

BOOK REVIEW

of

Stephen J. Nichols,

An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards,
P&R Publishing, 2003.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

This book by Stephen J. Nichols commends itself on several levels. First, anyone who is a student of Jonathan Edwards would likely find this book to be valuable, as it is a new attempt at organizing Edwards' thought around some common theme. Second, it is a good introduction to Jonathan Edwards for those who are not familiar with him. Third, it is an excellent book on the subject of assurance. Edwards, and the Bible, teaches that one who walks closely with God can have deep assurance with "an absolute sort of certainty." It is perhaps interesting, at least in my opinion, that the book is not particularly useful in terms of apologetics! The only real apologetics addressed in the book is that sort of apologetics addressed to believers, or nominal believers: preaching the truth of God's Word. As important as that is, in the secular world in which we live, filled with skeptics, materialists, atheists, and adherents of other faiths, apologetics means something different to me. As important as this book is, in my opinion, I felt a little cheated by the subtitle. Jonathan Edwards never wrote a book on apologetics, but I suspect that the main reason why is that apologetics in the sense of presenting the case for Christianity to those outside of the Church was not his concern. Most people in his day were professing Christians. His concerns were more aligned with false theological ideas such as Arminianism, false emphases within the Church such as emotionalism, and cold Church attendance with little evidence of a vital faith. So reading apologetics into Edwards, apologetics as I understand it, is perhaps not a particularly convincing theme. However, the book's emphasis on Edwards' teaching on the Holy Spirit, on knowing, perception, assurance, verification, and persuasion is very helpful to the Christian. Non-Christians would have little interest in any of this, it would seem to me.

Stephen J. Nichols is an associate professor at Lancaster Bible College. He has a Ph.D. from Westminster Theological Seminary. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and chairs the society's Jonathan Edwards Study Group. This book, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty*, is a revision of Nichols' dissertation which he did for his doctorate. Scott Oliphint at Westminster was Nichols' Ph.D. advisor. George Marsden was an external reviewer of the dissertation.

The book has six chapters. Chapter 1 is Edwards as an Apologist. Chapter 2 is Revelation: Edwards on Knowing. Chapter 3 is Perception: Edwards on Seeing and Sensing. Chapter 4 is Assurance: Edwards on Testimony (1). Chapter 5 is Verification: Edwards on Testimony (2). Chapter 6 is Persuasion: Edwards and the Apologetic Sermon.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the philosophical area called epistemology, or the study of how we know things. Nichols writes on page 22: "Edwards held that the Spirit works in dependence upon the Word. Consequently, the spiritual knowledge granted by illumination is the spiritual content of revelation. Inspiration and illumination are the province solely of the Holy Spirit." On the following page: "God's Word is the ground of truth, Edwards argues in 'The Threefold Work of the Holy Ghost.' Genuine convictions are 'according to truth, etc., they are according to the Word of God.' The unshakable basis of knowledge is revelation. In Edwards's apologetics, then, the Holy Spirit is the source of knowledge, as set forth in revelation. While this encompasses general revelation, the divinely inspired Scriptures are at the center of his attention and form the basis of his epistemology." On page 24 Nichols continues: "he gives priority to special revelation and from there constructs his epistemology. As Scott Oliphint observes, revelation is foundational and presuppositional in Edwards's scheme: 'We could say, then, that reasoning for Edwards presupposes the truth of revelation.'" One could say that, but then again one could say that Edwards was convinced of the truth of special revelation without speculating how he came to that conviction. What does it mean anyway, to say he presupposes it? Once convinced by reason and by the work of the Holy Spirit, revelation could indeed be foundational, but I fear that the word "presuppose" implies starting with the conviction without having any reasons for doing so. Perhaps I misunderstand Nichols at this point. Indeed, it seems to me that Edwards holds strongly to the Bible as the revelational of God, and that the Holy Spirit must be our illuminator when it comes to properly understanding it and applying it. But Edwards is one of the best thinkers this country has ever produced, and his life, well documented, is one of carefully and thoroughly studying and applying what the Scriptures teach, and making good use of reason and observation in the process. He argued from Scripture against wrong theology and wrong religious practice, and demonstrated where opponents were incorrect based on what the Bible teaches. But in my understanding, I think it would be incorrect to say that Edwards presupposed the truth of the Bible. Again, Edwards having the conviction that the Bible is true does not, in itself, tell us how he arrived at that conviction. To the best of my knowledge he hasn't told us. The value of his epistemology concerning Christian truth is that the Bible, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, must be our foundation and source. That is a strong message to Christians, but I doubt that nonbelievers would be must impressed with it. Therefore, if I understand what apologetics is supposed to be about, I don't think that Edwards is that helpful. After all, others, such as Spoul and Gerstner, appealed to Edwards for support of classical rational apologetics. Edwards wrote quite a bit, but he never explicitly addressed apologetics.

Chapter 6 is explicitly on the "Apologetic Sermon." It would seem that Nichols must be thinking of apologetics in a very broad sense of proclaiming the truth. Taken in that way, apologetics as declaring the truth of what the Bible teaches by a minister of the Gospel to Christians, Nichols has much to offer.

In spite of my criticisms about the meaning of apologetics, this book by Nichols is a good overview of Edwards' thought and a good introduction to those who are not very familiar with him. In my opinion, Edwards' theology is very sound and in much need for Christians today. Nichols' book is well written, easy to read, and very thought provoking. I recommend it to you.