VIRTUE AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURE

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At first glance our attempts to cultivate a congregation of faithful disciples seems to be a straightforward task. We simply reconstruct the imperatives and injunctions of the Bible in such a way as to form a "working agenda" for authentic Christian discipleship. Pastors and ministry leaders approach the task with utmost seriousness and intense concern for the spiritual vitality and well-being of the person-in-community. However, on closer examination, these tasks are fraught with culturally-laden perspectives of what constitutes authentic discipleship or "true virtue." This paper seeks to explore the theme of virtue with intent to create dialogue about culturally-laden versions of virtue theory, especially in connection with the pastoral task of spiritual formation in the congregation. The interpretive task, along with careful examination of the thought-world of Scripture, must take seriously the cultural context in which the gospel is proclaimed. This requires careful attention to the role of culture in shaping our

intentions, our habits, and our predispositions to "hear" the gospel and live out its claims in our lives.

It is clear that the biblical call is always counter-cultural. However, less examined are the working assumptions about what a truly formed life or a spiritually-formed community looks like. Some of the foundational assumptions may lack the rigorous foundation required in order to sustain the efforts of our moral vision over time. In order to seriously address this deficit we must approach the vision of the virtuous life or the discipled congregation from the perspective of a working theory of virtue. Without this, it is argued, many cultural assumptions will shape the vision of spiritual formation and these assumptions will largely operate without examination. In other words, we may hold contradictory, culturally-driven assumptions as part of our working idea of the nature of the spiritually formed life-in-community even when we are seriously engaged in the task of the formation of the community.

This is more common than we like to think. We prefer to imagine that our interpretation of the Christian life is construed solely from the application of Scripture to life. In fact, we are encultured beings who derive our understandings of the world or our worldview from a combination of cultural values, personal experiences, and embedded theology. This triad needs to be further examined in relationship to our vision for the mature moral life-in-community. The task is complex and therefore, in the interests of creating a framework for discussion, this paper attempts to articulate the theory of virtue espoused by the influential theologian, pastor and moral philsopher, Jonathan Edwards as a way of conceiving a broader moral vision for the life of virtue of the person-in-community.

I. The Nature of True Virtue – Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut on October 5, 1703 and died on March 22, 1758 in Princeton, New

Jersey where he had been named President of New Jersey College (Princeton) only one month before his death. In this short lifetime Edwards became one of the most preeminent thinkers that North America ever produced. Of interest, his final treatise, written in 1755 was *The Nature of True Virtue* (published posthumously in 1765). Why would Edwards articulate this theme of moral philosophy as his final work and what are the implications of this treatise for our current understanding of the life of true virtue? Among many other things that Edwards accomplished was an articulation of the moral life which has enduring importance for postmodern discussions about the nature of the authentic Christian life-in-community.

II. Features of Contemporary Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is an approach to moral philosophy which emphasizes character and human agency in ethics. As such, it must be seen "as a distinct mode of moral philosophy, different from and in competition with the other modes."[1] According to David Solomon, virtue ethics "suggests not only that moral philosophy should 'pay attention' to virtue concepts and include a virtue component in a complete normative theory, but that the concept of virtue is in important respects a more fundamental notion than the concepts of 'the right' or 'the good' where the good is seen as attaching to objects as possible consequences of our action."[2] I will outline five distinctive features of this approach.

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[1] James D. Wallace, "Ethics and the Craft Analogy," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, XIII*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Ueling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 222.

[2] David Solomon, "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, XIII*, ed. French, Ueling and Wettstein, 430.

1. Virtue Ethics is Fundamentally "Teleological"

The focus of a "teleological" approach to ethics is on the *telos* (Gk.) or goal of human nature. The assumption is that in the very fabric of humanity's make-up, there is a thrusting towards some innate end or *telos*. The nature of such a goal may be variously defined based on the understanding of human nature, the worldview of the philosopher, and the cultural context in which the person lives. However, the perception that ethics is best defined as a movement towards a goal is an essential feature of most approaches to virtue ethics. From a distinctly Christian perspective this is essential. Joseph J. Kotva, arguing this perspective, contends that "virtue theory deals with the transition from who we are to who we could be. A concern with this transition requires that we also try to discover our true nature or *telos* and ascertain our present state or nature."[3]

2. Virtue Ethics Emphasizes Human Agency and Character

Virtue ethics emphasizes the agency of human persons bearing traits or "virtues" over the rules and principles that might guide the moral life. This feature of virtue ethics allows it to offer a wider scope of reflection on the nuances of the moral life. As Solomon points out, because the virtues "embody a more complex capacity for discernment than do rules and principles, they defy formulation in rules or principles."[4] Thus, the central moral questions for virtue ethics is not "What should I do?" but "What sort of person am I to be?" States of character and the acquisition of the virtues are given priority over concern with specific choices. Virtue ethics recognizes that "who I become" will inform and determine my choices and actions.

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[3] Joseph J. Kotva, Jr. *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 17.

[4] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984 ed.), 439.

3. Virtue Ethics Heightens Moral Vision

Moral vision, or the ability to articulate a moral situation with clarity, is an important feature of the virtue ethics approach. Virtue ethics uses the imagery of vision to express the nuances of perception which are regarded as important aspects of moral understanding. To quote an important proponent of virtue theory, Gilbert Meilaender:

> An ethics of virtue is dominated by the eye, by metaphors of sight and vision. To know what traits of character qualify as virtues we must see our world and Human nature rightly. To see rightly, in turn, requires that we have the virtues. Virtue enhances vision: vice darkens and finally blinds.[5]

The mutuality of virtue and vision is an important feature of this approach to ethics. An adequate virtue ethic will discover ways to heighten moral vision and will, likewise, reflect an urgency concerning issues of character development which assist in one's ability to perceive a moral problem. The understanding that character determines what we see is important for advocates of a virtue ethics. Our perceptions of a moral situation are not based only on reason or duty, as other approaches suggest, but on who we are in the moral situation. Character determines how we perceive a moral situation.

4. Virtue Ethics Correlates All of the Virtues

A common theme in discussions about virtue is the relationship of the individual virtues to virtue as a whole. Are the virtues to be considered a unity? Are there certain unifying virtues from which all the others are derived? Since Augustine, Christian theology has generally assumed the unity of the virtues. Writing to St. Jerome (415 A.D.) Augustine notes, "He who has one virtue has them all, and he

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[5] Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 17.

who does not have a particular one has none… Prudence can neither be cowardly, nor unjust, nor intemperate, for if it is any of these it will not be prudence."[6]

Traditional discussions about virtue center on the four "cardinal virtues"– justice, wisdom (prudence), courage (fortitude) and moderation (self-control, temperance) and the three "theological virtues" – faith, hope and charity. [7]

5. Virtue Ethics Conceives the Moral Life in Community

The perception that virtue ethics inordinately focuses on the individual is misguided. One common consensus in virtue approaches to ethics is the understanding that the shaping of character takes place in community. Community is the context for the development of character. A consistent theme in virtue ethics is the understanding that character is not shaped in a social vacuum but that the moral life is formed as we participate in the wider community. Although virtue ethics has its eye on the interior functions of the moral life (virtues), the exterior context in which a person lives shapes and gives meaning to that moral life. Rorty expands this perspective: "Action takes place in a social world. It is, in the end, our social and political relation to others that keeps our virtues in whatever precariously appropriate balance they have…Significantly, our actions have their sense, their meaning, and their direction in a public, interactive world."[8]

The community is the context in which the virtues are developed. The virtuous life reflects the habits, dispositions, and values of the wider community and in turn shapes the wider community as a "community of virtue."

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[6] John P. Langan, S.J., "Augustine on the Unity and the Interconnection of the Virtues," *Harvard Theological Review 72* (1979): 84, 85.

[7] See Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 59-78.

[8] Amelie O. Rorty, "Virtues and Their Vicissitudes," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 144.

With this foundation, then, let us turn to the understanding of virtue espoused by Jonathan Edwards in his treatise, *The Nature of True Virtue*.

III. Jonathan Edwards' Concept of True Virtue

In order to unpack his treatise, it is important to recognize that Edwards was formulating a conception of virtue which may be described as an aesthetic theology. His aim was to convey a sense of true "beauty" which forms a basis for ethics. For him, beauty "does not consist in discord and dissent, but in consent and agreement."[9] These two concepts of "consent" and "agreement" are key terms in the articulation of his theory of moral virtue.

Once consent is identified as the method of appropriating true virtue, it is a matter of course for Edwards to conclude that the object of true affection must be the greatest object: "When viewed most perfectly, comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with everything to which it stands related."[10]

Edwards cannot speak of virtues which are separated from this universal object of love, for such actions fall short of true virtue, that is, they fail to relate to everything with which they stand connected. Thus, true virtue always exercises its affection for the greatest, most comprehensive and universal Beauty. Ultimately, this means "inclining to the general highest good"[11] and "love to God; the Being of beings, infinitely the greatest and best."[12]

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[9] Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960 ed.), 4.

[10] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 3.

[11] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 9.

[12] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 14.

True virtue, then, is consent to "being in general"[13] measured by "agreeableness."[14]

> For the true virtue of created beings is doubtless their highest excellency, and their true goodness, and that by which they are especially agreeable to the mind of their Creator. But the true goodness of a thing must be its agreeableness to its end, or its fitness to answer the design for which it was made. [15]

Edwards articulates moral agency in terms of the purpose or *telos* of humanity. We are created to be moral agents and, to the extent that we "agree" with God about our design, we move towards our ultimate purpose. We express this agreement through consent to Being in general. The concept of agreement here must not be minimized as being some character trait or quality of human response. It is rather of the nature of true virtue to "agree" or offer "consent" to "being in general". Edwards understands this as a function of human agency within the entire scheme of reality.

This leads to Edwards' concept of virtue ethics:

> The first object of a virtuous benevolence is being simply considered; and if being, simply considered, be its object, then being in general is its object; and what it has an ultimate propensity to is the highest good of being in general. And it will seek the good of every individual being unless it be conceived as not consistent with the highest good of being in general. [16]

Here he begins to shift from his aesthetic theology of agreement with beauty to a practical conception of virtue as the propensity to "the highest good of being in general" and the seeking of "the good of

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[13] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 8.

[14] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 24.

[15] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 25.

[16] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 8.

every individual being." There is a subtle nuance between "seeking" and "propensity". This is the style of argument he employs throughout his treatise. Our "propensity" in virtue must be to "being in general" or to what he terms elsewhere in the treatise as "general beauty". Only if this first condition of virtue is met can we begin to think about moral actions toward other created beings and "seek" their good. General beauty must be apprehended before particular beauty can find its context.

IV. Key Concepts in Jonathan Edwards' Construct of Virtue

My aim, to this point, has been to show the general texture of Edwards' thought in developing his theology of virtue. Though there are many important distinctions in this complex work, I highlight, for our purposes, three which explicitly relate to understanding his concept of true virtue. These are being, beauty, and consent.

1. Being

If virtue ethics prioritizes "being" over "doing" in its overarching scheme, then one structural component of a theological construct of virtue will necessarily be ontological, i.e. an expressed understanding of the nature of being itself. Edwards' understanding of virtue certainly fits this requirement in that his entire argument rests on the concept of "benevolence" to being. His most common reference in *The Nature of True Virtue* is to "being in general". For Edwards true virtue always must take "being in general" as its frame of reference. He develops two strains of thought simultaneously, slipping regularly from discussions about "being in general" to statements about "God as the supreme being". Thus, his treatise may be considered (a) an ontological argument for the nature of virtue as consent to being in general and (b) a theological argument for the centrality of God in the way the universe is structured.[17]

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[17] cf. Roland A. Delattre, "The Theological Ethics of Jonathan Edwards," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 (Fall 1991): 77.

Edwards' complex idea of being expresses more than one first imagines. This complexity is identified by Sang Hyun Lee in *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Lee describes Edwards' ontological structure of reality as essentially "relational". Key to this argument is Edwards' contention that "the universe is the external expression and repetition of God's internal being."[18] Thus, when he speaks of consent to "being in general" he has in mind precisely this relational notion of God's infinite repetition of God's character in time and space. True virtue is most specifically related to this objective reality in the sentient being's consent or agreement with being in general. The relationship between God's infinite self-expression in time and space and true virtue cannot be overstated. From his early encounter with God at his conversion, he was looking for words which might describe his experience of God's splendor and majesty breaking into the world.

In this treatise he has achieved what he had attempted to express in a lifetime, namely, an understanding of the ontological structure of the universe as God's character repeated in time and space. The moral component of this relational ontology is that by our benevolence to "being in general" (which is equivalent of God's infinite self-expression in time and space) we, as intelligent, sentient beings, act according to the nature of true virtue. Thus, for Edwards it is our regard for "being in general," rather than the limited sphere of our own private affections, which determines the degree to which our actions are of the nature of true virtue. This wider regard is of focal concern in Edwards' ethical scheme. He writes: "For he [sic] that is influenced by private affection, not subordinate to a regard to being in general, sets up it particular or limited object above being in general."[19]

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[18] Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 81.

[19] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 20.

Professor Lee calls this "the doctrine of the whole,"[20] and goes on to identify three important elements of this doctrine. The first is that, "what an entity is, is inseparable from its relations."[21] That is, "in Edwards' ontology, relations are internal to being… Being is being-in-relation,"[22] hence, "God as Trinity." Second, "relations determine the existence of an entity."[23] Thus, "not only the what-ness of an entity but also its that-ness is constituted by relations."[24] Third, Edwards insists on "the absolute comprehensive extent of the mutual relations of all entities."[25] Lee concludes that "entities are related not only with some other entities in the system of being but with all other entities – that is, with the whole."[26] Precisely this integrated relational ontology is at the heart of all Edwardsean thought.[27]

2. Beauty

I have stated that Edwards' theory of virtue may be described as an aesthetic theology. This view derives from the outset of his treatise where, in describing the conditions for true virtue, Edwards points to *beauty* as the starting point. He begins with the rather vague and undefined premise that "whatever controversies and variety of opinions there are about the nature of true virtue, yet all excepting some skeptics, who deny any real difference between virtue and vice, mean by it something beautiful, or rather some kind of beauty or excellency."[28]

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[20] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 82.

[21] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 77.

[22] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 78.

[23] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 79.

[24] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 79.

[25] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 80.

[26] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 80.

[27] Note Ramsey's editorial comment: "It is a grave error, now or ever, to separate Edwards' philosophy from his theology, or his moral philosophy from his theological ethics." Ramsey, *Ethical Writings*, 11.

[28] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 1.

From the outset, therefore, Edwards' idea of virtue is tied to the concept of beauty. Roland Delattre points to the importance of this feature in Edwards' thought:

> If we wish to understand and appreciate Edwards we must dare to take seriously his frequent suggestions that beauty is the central clue to the nature of reality. We must pursue the possibility that the aesthetic aspect of his thought and vision... his concept of beauty is primarily objective, structural, and relational rather than subjective, emotional and relativist. [29]

Beauty, for Edwards, is divisible into two principal types: *primary beauty and secondary beauty*. With this distinction he relates the moral life of the "spiritual" (primary beauty) with that of the "natural" (secondary beauty). Primary beauty is the beauty "of spiritual and moral beings, which are the highest and first part of the universal system."[30] All union and consent with being in general, in so far as it takes into account the universal scheme, is entailed in this quality of primary beauty. Primary beauty involves the moral sense and what Edwards terms "cordial consent" or "cordial agreement". Accordingly, the "consent, agreement, or union of being to being" that is "the union or propensity of minds to mental or spiritual existence, may be called the highest and primary beauty."[31] For Edwards, there is an intimate connection between primary beauty and true virtue. Primary beauty is "the 'consent' (love) between perceiving beings" which is essentially "spiritual (mental)." [32]

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[29] Roland A. Delattre, "Beauty and Theology: A Reappraisal of Jonathan Edwards," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, ed. William J. Scheick (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1980), 136, 137.

[30] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 27.

[31] Delattre, "Beauty and Theology," 27.

[32] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 83.

Secondary beauty is the form that usually comes to mind when we think of something beautiful. This "natural" beauty has to do with symmetry, proportion, uniformity, and harmony. As Paul Ramsey states, "Edwards observed beauty in the symmetry of buildings, in melodies, in the infinite number of equalities in a rose, a countenance, or the solar system."[33] Secondary beauty, says Edwards,

> ... is not peculiar to spiritual beings, but is found even in inanimate things; which consists in a mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc.[34]

This secondary beauty then has to do with the "natural (material) dimensions of reality"[35] which are also tied to the relational ontology described above. Lee explains:

> When Edwards speaks about the images and types from the natural world, he is not merely coming up with the corporeal illustrations or analogies of certain spiritual meanings; rather he is pointing to all of the dimensions of the relations that make up the very essence of the being of material objects themselves.[36]

3. Consent

Consent is the important link between Edwards' ideas of beauty and the nature of true virtue. Consent and its counterpart, dissent, are activities of thinking, willing, feeling persons. The degree of consent or dissent towards being in general is the functional measure of the degree of virtue. This link is described by Delattre as the connection between the aesthetic concept of beauty and the objective relations of consent:

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[33] Paul Ramsey, "Jonathan Edwards and the Splendor of Common Morality," *This World* (Spring 1989): 7.

[34] Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 28.

[35] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 83.

[36] Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edward*, 88,89.

Beauty is objective for Edwards because it is constituted by objective relations of consent and dissent among beings, relations into which the subject or beholder may enter and participate, but relations the beauty of which is defined by conformity to God (consent to being in general) rather than by degree of subjective pleasure. Beauty is, in other words, a structural concept, the nearest synonym for which is excellence rather than pleasantness. [37]

The concept of consent connects Edwards' aesthetic vision of reality with his ethics. He identifies two forms of consent which parallel the two forms of beauty: "cordial agreement" and "natural agreement".[38] The first parallels primary beauty, as "the cordial or heart-felt consent of being to being."[39] It is precisely here that Edwards offers his definition of "true virtue". "True virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to being in general. Or perhaps, to speak more accurately, it is that consent, propensity and union of heart to being in general, which is immediately exercised in a general good will."[40] Conceived this way, virtue may be understood as an aesthetic correspondent to the nature of reality. The "sensation" of primary or spiritual beauty consists in "a spiritual union and agreement"[41] which goes beyond natural beauty. Thus, true virtue occurs when our hearts are united with God's infinite self-expression through consent and spiritual union, through agreement with God.

Edwards uses this view of true virtue to distinguish between "natural" conceptions of virtue (justice, wisdom, gratitude, etc.) and the "cordial agreement" which unites one's heart "to being in general, or to God, the being of beings."[42] For him, true virtue as primary

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[37] Delattre, "Beauty and Theology," 139.

[38] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 31.

[39] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 138.

[40] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 3.

[41] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 33.

[42] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 38.

beauty always means a union of heart to God and a perception of God's infinite self-repetition in time and space. All lesser forms of agreement and harmony are not of the nature of true virtue but are forms of secondary beauty.

This description of virtue allows him to conceive the difference in the moral perception of regenerate (primary beauty) and unregenerate (secondary beauty) persons. He does not disparage the sense of moral apprehension that comes with natural agreement but relates this to the intuitive sense of natural conscience. Natural conscience is common to all humanity and "approves" the uniformity, equality, etc. of virtue while being unable to "taste" the "sweetness in benevolence to being in general."[43]

For Edwards, those ethical systems which fail to relate to the "sum of universal being, or comprehending all existence to which we stand related" are flawed primarily by their "narrowness" and in particular, by their readiness "to leave the divine Being out of their view."[44] The breadth of one's moral vision thus depends on one's ability to incorporate God's being (as the being of beings) into one's way of perceiving the world. Ethical systems which fail in this regard may be truthful (to the extent that they describe what is of the order of natural agreement) but short-sighted (to the extent that a private system is taken to "have more of the image of the universal"). [45]

Edwards offers a uniquely integrated scheme of moral philosophy, one that expresses the idea that the moral life is founded primarily on spiritual attentiveness to God. Whereas other approaches to virtue ethics lack an ontological scheme and essentially follow

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[43] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 68.

[44] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 87.

[45] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 88.

Aristotle to a private or limited domain, Edwards moves beyond such limited reflection and offers a dynamic and conception of the spiritually formed life. In so doing, he contributes a theological construct that can be enormously useful for reflection upon the moral life-in-community.

For this reason, understanding Edwards' concept of consent is critical. As he puts it, true virtue "consists in a disposition to benevolence towards being in general."[46] He uses the language of "disposition' to locate or situate benevolence. Delattre interprets this as a significant nuance in his theory of virtue: "Settled dispositions or habits or patterns of activity, not momentary visions or occasional acts, are what count. And the truly virtuous disposition or habit or pattern is primarily one of consent or benevolence to being 'simply considered.'"[47]

V. Implications for Christian Formation

Several insights might be drawn for our discussion about the nature of the spiritually formed life-in-community. Our approaches to spiritual formation often bring the clutter of our cultural assumptions into play. We are invested in ideas of moral formation that are burdened with cultural ideas of obedience derived from pragmatism in the workplace. Or, as in the Canadian culture, the template for the mature life-in-community is often truncated by reliance on a dominant virtue such as tolerance. Giving such preference to a dominant virtue truncates the discussion about the complex issues of moral formation in the community and offers an inadequate basis for such reflection. In Asian contexts perhaps the cultural aspects of honor/shame

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[46] Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 5.

[47] Delattre, "Beauty and Theology," 83.

embedded in cultural worldviews have a bearing on the way that our understanding of the moral life-in-community takes shape. In all situations our cultural values and assumptions are implicated in the deeper quest for understanding the nature of the truly formed spiritual life-in-community. The question of culture and hermeneutics is not how to become un-encultured but rather it is the question of how our Christian interpretation of life may transcend the cultural traps and templates prescribed for us, thus allowing us to reconsider the true axes of the Christian life-in-community. While we must be awake to the cultural dynamics, it would seem that a broader ontological structure within which to frame our vision of the mature life-in-community may aid us in working out a vision of "true virtue". Some implications of Edwardsean perspective on true virtue may help to clarify what is possible:

1. Relational Ontology as the True Context of Virtue

The change in context from a contextual, culturally-laden approach to an ontological and aesthetic vision of virtue recalibrates our perceptions of the nature of the spiritually formed life. In Edwards' construction, the fundamental habits or dispositions that require cultivation are those which shape the very being of a person or community in relationship to God. Obedience, in the context of a relational ontology, has to do more with consent, agreement and active listening. Attentiveness to God and union with God through prayer are shaped by the priority of "being" over "doing". The point is not to create programs of discipleship which get people to act virtuously, rather, the point is to invite people to the mystery of God as apprehended and experienced in our lives. Do our schemes of spiritual formation and discipleship in the church truly cultivate this theocentric focus? Is our vision of the mature spiritual life-in-community adequately developed as a spiritual union with God in a relational ontology that has the capacity to inform and transform our spiritual communities?

2. Religious Experience and the Moral Life

In Edwards' scheme the true moral life is not to be understood as a compilation of moral quandaries to be resolved or a series of consequential choices. Instead, he understands the core of the moral life as a spiritual or moral apprehension. The functions of the moral life are defined by our ability to perceive and participate in the activity of God (by grace) and to agree or offer heartfelt consent. Here again a new vision of spiritual formation will be required. Rather than motivating persons to "mission" the activity of moral vision is to apprehend what God is already doing in God's mission. The call here is not to "create" ministry but rather to participate in the ministry that God is already doing in the world. Discipleship efforts in the church often attempt to prescribe the imperatives of authentic Christian living. Edwards offers us a compelling vision of agreement and consent with "being in general" [God] which calls forth an investment in the spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, solitude and contemplation through which we will be able to apprehend the unfolding beauty of God's own mission-in-the-world. Our participation in this eternal activity becomes the lived out practice of a new way of being-in-communion with God. We "consent" to what God is already doing.

3. Social Dimensions of Virtue

Edwards insists that true virtue attends not only to a localized or "private sphere" but also to the wider connections in which virtuous actions consent with "being in general". In proposing this idea of the moral life, he offers a comprehensive context for the functions of the moral life. Moral vision, in his scheme, requires spiritually formed person-in-community to perceive such action "comprehensively" and "universally", with regard to "all its tendencies and its connections with everything to which it stands related." Virtue cannot be contained in the actions of individuals outside of their broader social connections. It is rather in the broader association with all of its connections, ultimately its connections and, ultimately in its

connection with the Divine Life, that true virtue is cultivated. In his descriptions of "consent to being" Edwards understands the social complexion of the moral life as a multiplicity of relations. These relations, as Delattre points out, are "primarily objective, structural, relational, and creative or formative."[48] Therefore, our vision of the maturing life-in-community will require that we conceive the deeper connections between what we may be doing to the widest possible connections – being open to God's Spirit as all aspects of God's work unfolds.

4. Ultimate Horizon of Spiritual Formation

The moral life must be understood, finally, from the perspective not of incremental virtues being lived out in isolation, but of our inter-connectedness and, in particular, with our relation to God as the infinite Being. There is, in Edwards' system, an inversion of the usual approach to social ethics in theology. Rather than beginning with contrived moral precepts and understandings, we discover in Edwards a system of moral participation in which our widening scope of activity will result in more love to neighbor and, ultimately, in love to God. Moral vision is therefore not the result of increasing rigid obedience or heightened moral regimen but rather of increasing cultivation of the spiritual apprehension of God's infinite love. This is almost a discovery of our union with Christ as we come to terms with our own re-created purpose and destiny. In Edwardsean thought, we "consent to being in general" and this becomes the ultimate horizon of the mature spiritual life-in-community.

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[48] Delattre, "Beauty and Theology," 140.

VI. Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards was 17 years old at his conversion. It was upon reading I Timothy 1:17, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen." that Edwards encountered God in a way that profoundly affected him for the rest of his life. He writes of this experience:

> As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense quite different from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up in him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him forever![49]

It is possible that this horizon never really left him and became the compass for his moral vision throughout his life. In the end he left us with such a compelling and inspired vision of the life of true virtue. One which challenges our assumptions, opens up our perspective and restores to us a true horizon for the nature of true virtue: "consent to being" and worship of our God.

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[49] Edwards, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," in *The Works of Edwards*, xiii.

ABSTRACT

This paper probes the ways in which culture influences our perceptions of the moral life and the work of discipleship in the church. Each culture has hidden lenses that may prevent us from examining the core assumptions that we carry regarding the nature of discipleship and spiritual formation in the church. It is clear that the biblical call is always counter-cultural. However, less examined are the working assumptions about what the truly formed life or a spiritually-formed community looks like. Pastors and church leaders often work within a cultural framework without exploring carefully how the cultural assumptions are framing their perspective. The paper draws on Jonathan Edwards' core understanding of true virtue as a basis for reflection on these issues. Using this framework the essay then seeks to expose some of the hidden assumptions about the role of culture in interpreting the moral life. The implications for the pastoral-theological reflection on spiritual formation and discipleship are explored in order to clarify foundations of moral formation, the relationship of religious experience to moral development, the social dimensions of the life of virtue and the ultimate horizon of spiritual formation.

撮   要

本文旨在探討文化怎樣影響我們認識教會的門徒訓練工作和道德生活。每一種文化均含有一些深層元素，或妨礙我們檢視教會訓練門徒與建立門徒靈命的核心假設。毋庸置疑，聖經對門徒的召喚，勢必與文化抗衡。可是，我們卻鮮有檢視所建立的真正門徒生命或聖靈所建立的門徒群體，究竟樣貌如何。教牧同工與堂會領袖，往往囿於文化框框而行事，沒有審慎探索文化假設如何建構定模他們看事物的角度。本文作者根據愛德華滋對真正德性的核心理解，來反省這些課題。透過採用有關框架，作者志切揭露我們詮釋道德生活時對文化角色深層假設的一鱗半爪。作者探索建立門徒靈命與訓練門徒的教牧神學反省的意義，以釐清建立道德的基礎、宗教經驗與道德發展的關係、德性生活的社會層次，以及建立門徒靈命的終極境界。