

## **Graduate Research Symposium Proposal**

**Title -** *Holy Children are Happy Children: Rhetoric and Ideology of Jonathan Edwards Concerning Youth*

**Program of Study** - History

**Presentation Type** – PowerPoint

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**Category** – Textual

**Abstract:**

The eighteenth century is often considered the most important era in the history of childhood. Old Puritan conceptions of original sin and physical punishment gave way to Enlightenment concepts of childhood innocence and rationality. Jonathan Edwards was a central figure who stood in the midst of this intellectual change. Situated quite literally in the middle of the transitioning eighteenth century, Edwards' attempted to bridge the gap between Puritan conceptions of childhood and new ideas made popular by John Locke. Sometimes the bridge held firmly, and other times it cracked widely. Edwards' theological and philosophical understanding of childhood was at the heart of both his preaching and writing. He was always keen to extrapolate on the large implications for children held in his other theological works. Understanding childhood was central to Edwards, because understanding humanity was central to Edwards. It seemed to him that in no place could grasping the intricacies and complexities of human depravity, innocence, and faith be better observed than in that of children. An examination of Edwards' rhetoric to children reveals a great deal about how he attempted to reconcile these two different ideologies. His ability to reason with children and redirect their wills to God was unique for his time. While Edwards' view of childhood is far from modern, the

ideas that he expressed had a large impact on American childhood conceptions throughout the following centuries and into today.

### **Christian Worldview Integration:**

Understanding history from a Christian perspective is first and foremost a pursuit of truth, no matter how unfavorable the results may seem. During the course of this research, there are many areas of Jonathan Edwards' life and theology that are questionable or disagreeable from a modern view. However, exposing his flaws paints Edwards as nothing more than a sinner in need of redemption – something that everyone can identify with.

Jonathan Edwards is often considered America's greatest theologian, so his views on a topic, especially one as important as childhood, are particularly relevant for Christians today. Much of his theology is the foundation of ideas that are practiced by some of the evangelical Church's most prominent figures, such as John Piper and Tim Keller. From a contemporary Christian perspective, Edwards' ideas of childhood are both a cautionary and inspirational tale. They are cautionary because a fine line exists between speaking Biblical truth to children and striking detrimental fear into them. Edwards may have crossed this line too many times. There is most likely a way to make young people aware of the reality of Hell without expounding on its terrors. On the other hand, much hypocrisy exists among Christian parents in that they soften the realities of damnation but expose their children to explicit content in video games and movies. There is a great need for consistency here.

Edwards' views are inspirational in terms of the rationality that he used in speaking to children. Young people and youth in Christian society are too often made aware of the "wrongness" in disobeying God's law, but are very seldom taught the beauty and happiness that comes with obedience. Edwards' articulation of this should be a model for Christian parents.

Perhaps the most important lesson from Edwards, however, is his emphasis on childhood conversion. Christians often become satisfied with exposing their children to religion and hope for an emotional response. It seems that there would be a great deal of benefit to the Church if more parents viewed childhood as a time specifically designed for conversion, and eagerly sought to promote real, genuine, and rational grounds for faith in them.

Finally, Edwards' view of children shows a strong Christian derivative from which even current secular perceptions of childhood are drawn. His combination of Calvinist doctrine and Enlightenment thinking has shaped an ideology of childhood that sees them as less than angels but more than devils.