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Turning a Gospel Preacher into a Mystical Guru:
A Review of *Formed for the Glory of God:
Learning from the Spiritual Practices of Jonathan Edwards*
by Kyle Strobel

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One of the unfortunate results of the current boom of interest in Jonathan Edwards is that many are appropriating what they want from Edwards's writings and discarding the rest. Kyle Strobel's book, which uses Edwards to promote "spiritual formation," is a case in point. In addition to being on the faculty of Talbot Theological Seminary, Strobel heads an organization which inculcates contemplative spirituality named Metamorpha Ministries, so it is no surprise that he would want to make use of Edwards's writings in this way. The term *spiritual formation* appears 7 times on page 13 alone (From now on "spiritual formation" will be abbreviated SF).

Responding to widespread criticism of the SF movement, Strobel asserts several times in the book that the SF movement is not New Age. However, connections to the New Age movement are well-documented: e.g., Thomas Merton --one of their patron saints, so to speak-- spent time in a Buddhist monastery and recommended incorporating mystical Eastern religious practices into Christianity.¹ Clearly, the agenda of this book is to mount a defense of SF against such criticisms by appealing to Edwards's prestige and devotional fervor. In doing so, Strobel inevitably becomes intellectually dishonest and ends up misusing Edwards to advocate something completely contrary to Edwards's real views. Edwards would never have supported Strobel's brand of contemplative mysticism, since Edwards was a strong opponent of Quakerism, an ancestor of the SF movement. Edwards did not believe one could conjure up an authentic experience of God through techniques. Here I want to look at four areas in which

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Strobel misunderstands Edwards: the nature of conversion, the gravity of human sin, the necessity of doctrine, and the meaning of the “means of grace.”

1. To begin with, Strobel’s thoughts on conversion reveal serious confusion about it. He explains that “conversion is a way to talk about the movement of a person seeking grace in repentance,” adding that “conversion is a model of the Christian posture before God” (45). These statements turn the idea of conversion into a stance that people take up toward God, making conversion into something that we do. Biblically, conversion is completely something that God does, causing a person to be “born from above” (John 3:3). Strobel wants to change the focus from conversion to a spiritual journey: “turning to journey imagery was a reaction against the belief that salvation was primarily about conversion—a moment of accepting Christ into one’s life” (20). Strobel evidently accepts the popular modern view that conversion is simply making some kind of decision about Christ. However, people in Edwards’s time often sought conversion for a long time and did not pray brief prayers to accept Jesus at someone’s behest. Edwards would not have put much faith in ritualistic prayers and decisions, since he understood very well the human capacity for self-deception. He knew that such practices could easily become grounds for religious self-delusion and complacency. Instead, he often urged professing Christians to confront the possibility that they might not be authentic believers. But for Strobel, conversion is merely the way we comport ourselves in our own self-directed “spiritual formation.”

2. Strobel’s shallow view of conversion reflects his equally superficial view of human depravity, a topic that Edwards never downplayed. Strobel is more worried about people getting the wrong idea that they might have to admit their own unworthiness to God. Commenting on John the Baptist’s confession about himself and Christ that “he must increase, but I must decrease,” Strobel disputes the idea that this means that “creatures are worthless” and that “for God to be glorified humanity must be diminished . . .” (45). Contrast that with what Edwards himself says in reference to a another passage about John the Baptist, Matt. 11:11: “The design of God in thus ordering things is to teach and show that he is all, and the creature nothing, and that all exaltation and dignity belongs to him” (Miscellany 681). Not living in the age of self-esteem, Edwards had no problem calling human beings “nothing.” In fact, far from being an advocate of self-esteem, he considered fallen self-love to be the wellspring of all evil.² He spoke rather bluntly about the worthlessness of the unconverted in sermons such as “Wicked Men Useful in their Destruction Only.” He did not soften his description of human depravity or sugarcoat God’s view of it to attract people.

However, Strobel dwells a lot on the Christian life as “life abundant,” selling an experience with God as a life-enhancing boon, in the manner of Rick Warren (whose endorsement is on the cover). When Strobel does deal with sin, he deals with it mainly in its human dimensions—personal shortcomings that hinder one’s advance in spirituality or something that comes between people to cause problems, such as envy. There is little about the essence of sin as

rebellion against God from a heart full of enmity toward him. From Edwards's point of view, abasement before God was a requirement for authentic conversion. Edwards called this experience "evangelical humiliation."

Strobel does not see any such radical reorientation as a necessity. Furthermore, in line with his generally this-worldly, abundant-life emphasis, Strobel almost totally skirts the issue of hell as the place where sinners get what they deserve. So he writes that "heaven and hell are not merely places, but realities whose powers are known now . . . Heaven and hell are fueled by love and hate respectively . . . the present realities of love and hate are proof that heaven and hell are real" (20-21). Leaving aside the absurdity of this reasoning about love and hate proving the existence of heaven and hell, there is nothing here about hell as an expression of God's wrath against sin, which Edwards often preached about.

Without deep-seated conviction of one's own depravity and worthiness of God's wrath in hell, there can be no sincere conversion, in Edwards's view. A religion oriented toward the goal of self-actualization, aiming at mystical oneness with God, has in all likelihood omitted that stage. Edwards recommended doctrinally-oriented contemplation of divine things only for the genuinely converted.

3. Wrath is not the only aspect of God that Strobel avoids. In general, in regard to theology, Strobel follows the common error of making a false dichotomy between spiritual experience and cognitive doctrinal knowledge. Edwards believed that minimizing the importance of doctrinal truth was a sign of counterfeit conversion.³ In contrast, Strobel does not seem very interested in doctrine. Strobel does mention the doctrine of divine sovereignty but only to criticize it as a source of pride among those who get too carried away with it: "Often, in Edwards's day and in our own, sovereignty fails to lead to humility because of a focus on getting doctrine 'right'" (105). However, Edwards never disparaged a concern for "getting doctrine right" and did a great deal to clarify and defend doctrines that were under dispute, such as original sin, which he wrote a book about. As for divine sovereignty, he emphasized that it is one of the attributes of God that authentic believers will rejoice in contemplating. In one sermon, Edwards says that false believers often "stiffly oppose the sovereignty of God; they can't find a heart to yield, that God should be the sovereign disposer of all things," while the real believer "loves to hear of it, loves to contemplate the holiness, the wisdom, the fitness, and wonderful and sovereign grace of this way [of salvation]." ⁴

Strobel urges the contemplation of "the love of God." But what does the love of God mean to most people? Because of the influence of psychotherapeutic thinking, to many the love of God means little more than "unconditional acceptance" and "no punishment for sin." That is clearly not what Edwards meant.⁵ Vague contemplation of the "love of God" may simply plunge people into warm, bubbly, sentimental feelings, not scriptural experience. Moreover,

how can Christians properly meditate on the love of God without a precise, rational grasp of Christ's propitiation of the wrath of God on the cross, which is where God demonstrates his love most dramatically? How can we even understand God's wrath against sin if our concepts of sin and hell are the truncated ones in this book?

4. Like many similar books, this book conflates "the means of grace" with "spiritual disciplines," which are not really the same things and reflect very different ways of conceptualizing the Christian life. The term "means of grace" puts the focus squarely on God's activity rather than our own and highlights the fact that God himself revealed them in scripture. In contrast, "spiritual disciplines" encompass many things that people have chosen to take up in order to be spiritual. Edwards himself believed in the "means of grace" but did not promote "spiritual disciplines" in the way that the SF movement does, though he encouraged scriptural, rational contemplation of God and the Gospel. Instead, Edwards devoted himself to expounding the Gospel in doctrinally clear, convicting terms and urged people to confront the possibility that they might not be genuinely converted. Very pertinent in this regard is this Edwards quote: "Christian practice . . . is the chief of all the evidences of a saving sincerity in religion . . . much to be preferred to . . . any immanent discoveries or exercises of grace whatsoever, that begin and end in contemplation."⁶ By "Christian practice" Edwards means living a holy, moral life, which he obviously puts ahead of mystical experience as an evidence of genuine faith.

In his directions about how to achieve the proper contemplative mindset, Strobel directs readers to assume "spiritual postures"⁵ (93). What does that mean? Some kind of mental yoga or "putting up your spiritual antennae," as I heard someone say once? Christians ought always to have reverence toward God whatever they do. Beyond that, such language seems to indicate a self-directed, altered state of consciousness, which calls to mind New Age religiosity. In any case, such a vague directive seems to be little more than "mystic-babble," akin to psychobabble. Academics and gurus frequently employ this kind of verbal fog, and Strobel seems to be both. In contrast, Edwards points believers to religious experience rooted in illumination by the Holy Spirit, which "arises from some information in the understanding, some knowledge that the mind receives."⁷

Even worse, Strobel does not appear to have a good grasp of Edwards's own psychological terminology. Strobel writes, "Religious affection is the movement of the soul in affection to God" (57). This statement confuses Edwards's use of the term *affection* with the modern use of the word as a synonym for love. It also reduces it to mere emotion. More accurately, Smith explains that "by an affection he [Edwards] meant the response of the self to an *idea*, an apprehension of the nature of a thing."⁸ In Edwards's view, authentic religious experiences have to be based on sound ideas; that is, orthodox doctrine. Strobel obviously does not care much for any such systematic, doctrinally precise understanding of revelation. There is not

even any clear explanation of the Gospel in the book. However, other religious groups also claim to have ecstatic encounters with the love of God, which they achieve through meditation, dancing, and other techniques. These experiences do not derive from any encounter with the Holy Spirit or belief in the Gospel.

Most troubling of all, this book encourages readers to trust in their spiritual efforts rather than in the truth of the Gospel message of Christ. In his conclusion, Strobel asserts that “meditation and contemplation are at the heart of the Christian life” (138). No, the Gospel of Christ and faith in him are the heart and soul of Christianity. Salvation, including sanctification, comes by grace through faith in the Christ of the Gospel message alone, not by human attempts to produce spirituality. That message centers on Christ’s atoning death for sin, his historical resurrection, and his coming again to save and judge. The SF movement is dangerous not only because it often inducts people into a New Age worldview; it also presents a very subtle form of salvation by works. With its shallow, erroneous treatment of weighty themes such as conversion, sin, doctrine, and the afterlife, Strobel’s book winds up focusing most of its attention on human efforts to produce spirituality. As a result, this book is not a reliable guide either to the views of Jonathan Edwards or to authentic Christianity.

¹ Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices Are Uniting Christians with the World’s Religions* (Silverton: Lighthouse Trails, 2002).

² Bruce W. Davidson, “Narcissism: The Root of All Hypocrisy in the Theological Psychology of Jonathan Edwards.” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57:1 (2014) 137–39.

³ Ibid. 141.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables, vol. 2: Divine Husbandman (On the Parable of the Sower and the Seed) Kindle Edition* (ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, Adriaan C. Neele, and Wilson H. Kimmach; Amazon Digital Service: Cascade Books, 2011) loc. 1447, 1514.

⁵ Bruce W. Davidson, “Not From Ourselves: Holy Love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards.” Paper presented at the International Conference on Jonathan Edwards in Tokyo, March 26, 2016.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2: Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 426.

⁷ Ibid. 266.

⁸ John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 33.