’s.⁸ The exclusivity of sexual activity in marriage was becoming less and less common. One reason for this may have been the practice of bundling, in which two lovers would spend a night together, supposedly confined to their own side of the bed. Historian Mary M. Lane suggests that this was most likely the case with Martha Root.⁹ However, this practice proved to be largely tempting and unsuccessful, as it was consistently mentioned in fornication confessions during the early to mid-eighteenth century.¹⁰

Another reason for the growing sexual immorality was an increasing naiveté and immaturity regarding sexual matters. Throughout the seventeenth century, Northampton had distributed land to young men when they reached early adulthood. However, by the start of the eighteenth century, it had become less available. With the combination of Indian hostilities, consolidated land holdings, and political antagonisms, young men had no choice but to delay marriage and remain in their parents’ home. As a result, the average age of marriage rose by three years, making it twenty-eight or twenty-nine for men, and twenty-five for women.¹¹ With this came a continued suppression in knowledge of sensuality. Men who were in their early to mid-twenties had the same information as fourteen year old boys.¹² As a result, any exposure to sexuality made these young men extremely susceptible to its temptation. With a growing awareness of the relaxed sexual standards surrounding them, men became increasingly resentful of the confines that had been put on them by their church and family. After the Great Awakening came to an end, there remained little to restrain their sexual desires.¹³ The fruit of this change can best be seen with Edwards in the “young folks’ Bible” case, which will be discussed in more detail later.

With an increasing prevalence of immoral behavior, the sacred view of marriage began to lessen. In many cases, after a couple became espoused, they were regarded as married despite having not participated in an official ceremony. Those who did engage in sexual intimacy before

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery on a People,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Sermons and Discourses 1703-1758*, vol.14, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997), 498.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 491-492.

⁸ Sklar, “Culture versus Economics,” 40.

⁹ Mary M. Lane, “What Ever Happened to Martha Root?,” *Jonathan Edwards Online Journal* 14, no. 1 (2014): 107, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://jestudies.yale.edu/index.php/journal/article/view/144/101>.

¹⁰ Cedric B. Cowing, “Sex and Preaching in the Great Awakening,” *American Quarterly* 20, no.3 (Autumn 1968): 624, accessed March 22, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/stable/>.

¹¹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 150-151.

¹² *Ibid.*, 300.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 301.

marriage were more readily forgiven than couples who were not espoused.¹⁴ As a result, the binding nature of a marriage ceremony became almost irrelevant. Sexual acts that signified marriage were less frequently done within a legally binding framework. However, this gradual separation of spiritual binding (sexual activity) and legal binding (marriage ceremony) eventually led to exploitation.

Simultaneously, as wealth and population increased in New England, magistrates concluded that pastoral guidance and common sense were no longer sufficient means of moral restraint. Instead, formal procedures based on “universally applicable legal principles” were necessary.¹⁵ Legality and morality regarding marriage became detached. Because spiritual binding was now seen as separate from legal binding, fornication could be treated without marital responsibilities. As seen with Elisha Hawley, the law could be used by men as an instrument to “pay off the families of their pregnant lovers.”¹⁶ What should have been a heart issue quickly became a financial one. Marriage could be removed from the equation, both for the civil authorities, but also by the ministers who quickly began to favor a more popular rational and legal approach rather than an emotional or spiritual one.¹⁷ As a result, men were given an implicit authorization and right to a women’s body that was often approved by the colonial legal system.¹⁸ Language describing the beauty and sanctity of marriage quickly became subservient to more methodical legal rhetoric, leaving Edwards as one of the few to oppose the new system.

There were very few instances when Jonathan Edwards involved himself in marriage issues between other couples. Most of his words and actions focused on conversion, revival, and articulating God’s beauty. With this being his primary focus, he did frequently address the growing sexual immorality among his congregation. The most famous of these occasions is the previously mentioned “young folks’ Bible” case of 1744. Already concerned with a downward trend among his parishioners, he soon discovered that several young men, between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-nine, had obtained several popular books regarding medicine and midwifery. One of these books, *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece in Three Parts: Displaying the Secrets of Nature in the Generation of Man*, included information about men and women’s anatomy and sexual functions. Though scientific in nature, it nonetheless excited the minds of young men who were unfamiliar with these details. While making obscene jokes and comments, they charged other boys ten shillings to view the books’ explicit content. Perhaps even more alarming was the fact that they also used the information to taunt and tease girls in the town. Marsden notes that “By today’s standards, this would be a case of sexual harassment.”¹⁹ Supposedly, this behavior had been occurring for almost five years before it was discovered by Edwards, and involved around twenty young men.²⁰

Abhorred by the nature and scale of the immoral behavior that had been occurring just

¹⁴ Roy Carpenter, “Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century Pelham, Massachusetts: The Jonathan Edwards Clan, Divorce Law, and the Eleanor Gray Case,” *Jonathan Edwards Online Journal* 1, no. 1 (2011):27, accessed March 21, 2015, <http://jestudies.yale.edu/index.php/journal/article/view/47/35>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ Michael P. Winship, “Behold the Bridegroom Cometh! Marital Imagery in Massachusetts Preaching, 1630-1730,” *Early American Literature* 27, no. 3 (1992): 178, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/stable/pdf/25056903?acceptTC=true>.

¹⁸ Eva Chamberlain, “The Immaculate Ovum: Jonathan Edwards and the Construction of the Female Body,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (April 2000): 321, accessed March 23, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/stable/pdf/2674477>.

¹⁹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 294-295.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

under his nose, Edwards decided to bring the matter to the church.²¹ Declaring the sins of these young men “scandalous” and injurious to spirituality, Edwards took a strong approach.²² While he did not speak of marriage directly, his rhetoric implies that sexual activity was meant to be preserved for marriage. The sins were considered scandalous because they undermined the beauty of God’s design. Unfortunately for Edwards, however, his public confrontational approach was seen as too harsh by his congregation. In light of the growing “normalcy” of sexual immorality around him, Edwards’ response seemed obnoxious and overdone.²³

A more direct case, in which Edwards shared his thoughts about a couple’s marriage, occurred in 1744. While visiting the Mahican village of Kaunameek, near Stockbridge, Edwards heard a story about an Indian man who left his wife to live with another woman. However, after the “law of God respecting marriage had been opened to him,” he returned to his wife.²⁴ In his writing, Edwards made it very clear that he was pleased with the man’s decision. The man’s wife had given him no just occasion to desert her, and “she moreover insisted on it as her right to enjoy him.”²⁵ Edwards gladly concluded that “here appeared a clear demonstration of the power of God’s Word upon *their* hearts.”²⁶ This wording by Edwards seems to be significant for a few reasons. The first is that it correlates the man’s decision to return to his wife with the “law of God respecting marriage.” It emphasizes the binding nature of marriage with only one woman. Secondly, it places a large amount of admiration on the wife’s decision to receive her husband. Despite his adulteress behavior, the woman saw it as her joy to remain with him. Although they had legal grounds for divorce, Edwards nonetheless pointed out the beauty of their reconciliation. God’s word was working in both of their hearts to restore the marriage. In essence, Edwards not only emphasized God’s law about marriage, but also its power to bring joy to people. Furthermore, he noted that the couple’s marriage testimony had a positive effect among the other Indians, “who generally owned that the laws of Christ were good and right respecting the affairs of marriage.”²⁷ His words show that biblical marriage was something that should be pursued, even in (perhaps especially in) regrettable and repentant circumstances.

Although the story of the Indian couple took place in 1744, Edwards did not reflect upon it until 1749 in the memoir titled *The Life of David Brainerd*. Even if it cannot be officially confirmed, it seems possible that Edwards’ inclusion of the marriage story may have been an indirect response to the Martha Root case that transpired from 1748-1750. While the outlines of this event have already been narrated, the specific arguments of Edwards deserve some detail.

In articulating the necessity of marriage, Edwards wrote:

The words can’t be reasonably understood otherwise than thus. Seeing he hath humbled her, and taken the liberty to use her as his wife, and as ‘tis proper none should use any woman but a wife; therefore ‘tis FIT and SUITABLE that she should indeed be his wife, seeing he has made so bold with her, and had her once, ‘tis fit he should have her always, and not put her away all his days. Tis utterly

²¹ *Ibid.*, 293-294.

²² *Ibid.*, 295.

²³ Edwards’ actions in the “young folks’ Bible” case actually served as a catalyst to turn public opinion against him. After further controversy regarding the administration and qualifications for communion, Edwards was dismissed from his Northampton pastorate in 1750. *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “The Life of David Brainerd (1749),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.7, ed. Norman Pettit, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 313.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 313-314. Emphasis Added.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

unfit man should think to put away at their pleasure, those whom they have seen cause for their pleasure...²⁸

Again, Edwards' wording reveals several of his beliefs about marriage. First, it confirms that, unlike the growing trend around him, he could not separate spiritual binding and legal binding in marriage. The two logically went together. Since Hawley "had her once, 'tis fit he should have her always." They had behaved as a husband and wife should, and ought therefore to continue in that bond. Secondly, Edwards spoke against Hawley's self-serving motives, implying that sexual activity should be reflective of the mutual responsibility and beneficial nature of marriage. To Hawley, Martha Root was no more than a vessel of fleeting pleasure, one that he could easily rid himself of.

Interestingly, the main thrust of Edwards' argument did not highlight the fact that Root and Hawley had a child together. While it would seem that the welfare of the child should be the main focus, Edwards instead focused on the overall picture. He did not argue "merely that justice [be] done to the woman or the repairing the outward injury done to her...For God's law in this case has not only regard to particular temporal rights and privileges of the parties served, but to the surety of the words, and the order, decency, and health of human society in general."²⁹ In other words, the situation was not only about the child or mother's well-being. Surely they could get along with a cash settlement. The real problem was the brokenness of their actions and the new actions required to reconcile them. Cash payment could not solve the growing problems in society, but a restored view of marriage could. To Edwards, monetary transactions pointed to a higher moral obligation, but did not satisfy it.³⁰

Also of special note is Joseph Hawley III's defense of his brother Elisha. Joseph likened the requirement of marriage by the church to the requirement of circumcision among early Christians. He believed that both of these were wrongly imposed upon people because they were unnecessary to Christian belief.³¹ Hawley understood circumcision in the Old Testament to be a ceremonial and legal action that verified a person's legitimacy in the Abrahamic Covenant. In highlighting circumcision's uselessness, he was most likely referring to Galatians 5:6, which says "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (KJV). He showed that in the New Covenant, only faith could qualify someone as a true son of Abraham. However, in equating marriage with circumcision, Hawley appears to have been implying that marriage too should not be forced as a requirement to verify one's Christianity. Joseph Hawley's thoughts, although biblical in nature, reveal a totally different mindset than Edwards. Hawley had in fact acquired some liberal and Arminian views when he left for Yale in 1742.³² Edwards was a strict Calvinist. These differences most likely made Hawley quicker to oppose Edwards' ideas and more reckless in his biblical reasoning.

The result appears to be a strong misinterpretation of Edwards' logic. He saw Edwards' argument only in terms of law and legality, writing to his brother, "...if they proceed they would impose more than the Jewish Yoke which St. Peter declared neither the Jews in his time nor their fathers were able to bear."³³ He encouraged Elisha to do what was right "in Conscience and

²⁸ Sklar, "Culture versus Economics," 45.

²⁹ Ibid., 46.

³⁰ Ibid., 45.

³¹ Ibid., 42.

³² Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 358.

³³ Sklar, "Culture versus Economics," 42.

before God, *if there was anything* [illegible]...*that was particularly binding that nobody else knew of.*³⁴ What Joseph Hawley appears to be suggesting in this phrase is that the necessity for Elisha to marry Martha is not only based on his own conscience, but is determined by what is deemed legally binding. According to Sklar, legally binding circumstances during the time period would include a woman who did not “share the guilt of enticement” or a woman who had already lost her virginity.³⁵ Joseph Hawley believed that since neither of these instances were true in this case, and because marriage was not a necessary proof of Christian faith, there was no legal justification for their marriage. However, Edwards’ argument before the court was not based on rules or regulation, but on the heart and morality. Hawley was surprised to find that Edwards advocated for marriage regardless as to whether or not there was mutual guilt of enticement or whether Martha had been a virgin at the time of their fornication. He was not arguing for marriage to be a requirement for Christian belief or the result of legal circumstances (as Hawley apparently thought that he was), but instead believed it was the logical conclusion of true Christian faith, and most beneficial to society at large.

While the instances in which Jonathan Edwards addressed specific marriages reveal helpful insights into his mindset, they do not sufficiently detail what he believed ideal marriage should be. However, in all of Edwards’ writings, there is not a single instance in which human marriage is the main focus. The most helpful piece is one written in 1746 titled “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons and to Her God.” Edwards preached this sermon at the instalment of Reverend Samuel Buel at East Hampton, and showed the symbolism between a pastor and congregation, man and wife, and Christ and Church.³⁶ While its main purpose was to promote the respect of the new pastor, it also serves as a helpful document for surmising Edwards’ beliefs about earthly marriage due to its numerous analogies.

The first aspect of marriage that Edwards emphasized is passion. To him, the relationship is fueled by love and affection. Preaching on Genesis 2:21-25, he said, “when Adam rose from his sleep God brought woman to him from near his heart.”³⁷ Edwards believed that marital love has biblical and theological roots. In another work, Edwards compared a relationship with God to a human one, writing, “As in marriage, it is the personal beauty [that] draws the heart.”³⁸ In yet a different instance, Edwards asserted that a young man should find great joy in a virgin that he marries.³⁹ In fact, when listing concomitants of marriage, “each other’s joy” is first on the list.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Edwards urged couples to “rejoice in each other” because each of them has been chosen by the other above anyone else “for their nearest, most intimate, and everlasting friend and companion.”⁴¹ They should be pleased to be around each other and to talk with each other.⁴² After all, they are the “objects of each other’s most tender and ardent love.”⁴³ Clearly, passion and affection were a large part of marriage to Edwards. Desire was essential. Attractiveness and

³⁴ Ibid. 42. Emphasis Added.

³⁵ Ibid., 43.

³⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons and to Her God (1746),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), 18.

³⁷ Elisabeth D. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards*, (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1971), 25.

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, “Religious Affections (1754),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 84.

³⁹ Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage,” 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

beauty were the sparks that started an enduring flame of love. However, Edwards also wrote, “when we have the idea of another’s love to a thing, if it be the love of a man to a woman...we have not generally any further idea at all of his love, we only have an idea of his actions that are the effects of love.”⁴⁴ In other words, the love of a husband and wife had to be manifested through their actions in order to be realized.

The other aspect of marriage emphasized by Edwards is mutual and beneficial duties. Each person in the relationship had certain obligations to fulfill. Part of these marital duties included procreation.⁴⁵ While this was not the most essential aspect of marriage to Edwards, it was nonetheless the will of God to continue mankind in this way. The result would be a “spiritual offspring” that would glorify God from an early age.⁴⁶ Edwards made clear that the fundamental duties of marriage were ones that were “not only necessary to the more special designs and purposes of marriage, but also to the higher purposes of life and subsistence in the world.”⁴⁷ Marriage did not only include sexual intercourse, but also included emotional and moral duties as well.

To Edwards, marriage required “mutual helpfulness, and a constant care and endeavor to promote each other’s good and comfort.”⁴⁸ In this sense, marriage was not focused on personal pleasure, but instead sought the good of one’s spouse. It was a “mutual sympathy with each other, a fellow-feeling of each other’s burdens and calamities, and a communion in each other’s prosperity and joy.”⁴⁹ Marriage endured and thrived on all of life’s circumstances. In addition, each person in a relationship had a duty to remain pure. As a bride and bridegroom, they made an exclusive covenant with each other that could not be broken.⁵⁰ Their pledges should have been “truly done in a holy manner, with sincere and upright aims and intentions, with a right disposition, and proper frames of mind in those that are concerned.”⁵¹

Other duties that Edwards mentioned were more gender specific. As head of the relationship, a husband became the wife’s “guide of her youth.”⁵² He was responsible for her growth and maturity in godliness. In addition, the husband was to give himself over to his spouse through a “constant endeavor, and earnest labor for her provision.”⁵³ He was the provider for not only her physical needs, but also her spiritual and emotional needs. A woman, on the other hand, was to “deliver up herself” to her husband’s provision and guidance.⁵⁴ She was to “honor and help [him], to be guided by [him] and obey [him] as long as in the world.”⁵⁵ Together, their roles produced a mutual joy and happiness. Edwards believed that in the way marriage was designed by God, pleasure could not be separated from duty. The two were reflections of each other.

⁴⁴ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 25.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Original Sin (1758),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.3, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 426.

⁴⁶ Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage,” 20.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Autobiographical and Biographical Documents: On Marital Duties (1749),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, vol.40, ed. Jonathan Edwards Center, <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXdwaGlsby9nnZXRvYmpl3QucGw/Yy4zODoyLndqZW8=>.

⁴⁸ Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage,” 20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Perhaps Edwards' ideal view of marriage was part of the reason why he was so adamant in promoting it. If pleasure and duty went hand in hand, it seemed most logical for Elisha Hawley to marry Martha Root. If there was a joy in exclusive intimacy, it was logical to praise the decision of the Indian man to return to his wife, and for his wife to accept him. If biblical marriage was this beautiful, there was no reason to settle for anything less. Where this type of marriage was possible, it should be pursued.

While Edwards' ideal view of human marriage is perhaps enough to help clarify his actions in various circumstances, there is another explanation that is even more powerful. Edwards believed that God created marriage so that it "might be a type of the union that is between Christ and his Church."⁵⁶ The physical reality was symbolic of a greater spiritual reality. "God appointed that man and wife should be joined together as to be one flesh, to represent this high and blessed union between Christ and the church," he wrote.⁵⁷ It is a "great mystery."⁵⁸ The relationship of Christ and the Church was the most perfect example of how earthly marriages should work. Edwards expounded on this with beautiful imagery:

Everything desirable and excellent in the union between an earthly bridegroom and bride, is to be found in the union between Christ and his Church; and that in an infinitely greater perfection and more glorious manner. – There is infinitely more to be found in it than ever was found between the happiest couple in a conjugal relation; or could be found if the bride and bridegroom had not only the innocence of Adam and Eve, but the perfection of angels.⁵⁹

It is this comparison that might best explain Edwards' persistent advocacy of marriage. If earthly marriages were indeed a representation of Christ's relationship with the Church, then there were few better ways to present the gospel message. In the Martha Root case, Edwards argued for marriage because it would promote the "health of human society in general."⁶⁰ It seems possible that Edwards not only saw this to be true in a physical sense, but also in a spiritual sense. Because they were one flesh, their marriage would be symbolic of Christ's union with the Church. It would promote the gospel. However, their cash settlement and separation would also be symbolic, but in a different way. It would represent Christ separating himself from the Church. To Edwards, this was unthinkable.

The ideal concept of marriage depicted by Jonathan Edwards brings with it a few important questions. How did Edwards' rhetoric compare to others during this time period? Was his view of marriage original? The answer is that while Edwards' overall concept of marriage was not original, his articulation of it was unique.

Edwards' strong emphasis on desire and emotion in marriage actually has roots, according to Belden C. Lane, in Calvinist theology. First taking root with early Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, John Calvin and his followers later continued to highlight the idea of deep pleasure found in "longing after Christ."⁶¹ Continually referenced by various authors in the following years, this concept drew even more explicit comparisons

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁰ Sklar, "Culture versus Economics," 46.

⁶¹ Belden C. Lane, "Two Schools of Desire: Nature and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism," *Church History* 69, no.2 (June 2000): 376-378, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/stable/pdf/3169585.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

between love for Christ and love for one's spouse. In 1656, Francis Rous, provost of Eton College wrote, "Clear up thine eye, and fix it on him as upon the fairest of men, the perfection of spiritual beauty."⁶² The language of desire and parallel between Christ and the church were one in the same. Similarly to Edwards, early Puritans believed that marriage would naturally increase the love between two people.⁶³ This stands in stark contrast to most Catholics, who saw marriage more in the terms of duty than desire. They saw procreation as the highest ends of this sacred union, rather than the deep-seeded longing to meet each other's needs.⁶⁴ For Puritans, "marital imagery allowed earthly relationships to illuminate the divine one," writes historian Michael P. Winship.⁶⁵ Marriage allowed couples to heighten and refine their desire for God. It was a "training ground" that led to greater affection and duty for Christ.⁶⁶

However, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Puritan marriage rhetoric began to change. By the time Edwards delivered his sermon "The Church's Marriage to Her Sons and to Her God" in 1746, marital imagery was virtually nonexistent. The reason for this change, according to Winship, was the "penetration into Massachusetts of post-Restoration Anglican assumptions about the nature of legitimate religious language, imagery, and experience."⁶⁷ The Enlightenment provided ministers with supposedly more rational and reasoned explanations for spiritual concepts. The language of desire and affection in a relationship with Christ that paralleled marriage was deemed as silly and inappropriate. Therefore, while clergy in the eighteenth century remained doctrinal Calvinists, they "tended to focus more on the reasonableness of their version of Christianity than upon its mysteries."⁶⁸ And, with the demystifying of spiritual concepts, came the demystifying of the beauty in marriage. Perhaps this new bent towards logic also manifested itself in the new legal trend that took place soon thereafter. With a call towards more rational thinking, more formal legal procedures would have seemed appropriate. The Council of Ministers who upheld the Martha Root case was most likely a product of this rational and legal mindset.

While several Puritan ministers, such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Moodey, continued to use marital imagery during the early 1700's, their noble efforts eventually died out.⁶⁹ This is why Edwards' later view of marriage was so special. His language of desire and metaphor of Christ and the Church evoked the beliefs of classical Puritanism in a society that had long abandoned them. In fact, Edwards could not help but return the desire and beauty to marriage because his theology as a whole was based on it. Convinced, after fifteen years of ministry, that "modern" ideas were detrimental to human nature, Edwards sought to restore the theories of Calvinism.⁷⁰ Written at Stockbridge in 1754, in the midst of missionary work with Indians and combating cruel English policies towards them, Edwards' famous *Freedom of the Will* allowed him to explain theology in a way that would address the modern ideologies, immorality, and corrupt legal systems that were taking place around him. To Edwards, a love for God and desire

⁶² Francis Rous, *The Mystical Marriage, or Experimental Discoveries of the heavenly Marriage between a Soul and her Savior*, (London: R. W., 1656), in his *Treaties and Meditations* (London: Robert White, 1657), 683.

⁶³ Lane, "Two Schools of Desire," 379.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁶⁵ Winship, "Behold the Bridegroom Cometh!," 171.

⁶⁶ Lane, "Two Schools of Desire," 386.

⁶⁷ Winship, "Behold the Bridegroom Cometh!," 171.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 173-174, 180.

⁷⁰ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 437.

for Christian duty were the key principles of genuine faith. Love manifested itself in works. In the end, this is also what would be most satisfying to people.⁷¹ In essence, Edwards attempted to bridge the gap between Enlightenment thinking and old Puritan spiritual imagery – between logic and desire.

By all accounts, it appears as if Jonathan Edwards was able to put his own view of marriage into practice. Interestingly, Edwards himself came from an “impure” pedigree. His paternal grandmother, Elisabeth Tuthill, committed adultery resulting in an illegitimate birth. After threatening to cut the throat of her husband, Richard Edwards, she deserted him. Consequently, the two divorced, creating an unfavorable reputation for the family.⁷² Perhaps partially haunted and embarrassed by this past, Jonathan Edwards sought to please God in his marriage to Sarah. In much the same way that he articulated attraction in marriage during his sermons, Edwards wrote of his infatuation for Sarah: “When we behold a beautiful body, a lovely proportion, a beautiful harmony of features of face, delightful airs of countenance and voice, and sweet motion and gesture, we are charmed with it.”⁷³ With the approval of Sarah’s father, James Pierpont Jr., the two wed in 1727. Their resulting marriage is something that many have admired.

Samuel Hopkins, who lived with the Edwards family for two years, took special note. In regard to Edwards’ relation to Sarah, he wrote, “Much of the tender and kind was expressed in his conversation with her and conduct toward her.” Sarah, he stated, was “a more than ordinary beautiful person; of a pleasant, agreeable countenance” who “paid proper deference to Mr. Edwards.”⁷⁴ The Edwards marriage nonetheless included its fair share of difficulties. While details are unknown, it is clear that Sarah faced several bouts of depression and irregular emotional behavior, taking a toll on both her and her husband. Jonathan, on the other hand, faced numerous physical difficulties from his travels and poor eating habits.⁷⁵ Several times he was considered to be close to death. Edwards’ preaching engagements also removed him from his family for extended periods of time, leaving Sarah alone to care for their eleven children.⁷⁶

However, all evidence suggests that Jonathan and Sarah not only remained faithful to each other, but also remained deeply in love. Perhaps most telling of their relationship are the last words Edwards uttered on his deathbed in 1758. Speaking to his daughter Lucy, he said, “give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, Edwards’ last words were not deeply theological. They were relational, yet spiritual. Marsden notes, “Edwards always chose his words carefully, and ‘uncommon union’ was an expression of the deepest affection, coming from someone for whom the highest relations in the universe were unions of affections among persons.”⁷⁸ Even on his deathbed, Edwards could not escape comparing union with God and union with a spouse.

There is no doubt that Edwards’ theology informed his marriage, and perhaps vice versa. Indeed, it is Edwards’ theological concept of marriage that cannot be ignored. An explanation of

⁷¹ Lane, “Two Schools of Desire,” 384.

⁷² Chamberlian, “The Immaculate Ovum,” 302.

⁷³ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 99.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 251, 254.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 494.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Edwards' dealings with marriage cannot be addressed without comprehending his theological understanding. The sacredness and beauty of marital union were the driving force behind his actions and words on the topic. With this being said, it must also be noted that this understanding does not necessarily show advocacy for all of his actions, even from a Christian perspective. Although it may have been morally right for Elisha Hawley to marry Martha Root, a modern perspective might still question the appropriateness of Edwards to force the union against their wishes. However, it is also important to view Edwards' actions in light of his own historical context. New legal proceedings took form at the same time as increased sexual promiscuity. These enormous changes to New England life make Edwards' actions as a traditional pastor, if not justifiable, at least more understandable.

As Christians, perhaps what can most be learned from Edwards then, is the willingness to pursue and articulate biblical marriage amongst an increasingly apathetic people. A person's view of marriage should be grounded on theological truth, rather than changing philosophical, social, and legal trends. Christians should seek to show the gospel message by highlighting the beauties of biblical marriage and replicating it in their own relationships, in an attempt to promote, like Edwards, the "decency, and health of human society in general."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Sklar, "Culture versus Economics," 46.

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