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Every Good and Perfect Gift: How Jonathan Edwards Uses the Motif of the Gift to
Communicate the Gospel

When a person brings a gift to a party or holiday gathering, they often do so out of fear of people viewing them as impolite if they forget. This societal norm creates the impression that the receivers deserve the gift. However, objects of value that are deserved are called wages, not gifts; gifts are products that are undeserved and unearned. Though the motif of a gift is uncommon in literature and is not as common as motifs of nature or childhood, it is important to understand the components of a Gift.¹ Involved in an exchange are a Giver and a Receiver. The Giver works for the Gift but chooses to bestow it to a Receiver, who has not earned it and does not deserve it. The final component is the Gift, a product that is perfect and pleasing to both the Giver and Receiver. Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan revivalist preacher of the eighteenth century utilizes this motif in his sermon, "A History of the Work of Redemption." Employing this motif sets him apart from his contemporaries who preach in a "turn-or-burn" fashion, making him the most effective and key preacher of the Great Awakening; his sermon utilizes the motif of the Gift to encourage, to convict his audience of their sin, and to urge them to respond. Edwards' sermon effectively employs the motif of the Gift to convey the Gospel. He explains the aspects of the Giver, the

¹ I will be capitalizing the words Gift, Giver, and Receiver for the rest of the essay in order to emphasize Edwards' use of the motif, a device larger than the literal and figurative.

Receiver, and the Gift and ends with his signature application that persuades his audience to accept this Gift.

The first component that Edwards demonstrates is the Giver: God in all three-persons. To reiterate, the Giver has worked for the Gift, and therefore deserves it. Edwards demonstrates that all three members of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, take part in the plan to bring about this Gift. He outlines the preparation of the Gift so his audience can comprehend the depth of the Giver's care. To illustrate this concept, Edwards' compares this work to how people plan out a building; he states that "God went about [building] immediately after the fall of man...God has [been]...building ever since, and so will...to the end of the world" (Edwards 132). God has a plan in place so that He can purchase this Gift. He works toward this Gift. Edwards wants his audience to understand that this Gift has cost God time and effort. Indeed, "Edwards...sought to cast everything within God's purposeful plan of redemptive history" (Barshinger 67). He does not want his audience to leave feeling ashamed; he desires that admiration would well up in their souls towards God, His plan, and His thoughtfulness towards them. Though God lacks nothing as a perfect being, He puts effort into procuring this Gift for those who will receive it. Edwards outlines the plan that the Trinity has for the Gift and provides detail on each member's role in working to redeem humanity.

The head of the Trinity, God the Father, plays a key role to seek out the Receivers of the Gift. Edwards states that "the work of God" is "converting souls, opening blind eyes, and unstopping deaf ears...and rescuing...captured souls of men out of the hands of Satan" (Edwards 131). All three are involved in each duty of Salvation, but God finds the Receivers of this Gift. He makes salvation appealing to them. Edwards' slips in his Calvinistic theology from the beginning even as he focuses on the Giver and not the Receiver. Some may argue that He is not a

just God, for by selecting the saints, God also chooses those who reject Him. However, “the justice of God is not ignored in the salvation of sinners [;]...Edwards demonstrates the justice of God by focusing on God’s covenant” (Aiken 97). God models the blueprint for this Gift after the covenant He made long ago, and since He is forever faithful, He will stick to His part of the Redemption. Edwards’ recognizes that though God lays out His plan for all to see, He knows that there will be those who reject the Gift He is working for. God is at once both a manager and employee as He works towards the goal that all might be saved. God the Father executes His part of the plan, as does His Son, Jesus.

While the Trinity continues working to pay for the Gift of salvation, Jesus paid it in full when He came to earth. Though contradictory, God is eternal, so He is not bound by the limits of time. Therefore, God still pays for the Gift, and has paid for it all at once. Edwards states that “the Work of Redemption...[began] with Christ’s life and...finished with...his resurrection” (Edwards 128). Christ gives through His act of service. Many preachers tend to focus on the resurrection alone as the source of salvation. But Edwards stands out from these preachers as he indicates that while the resurrection completes the payment, Christ’s entire life is the Gift of salvation. For Edwards, “the excellency of Christ’s work unites the power to save...with empathy and compassion for human sin” (Miller 10). He convicts his audience by explaining the sacrifice Christ had to make on their behalf. Yet he encourages them as he conveys this marvelous love; someone chose to pay for this Gift, as costly as it is. God carries out this Gift in creating and choosing the receivers Jesus pays for this Gift in His life and resurrection. The final member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, continues to carry out this Gift in the Receivers’ lives.

The Holy Spirit continues the work of salvation for Receivers in their daily lives. His job is to “sanctify, or to carry on the work of [God’s] grace...and to comfort [sinners] with” His

presence (Edwards 131). Jesus' resurrection covers believers' sins, allowing the Holy Spirit to be with Christians on earth. The Holy Spirit continues the work that God begins in those He saves by encouraging them to live without sin. He walks with them and convicts Christians to live a life in response to God's Gift. This "sanctifying grace remedies [the] defects" of sin and "[disposes] the heart to be suitably affected by" Biblical messages (Wainwright 192-3). The Holy Spirit's work happens within the Believers as he provides them with strength to resist sin; they need His presence since they cannot overcome sin by themselves. Edwards emphasizes that his audience does not only need this Gift for their salvation but also for their daily living. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit work together to pay for the Gift of salvation.

A perfect Gift reflects the love the Giver has for the Receiver. It reminds the Receiver of the Giver and His selflessness. Edwards indicates that this Gift, while meant for Believers, is also meant to exalt God. He finishes his sermon stating, "the Son [is]...glorified" as is "the Father by what should be accomplished by the Spirit" so that "the whole Trinity conjunctly" are "exceedingly glorified" (Edwards 135-6). According to Edwards, this Gift would not exist without the whole Trinity. Each member performs a different role in working for this Gift and all roles are of equal value. The Gift honors each members' work and their work glorifies one another. By tracing his rhetorical hand over the intricacies of their work, Edwards puts into perspective the grand amount of work and love God has for the lost. This masterpiece of divine love "humbles saints because they see what has been done for them" (Aiken 97). In this work, God intends to procure this Gift to save the Receiver, but also ends up glorifying the Giver, Himself. Of course, omniscient God knew this would happen, but Edwards' audience does not. Edwards illustrates the effort and the dual purpose of this Gift to convict them of their sin and

encourage them to accept the Gift by displaying God's great love. In any Gift exchange, the character of the Giver matters, but the Receiver's character also plays an important role.

In this case, the undeserving Receivers of this Gift emphasize the grand love that God has for them. Edwards sets the stage for a tragedy as he uncovers that "man's soul was ruined by the fall...[his] nature corrupted and destroyed, and man became dead in sin" (Edwards 134). Staying ever true to his Calvinistic script, Edwards' lays out the doctrine of total depravity. Yet Edwards does not recite this line robotically; he gives evidence for his audience's unworthiness of the Gift of salvation. In fact, "instead of quickly passing over the fact that all men are sinners, [he] slowly unmask[s] the horror of sin" (Aiken 93). In his poignant presentation, Edwards requires his audience to feel the weight of their sin. He wants them to know that this Gift is not a payment or even a reward for good works. To add to this weight, no one is worthy of receiving this Gift. They deserve much worse than no Gift; they deserve eternal punishment. Indeed, Edwards' reinforces that not only are they undeserving of this Gift, they also cannot earn the Gift if they wanted to.

A Receiver cannot perform good deeds in order to attain the Gift. If they did work for the Gift, it would be considered payment. Edwards repeats that "all [Adam's] posterity...are partakers of the fall and the corruption of nature" (127). In his will, Adam bequeaths sin, and therefore the Receivers, by birth, cannot obtain the Gift of salvation by themselves. Furthermore, since the Receivers are finitely human, they cannot perform the divine work required to attain this Gift. They may perform good works, but their wicked hearts prevent them from achieving salvation on their own. As one commentator states it, even an "awareness of human folly and appeals...to do right, are insufficient for the increase of virtue" (Haroutunian 23). A person's recognition of sin as a problem cannot save their soul. Edwards raises the stakes as he states that

even if a person wishes to do right, they cannot; the only way to overcome sin is through dependence on the Holy Spirit, who is part of the Gift of salvation. Often, people incorrectly believe they will go to Heaven if they do good works; Edwards desires to expose and overturn this illogic. He declares this harsh truth so his audience will repent and depend on God; he desperately wants them to receive this Gift. Despite their unworthiness and inability to earn this Gift, God has Receivers in mind that He chooses.

Another trait of a Receiver is being chosen by the Giver. Edwards' Calvinism shines through in this motif and strengthens it. He narrates that another "design in the affair of redemption was to...bring all elect creatures in heaven" so that they will be "together in one body to God the Father" (Edwards 135). God chooses the Receivers. In His omniscience and eternity, He knows who will receive the Gift as well as those who will reject it. God wants those who receive His Gift to become a part of His family. This election is no more than a legal term for adoption. By selecting the Receivers, God gives them one common Father and a new inheritance, replacing the worthless inheritance they received from Adam. Yet Edwards delivers this harsh truth gently by "[preaching] unconditional election" and "[emphasizing] that Christ died...for members of all nations and all social ranks" (Wheeler 737). As aforementioned, Edwards avoids giving the impression that those who are elect did something to deserve or earn the Gift. Therefore no one earns the right to call the election unfair.² While delivering the convoluted news of the election, he states that God accepts those from every category that humanity would discriminate against. No one can claim an elected holiness based on their

² Despite the countless debate over election that still lives on, the concept of election is just because God is just and because every human has sinned. Election can be a touchy subject, but again, Edwards turns the controversial into something palatable and the easily ignored into alarming.

earthly heritage, especially as Edwards reminds them of the true inheritance all humanity deserves. As God freely chooses the Receivers of this Gift, so can the Receiver choose to receive or reject the Gift.

The Giver gives the Receiver a perfect Gift: Edwards demonstrates that the Gift is perfect because it is a necessary antidote. This Gift is a necessary Gift; the Receiver needs this Gift, but again, has not earned it. When Satan “introduced sin into the world,” he “made man God’s enemy” and “brought guilt on man and...death...and dreadful misery” (Edwards 133-4). If man does not have this Gift, he will die an eternal death. Worse than dying, he will live in desolation while on Earth as well as in death. Sin is responsible for the misery and sorrow on this Earth. But God’s Gift of salvation saves man from sin; man needs this Gift to overcome sin eternally. This Gift includes the Holy Spirit’s presence, which helps Receivers overcome sin within this life. This Holy Spirit also comforts the Receivers so that the misery of sin’s effects does not overwhelm them with sorrow. Indeed, “Edwards believed” in this Gift as “the only antidote to the brokenness and hopelessness of the human condition” (Miller 13). Because of his fervent and undistracted belief in salvation, Edwards conveys to his audience the necessity of this Gift. Humanity remains unaware the desperation that the Gift release them from. Edwards longs to share with them the hope that they can have; the Giver has worked for and continues to work for salvation in the Receivers’ lives, so they do not have to live in despair of sin’s domination. This perfect Gift is a practical one as it serves the needs of its Receiver. Miller frames this necessary Gift as an antidote while another commentator frames its necessity in a different way.

This Gift is necessary because of its release of the Receiver from a fair trial. While Kimmach surveys Edwards’ sermons, he notes that in each one of them, “the unregenerate sinner has no further court of appeal, no alternative...the sole escape is through the door where Christ

beckons” (122). Again, a Receiver needs this Gift if he wishes to escape his deserved fate. Satan seeks to make potential Receivers God’s enemy through sin. Yet while sin separates, it will not be a permanent separation. The Giver, through the Gift, creates a discretionary loophole for the Receiver. The Gift’s perfection is not only in its necessity, but also in its completeness.

Though the Trinity continues working on this Gift, it will one day be complete. Edwards explains that “the Work of Redemption...will be continued to the end of the world and then will be finished” (Edwards 130). As aforementioned, the Holy Spirit continues the work of Salvation within the Receivers’ lives. By electing His Receivers, God promises that they will be with Him in the future. However, the only way Receivers can live with a perfect God is if they, too, are perfect. The completed Gift allows them to be with Him forever. Because the Gift reflects the Giver, when Edwards describes this Gift, “he [details] the all-sufficiency” and the “power of His...resurrection to atone for human sin” (Wheeler 752). The Giver possesses all the qualifications needed to complete this Gift. Through His Gift, His power works within the Receivers, making them holier for when they die and live with Him in Heaven. Again, since the Giver is eternal and beyond time, the Gift is already complete, though its completion does not occur until Jesus’ return. Edwards emphasizes the completion of this Gift, so that his audience understands that God will not offer the Gift forever; in the Gift’s completion also lies its limited nature.

A perfect Gift is a limited Gift; if the Giver offers the Gift forever, the Receiver may never accept the Gift. In this sermon, Edwards states that “the Work of Redemption is not an eternal work” but the “fruits of this work are eternal fruits” (Edwards 130). God offers His Gift countless times because of His grace; however, because of His justice, He will not eternally extend the invitation. God has set a time when the free offer of Redemption will close; He will

not be pushed away and ignored forever. Though the offer of this Gift will close, once accepted, its effects last eternally. Sin brings death, but God brings eternal life. Edwards “[warns] the unconverted of their precarious situation before God” because “of their many sins that might bring them into everlasting damnation at any moment” (Stievermann 196). People must choose before their death to trust in God for His Salvation. Edwards possesses an urgent tone because nobody knows their death date; he preaches as if they will die in the next minute so his audience might extend their hand toward the Giver and accept this necessary, completed, and limited Gift before they run out of time. Everyone deserves death and separation from God because of their sin. If they refuse repentance and reject the generous Gift and its’ Giver, they will get what they deserve. But if they accept the Gift, they will experience abundant life. The Giver wants the best for the Receiver, but also respects Himself. This limited Gift provides a free life for the Receiver to live.

God’s purpose in this Gift is also the freedom it provides the Receiver. In this Gift, “God...[accomplishes] deliverance and salvation for the church” and the “persons [who] are...redeemed...receive the benefit...in its effect in their souls” (Edwards 127, 131). God gives the Gift of deliverance. Sin’s daily presence in people’s lives keeps them in bondage, but God releases the Receivers from sin’s tyrannical rule. Edwards recognizes that the Devil deceives humanity into believing that by sinning as they please, they have freedom and control over their lives. In reality, they work for an abusive taskmaster for fair yet terrifying wages. But God offers freedom in His Gift; they do not need to work for it or deserve it, and they get to escape the consequences they ought to reap. Their eternal fate, along with their daily living, changes because of this Gift. Edwards holds that “man is not free, because his nature derives so completely from” sinful “conditions” (Carpenter 101). Man is born into sin, so his true

inheritance is death. Therefore, he cannot derive this Gift from himself; he can only accept the Gift that God holds out to him. Humanity does not have to live in the eternal situation they were born into. They have hope. He at once convicts them that they are in dire need of this Gift and encourages them to accept the Gift with a light heart. Edwards describes a complete, necessary, limited, and free Gift to prompt his congregation to actively respond to God's generosity.

The response Edwards desires from his audience is to accept the Gift and obey God in love, not with the purpose of rectifying debt or from a place of shame. After convicting them of their sin and worthlessness, and embellishing on the wondrous Gift and its' Giver, Edwards leaves his audience with a desire to do something about their situation. He emphasizes the "responsibility of Christians to actively seek God in their lives...without falling into the Arminian trap"³ (Stievermann 197). After demonstrating the insufficiency of the Receiver to earn salvation from Hell, Edwards urges his audience to embrace God, the only proper way to thank a Giver for His Gift. Though a Receiver's return Gift of obedience is a toddler's finger-painting in comparison to the Giver's masterpiece, the Giver adores it despite its flaws because of His love for the Receiver. Edwards' desires that his audience will obey God for the rest of their lives because of this great Gift.

The motif of the Gift sets Edwards apart from his contemporaries. While this analysis has one foot in the seminary, it also has another in the literary analysis conversation because of Edwards' brilliant grasp on this controlling metaphor. His audience learns to comprehend this abstract concept as every one of them has been a Giver and a Receiver at some point in their life. This motif gives them the ability to understand the depth of the God's love and an easy way to

³ The trap being that Arminianism supports salvation by works. When Edwards encourages acceptance and obedience, he urges his audience to do so out of love, not to gain salvation. Stievermann points out Edwards' skill in walking this line.

remember why they are saved by faith and not by works. He communicates that God has a plan and explains the Trinity's functions to attain the Gift. His clear communication encourages his audience to open their hearts to One who has worked for this Gift. Edwards effortlessly communicates the complex doctrine of election, which can make some congregations bristle. The necessity, completion, limitations, and freeing nature of this Gift makes the audience see its' value the way Edwards sees it. His goal is to win his audience intellectually and spiritually, and by using the motif of the Gift, he transforms their hearts and minds with grace. Arminian or Calvinist, believer or non-believer, Edwards' motif of the Gift gives any literary person a lens with which to understand the complexity and beauty of salvation.

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