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# Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology

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## Jonathon Edwards: A Mini-Theology

John H. Gerstner

Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1987

135 pp., U.S. \$5.95

On the back cover of Dr. John Gerstner's *Jonathon Edwards: A Mini-Theology* one can read the following quote by George Marsden of Duke University Divinity School: "In this labor of love, John Gerstner presents Edwards as the brilliant defender of Reformed orthodoxy. Those who admire rational theological systems will here find valuable grist for their theological mills." These brief lines capture both the essence of the book and the audience who will laud its appearance.

Gerstner makes no attempt to hide his partisanship. The well-known scholastic fundamentalist of the Warfield-Machen-Westminster Seminary species proclaims clearly his loyalty to Edwards and his theology in this brief work. "My indebtedness to the saint of Stockbridge is greater than to any other human being who has ever lived outside of the pages of Holy Scripture itself", is stated by the author at the outset (p. 11), and the dedication to his wife mentions that Edwards "has become a household word for some forty years to our eternal benefit". This honest passion, and the grace with which the author chides himself about it, adds a touch of charm to the book which readers might well appreciate. It is refreshing to see such open apologetics; far too many books attempt to hide their presuppositions behind an aura of objectivity. This is not one of Gerstner's sins.

Also Gerstner's book reflects the scholarship by which he has achieved his repute. It is clear and easy to read, and it makes no claim of thoroughness. He calls it "a mini-theology", "an introduction and nothing more than an introduction to Edwards' theology", and that's exactly what it is. It is a compendium, a collection of Edwards' thinking gathered around twelve dogmatic themes chosen by Gerstner. These topics read like an outline of the scholastic *summas* of seventeenth century Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxy. Using a mix of Edwardsian quotes and his own theological brand of reasoning, Gerstner develops an apology which demonstrates his alliance with post-Reformation scholasticism and the fundamentalist Princeton faction led by J. Gresham Machen. At times, indeed most of the time, his scholarship is lucid and logical, clear and pointed, but the appeal of his argumentation is unassailable only in the context of the dogmatic presuppositions under which he operates. He is extremely knowledgeable, and his observations about Luther's and Augustine's sola fideism, for example, are thoughtful and provocative in the best sense of these words. Finally, it is to Gerstner's credit that his polemics neither denigrate his foes in a personal sense nor seek to distort what his theological opponents have to say.

Nonetheless, the book leaves much to be desired. Like most scholastic systems Gerstner's is barren of life. It is caught up in a narrow logic of

ideas which wastes its passions on past foes and past combats. Its world is insular and marginalized, and its battles are joined in a narrow ecclesiastical milieu far from the raging questions that torment humanity today. No doubt the so-called existential questions are addressed throughout history, but for Gerstner there seems to be a confusion between timeless issues and timeless jargon. One wonders whether Gerstner spends more time defending a theological system, with its corresponding rhetoric and rationale, than he does in proclaiming the radical scandal of the gospel to which he is committed. My own partisanship finds Neo-Orthodox agapaism more radically Biblical than Gerstner's Anselmian straitjacket which makes Biblical love the prisoner of feudal notions of justice divine and human.

Beyond this theological assessment must be made an historical one, and that must be a most telling critique. Jonathon Edwards does not shine through in this book with all his splendor. The greatest of New England's Puritan thinkers, the bridge between orthodoxy and Pietism, remains disembodied in this work. He is used by Gerstner to buttress Gerstner's own agenda. Undue space is given to analysis (i.e., of medieval thought, Augustine and Luther) that adds little or nothing to Edwards' thought. Theology is living; it has flesh and blood. Edwards is an overwhelming manifestation of that in his life and in his major works and polemics. It is to be profoundly hoped that Gerstner's planned exhaustive treatment will allow Edwards to live and speak out of his own setting and not out of the apologetic needs of the author.

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## Quest for a Philosophical Jesus

Vincent A. McCarthy

Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986, n.p.

From the Apologists of the second century until today philosophers have attempted to prove the truth of Christianity and to show that it is acceptable to reason. Most of such attempts have been viewed with suspicion, if not hostility, by the Church. Vincent McCarthy examines the philosophical defenses of Christianity by four outstanding philosophers: Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Schelling. He argues that these eighteenth and nineteenth century thinkers have clarified the issues that still face the philosophy of religion.

When these four appeared the Enlightenment was firmly in control of the intellectual scene. Christianity, the Church, the Bible and even Jesus had been cast aside as superstitious, irrational, dogmatically authoritarian