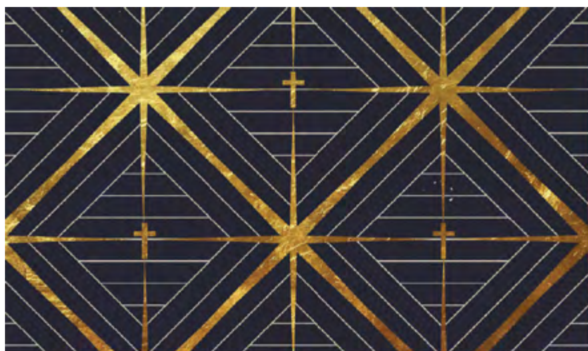

GEORGE MARSDEN

An INFINITE FOUNTAIN *of* LIGHT

JONATHAN EDWARDS *for the* TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *An Infinite Fountain of Light* by George Mish Marsden.
Copyright © 2023 by George Mish Marsden.
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

1

A PERSON *of* HIS TIME *for* OUR TIME

The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.

C. S. Lewis

Christians in every era need to pause once in a while to get their bearings. Though we belong to churches that give us some good guidance, that advice must compete with bewildering numbers of other voices we hear during the week. It is as though we are hiking in a land only half familiar to us, and we are confronted with many unmarked, poorly marked, or—increasingly—wrongly marked turns. So we may feel we are losing our way in the face of perplexing and enticing options. Or we may feel that the denominations or Christian movements that we have followed are themselves losing their way and are offering us inadequate directions. And even if we believe that we are on essentially the right path, it may be helpful to reconnoiter once in a while to see if we can be wiser in the ways that we proceed.

As one who has spent many years trying to understand the interrelationships between Christianity and American culture, I

ivp | InterVarsity Press

see the calling of a Christian historian as helping us step back in order to gain perspective on where we are by looking at how we got there. That is not the most important calling within the body of Christ, but it is one of the valuable functions from which I believe the whole body can benefit. If we think of Christians today as being part of a fellowship on a great quest, such as in *The Lord of the Rings*, then we might view historians and other cultural observers as comparable to some Hobbits who have been assigned the task of keeping careful records of where we have been. They can help see where and why we have made some wrong turns, or correct ones. That can help the whole company as it makes future choices. Unfortunately our maps give us only the general direction to our destination, and we can only guess at the contours of the territory that lies ahead. And we are only Hobbits. We need wise leaders like Gandalf and Aragorn to interpret the clues from the guidelines we have been given and to lead us in the right direction. So I see my contribution as twofold. First, as a historian, I hope I can, in the light of our past successes and failures, help identify what are some of the greatest cultural challenges for Christians today in negotiating their way through the contemporary world. Second, as a Christian who knows how difficult it can be to meet those challenges, I have learned to look to the wisdom of some of the guides who have proven reliable in many cultural settings and so can help us to know where to turn in our own.

Jonathan Edwards is among those mentors who present some striking insights that I have found especially helpful in my ongoing personal quest. So I offer this little book in the hope of sharing that guidance with others.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Looking to the most profound insights of Christians from another era can be an especially helpful way to gain perspective on our own needs in our own era. Edwards lived in a time differing greatly from our own, when people assumed some outlooks we may find puzzling or simply wrong. Yet precisely because Edwards lived in such a radically different era, he can help us to see our present situation in a new light. One of the things that the study of history can help us recognize is the degree to which people are shaped and sometimes blinded by the prevailing assumptions of their age and culture. The most important implication of that observation is that people in our own age are not exceptions to that rule. And that includes us. Once we are alert to the danger of being blinded by assumptions of our own time, we can attempt to identify those assumptions and to assess critically which are blinding and which may be valid. For those purposes, in can be especially helpful to view our times in the light of the wisdom from other times.

In studying the Christian past, I have found Jonathan Edwards especially helpful both in challenging assumptions of our own age and in offering invigorating guidance in my own quest to follow Christ. Edwards is not, of course, alone in this regard. Any one of scores of great Christian saints of the past or present might serve as comparably wise guides. For instance, I have been helped or inspired at various times by Augustine, J. S. Bach, Pascal, Kierkegaard, the Niebuhr brothers, Martin Luther King Jr., J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis, as well as many other past and more recent writers. It happens, though, that my interest in Edwards led to me study him in depth and to publish two biographies about him. So I have had more opportunity to think

ivp | InterVarsity Press

about how his best insights are helpful for my own faith. That study also reminds me of my own limitations. It is far easier to articulate the grandeur of Edwards's theological vision than it is to begin to respond to it as one should. I suppose such a strong sense of inadequacy is what anyone should expect when trying to understand and to follow God's Word and God's ways in the world. Still, I feel that inadequacy acutely in the presence of the grandeur of the Christian vision and in facing the challenges of following its implications.

In thinking about Edwards in relation to other great Christian thinkers, I have been particularly struck, for instance, by some of the parallels with C. S. Lewis, someone else whom I have been privileged to write about and whom I will invoke occasionally. Some readers might find that pairing counterintuitive. Edwards and Lewis are so different in so many ways. Lewis is a theological essentialist who presents "mere Christianity" as "those beliefs that have been common to all Christians at all times."[1] In doing so, he is drawing on the Christian mainstream that flows though Augustine. Edwards is a theological maximalist who attempts to work out in detail all of the implications of classic Christian belief. He is explicitly Reformed, which means that he draws most directly on a couple of centuries—since the time of John Calvin—of Protestant theological elaboration of the classic Augustinian heritage. That is a reminder that much of what is profound in Edwards is not unique to him. But I invoke Lewis as a particularly useful counterpart to Edwards. Lewis makes a point of not being original. Rather, he says, he is trying to draw on the most common

[1]C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 6.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

essentials of the Christian theological tradition throughout the ages. So I find Lewis's breadth in his inclusive and nonjudgmental reaching out to all sorts of traditional Christians a nice balance to the strict dogmatism that sometimes accompanies Edwards's astonishing depth of insights.

One of Lewis's most helpful insights is that most Christian theologians need translators. With that principle in mind, he recommended that every examination in theology "ought to include a passage from some standard theological work for translation into the vernacular."[2] If you cannot explain a theological principle in terms that ordinary Christians can understand, then you probably do not understand the doctrine very well yourself.

Edwards particularly needs translators. Though he was sometimes a remarkably effective preacher, most often that effectiveness had to do with his personal intensity in addressing New England audiences who were well schooled in Reformed theology and used to formal expositions. And his theological and ethical treatises were addressed to highly educated clergy and others with philosophical training who could follow subtle and complex arguments. Much of what he wrote in his extensive private notebooks is even more philosophical and obscure. Furthermore, he wrote in an eighteenth-century idiom that is sometimes hard to follow in our time. In each of these modes of writing, he sometimes came up with brilliant and even beautiful passages. But those are the gems that may be extracted only through a lot of deep mining.

---

[2] C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," *God in the Dock,* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 243.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

So I view one of my roles in this volume as to be a translator of Edwards. As a Christian layperson who has been helped by many of his insights, I can in turn try to help others discover and appreciate those insights. And as someone who has studied Christianity in American culture, I can also suggest how those insights speak particularly to our cultural settings today.

Some aspects of Edwards's thought, it must be acknowledged, are not at all helpful. Sometimes he carries his insights too far. And sometimes he gets off on a wrong track. That is most glaringly evident, for instance, in his interpretation of biblical prophecies. Adopting a then-current interpretive framework, he believed that the key to understanding recent history was that the Roman Catholic Church was the antichrist spoken of in the Scriptures. Given that premise, Protestants could interpret biblical prophecies as predicting that the papal powers—such as the Roman Catholic nations of France and Spain that were often at war with Great Britain and threatened New World Protestantism—would eventually be defeated. After that, as Edwards interpreted Scripture, true Christianity would spread remarkably, and the world would rapidly improve. The last era in human history would be a golden age lasting a thousand years, the "millennium" in Scripture. And probably starting around the year AD 2000, at the end of the golden millennial age, Christ would return. This was what is now called a postmillennial view. A great mind working from wrong premises can produce spectacular errors.

So it should be clear that my outlook in these reflections is not at all that just because Edwards says something, we must pay attention to it or learn from it. Rather, recognizing that Edwards,

ivp | InterVarsity Press

like the rest of us, had his share of shortcomings, I hope to offer readers the best of Edwards's insights that are most helpful today.

Further, I do not present here a full account of Edwards's theology and related teachings. Many such overviews are readily available.[3] Edwards was strongly Reformed or Calvinistic. Often he elaborates aspects of that outlook in great detail. He also applies his powerful philosophical skills to trying to resolve some of its most difficult paradoxes. Many Christians, especially scholars in the Reformed heritage, find these discussions fascinating and often insightful, and I can sometimes share in such interests. However, in this book I am addressing a broader audience of Christians who have more practical concerns. The insights from Edwards presented here are filtered through my own outlook and experiences of being an American Christian in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His best insights are not specific to his Reformed theological tradition, even though they arise in that context. So I am confident that many who see themselves as close to that transdenominational heritage that C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity" can benefit from Edwards. I hope and pray that readers may find many of his keen insights as invigorating as I have.

As the author of both a longer and a shorter biography of Edwards, I can here summarize some of the most basic insights I have to offer for understanding his life and work. Anyone who

[3]Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) is an especially helpful, comprehensive source. See also the Yale Jonathan Edwards Center website for an abundance of resources: http://edwards.yale.edu.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

has read one of these (or another Edwards biography) can move on to chapter two.

Edwards lived from 1703 to 1758 and almost entirely in New England. He grew up in the village of East Windsor, Connecticut, where his father, Timothy Edwards, was the pastor. Timothy stood firmly in the old Puritan heritage. Jonathan's mother, Esther Stoddard Edwards, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, sometimes known as "the pope of the Connecticut River Valley" due to his dominant influence in that western Massachusetts region. Jonathan was the only boy among ten sisters, five older and five younger. Precocious and an avid reader, Jonathan began his collegiate school just before turning fourteen. He continued his studies at Yale in New Haven until 1722, when he received his MA, then the school's highest degree. During 1722 and 1723 he served as interim pastor of a Presbyterian church in the busy seaport town of New York. In 1723 he took a position as pastor of a crossroads village church in Bolton, Connecticut. Then he returned to Yale to serve as an instructor from 1724 to 1726. From there he went on to assist his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1727 he married Sarah Pierpont, then seventeen, the daughter of a prominent New Haven pastor and someone he admired for her evident piety.

Throughout these years Jonathan's most pressing concern had to do with the state of his soul. His father emphasized regeneration, or that one needed to be "born again" by God's saving grace. Timothy Edwards also fostered some times of "awakenings," or times of religious revival, in his parish. Timothy was also an expert on the Puritan standards for determining whether

ivp | InterVarsity Press

one was truly converted. From his early childhood Jonathan struggled with that question, constantly gauging the state of his soul, making strict resolutions, keeping a spiritual diary, and often fearing that he was failing and deserving only of punishment. Later, when he was an established pastor and spiritual leader, he wrote an account of these struggles—a topic to which we will return. By the time he had taken up his position in Northampton and been married to Sarah, these issues seemed to have been resolved.

When Solomon Stoddard died in 1729, Jonathan became pastor of the Northampton church, where he would remain for the next twenty years. Northampton was a town of about one thousand inhabitants on the Connecticut River. Church and town were more or less coextensive, and Solomon Stoddard had been renowned for, contrary to the usual Puritan practice, not requiring accounts of conversion for church membership and participation in the sacraments. He believed that participating in the Lord's Supper might in fact sometimes be a means to conversion. Stoddard emphasized conversion itself as much as other New England pastors, and he too saw seasons of awakenings in his parish.

While still a young pastor, in the fall of 1734, Jonathan oversaw a stunning awakening in his church that lasted well into 1735. Even in this setting where churches often experienced times of spiritual renewal, this one seemed to exceed others in its intensity. And what made it especially influential was that Jonathan wrote a glowing account of it, describing how almost all the townspeople seemed concerned with the state of their souls. Titling this "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,"

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Edwards sent his narrative to an influential pastor friend in Boston who in turn sent it on to Isaac Watts (the great hymn writer) in England. Watts enthusiastically saw to its publication. Edwards suddenly became one of the well-known promoters of revivals in an era when waves of religious renewal were beginning to build in the English-speaking world. George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley were among the young men who were encouraged by Edwards's work and were themselves on the verge of launching monumental renewal movements.

Between 1739 and 1740 evangelist George Whitefield visited America, where his preaching, often outdoors, throughout the colonies sparked what is now called the Great Awakening. When Whitefield came to New England in 1740, he was happy to accept an invitation to visit Edwards in Northampton. Edwards, in turn, helped promote this new awakening. Particularly, he joined with some other New England clergy in traveling outside of their parishes, sometimes in teams, to hold extended awakening services in various communities. It was in such a context that in 1741 Edwards preached his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in the village of Enfield, Connecticut. Warnings about hellfire were commonplace among almost all Christian preachers of the era, but Edwards filled this sermon with unusually vivid images depicting how precarious life was when standing on the brink of eternal damnation. His hearers in Enfield were so overcome with emotion that he could not finish. Unfortunately, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when this sermon was widely anthologized, Edwards came to be better known as a hellfire preacher than for all his more positive theological insights. For many, the "Sinners" sermon is still the only

ivp | InterVarsity Press

thing they know about America's greatest theologian. I hope this book will fill in the picture of his much more positive appeal as an engaging teacher and mentor.

Edwards also became the most prominent apologist for the awakenings, or what became known as the "New Light" movement, writing several treatises on the subject. Critics of the awakenings, including some of Boston's most respected clergy, warned against the deceptiveness of the emotions that the awakenings generated. Edwards responded that while it was true that such reactions were sometimes superficial and deceiving, it was also true that overwhelming emotions might be appropriate responses for those who recognized the transforming grace of God in changing one's life for eternity. So to oppose the awakenings, whatever their faults, would sometimes mean to oppose the work of the Holy Spirit. Edwards recognized that telling the difference between genuine Christian conversion and its counterfeits was not an easy task. In 1746, after the awakenings had subsided, he published *A Treatise on the Religious Affections*, which remains a classic account of how to tell the difference between true Christian commitment as distinguished from hypocrisy and self-deception.

By the time Edwards was writing on this theme, developments in Northampton were beginning to cast a cloud over his work as a pastor. Small town that it was, Northampton had returned to some contentious attitudes that had long been among its tendencies. A number of church members whom Edwards had believed to be converted during the awakenings no longer evidenced the signs of true grace. And some petty resentments were now directed at Edwards and his family. Late in the decade Edwards attempted to address the issues in what proved to be a

ivp | InterVarsity Press

very unwise way. He proposed to reverse the lenient standards for church membership that Solomon Stoddard had instituted. Prospective church members, Edwards insisted, should be required to offer at least a minimal profession that they had been converted in a heartfelt way. Most of the congregation was up in arms at this proposal. It would have threatened not only to bar some of their adult children from communicant membership but would also then mean that some of their grandchildren would be ineligible to receive infant baptism. In 1750 the Northampton congregation voted to dismiss him as their pastor.

The next year Edwards accepted a position as a pastor and missionary to the Native Americans in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in the mountains of the far western part of the colony. Stockbridge had been founded in the 1730s as a missionary effort by New Englanders concerned that the colonies' previous efforts to evangelize the Native Americans had largely failed. While the villagers were predominantly Mahicans, a missionary family and some others of English descent settled near them in hopes of establishing trusting relationships. Edwards already had a deep interest in Native American missions. In fact, he had published, in 1749, what became an influential spiritual biography of a young missionary to the Native Americans, David Brainerd. So Edwards was willing to move his very large family—eight of his children were still under the age of eighteen—to the dangerous frontier settlement to serve that cause. His Stockbridge years were among the most eventful of his life, marked especially by the outbreak, in 1754, of the French and Indian War.

In 1757 Edwards accepted a call to become the president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). There, before moving the

ivp | InterVarsity Press

rest of his family from Stockbridge, he lived with his daughter Esther Burr, the widow of the Rev. Aaron Burr Sr., the late former president of the Presbyterian college. Edwards also, by the way, got to know his rambunctious two-year-old grandson, Aaron Jr. (future vice president of the United States and deadly rival of Alexander Hamilton). In 1758 in New Jersey there was a smallpox epidemic. Edwards, who respected science, advocated vaccinations, which—while even more controversial than they are today—had recently been proven to be effective; early that year, however, he died from a rare side effect.

As a biographer of Edwards, I find that several factors stand out for understanding him in his personal and historical context.

First, I think it is important to recognize that during most of his life Jonathan was surrounded by large families, mostly women and children. While growing up, his daily life must have been shaped very largely by his ten sisters and his highly intelligent, pious mother. In Northampton Jonathan and his wife Sarah, likewise intelligent and pious, also reared a family of eleven children, eight girls and three boys. Many of the women around him were his models for Christian piety. Due to gender biases in record keeping, we know very little about most of these women or how they influenced him.[4]

A second factor is that Edwards (d. 1758) lived in an era before the more progressive outlooks that sparked the American Revolution and other social transformations of the next century were

[4]Esther Edwards Burr is the one exception. See Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker, eds., *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754–1757* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

ivp | InterVarsity Press

considerable factors in public discourse. That meant that he, his wife, Sarah, and his family took for granted some attitudes that most twenty-first-century people regard as mistaken. For instance, instead of assuming, as most of us do, that all people should be, as much as possible, afforded equal opportunities, they assumed that—as had been true throughout almost all history—societies should be arranged hierarchically and that normally men should rule. One example would be that the many gifted women in the Edwards household were, as a matter of course, not allowed collegiate education.

Most jarring to our sensibilities is the troubling fact that Edwards owned probably one or two enslaved Africans most of his career, as did many other clergy and other prominent New Englanders prior to the Revolutionary era. I have offered in *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* a detailed account of what little we know about that and his views on the subject. In summary, while Edwards was wrong to have owned enslaved Africans, he was at least ahead of his time in rejecting the underlying and more lasting racism that was used to justify mistreatment of nonwhite people. Unlike the great majority of his White contemporaries, he was explicitly antiracist, affirming that Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans were "of the same human race."[5]

[5]He made this observation specifically regarding Africans, and in a sermon to the Native Americans he likewise emphasized that "we are no better than you in no respect." He also affirmed that one day there would be great African and Native American theologians. In some informal notes from the 1740s he observed that while he did not believe that slavery was prohibited in the Bible, Europeans did not have the right "to disfranchise all the nations of Africa." Nonetheless, despite his antiracist views, which were progressive for his time, he indicated that the problem of African slavery was systemic in that it was sustained by the huge economic interests in the transatlantic trade system on which all the colonists were dependent. So, living at a time when antislavery sentiments were rare, he apparently believed that there was no effective way to change that system. And,

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Further, within a few years of Edwards's death, both his son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., and his closest disciple, Samuel Hopkins, used his ethical teachings in their opposition to slavery.

While we can acknowledge that Edwards was wrong regarding slave owning, that fault surely does not nullify the value of his insights on many other matters. One good working principle in life is to recognize that we can learn things from people who have serious blind spots and moral failings even while we may criticize those shortcomings. And such attitudes of generosity should be especially evident regarding the blind spots of people in other eras who lived in circumstances that we only dimly understand. If we did not accept the principle that we can learn profound things from people who have serious flaws and inconsistencies, then we could not learn from anyone—excepting Jesus. And no one could learn from us.

A third factor that is particularly striking for understanding Edwards's life is that he lived much of it on the American frontier. Northampton was on the western edge of the British settlements. So Edwards's experiences were very much shaped by living in the conflicts among three powers contending for the same territories: the British, the French, and the various Native Americans whom the Europeans had displaced. Periodically during his lifetime, conflicts among these groups broke out into fierce warfare, usually as extensions of European wars. Northampton sometimes had to be fortified in fear of attack from the Native Americans. And in Stockbridge, keeping peace with the local

---

he observed, even those who did not own slaves were supporting the system by buying products produced by slaves. See George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 255-58 and 385 for a fuller account and documentation regarding his views on slavery and race.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Native Americans was always a primary concern. Many of the other Native Americans were allied with the French. During the French and Indian War of the 1750s, the Edwards family was in particular danger. On occasion, cannon fire could be heard from the Edwards's home.

A fourth factor for understanding Edwards in his own time is that his British loyalties, especially during these times of periodic warfare, were heightened by the fact that he saw Great Britain as the primary defender of the Protestant cause within Christendom and particularly in North America. In the two centuries since the Reformation, Christendom had been bitterly divided between Protestants and Catholics, and that still shaped many people's political and national loyalties. Edwards's intense Protestant partisanship led him to his postmillennial interpretations of the Bible, in which the defeat of the pope as antichrist played a pivotal role.

Finally, relating to his lasting influence, there is a positive side to Edwards having lived at the time he did. Some of his most fundamental insights arise in the context of living at a turning point between two historical eras. Born in New England in 1703, he was reared in a world in which much of the premodern Puritan outlook of the previous century was still intact. Yet he was also living at the dawn of what we now see as the modern era. So at the same time that he was growing up in a little town, in a sheltered and old-fashioned Puritan environment, he was also coming of age in a colony of Great Britain just as that nation was emerging as an epicenter of the revolutionary new scientifically based thought. While still in his teens, Jonathan became thoroughly acquainted with both outlooks. As a precocious child, he

ivp | InterVarsity Press

early became acquainted with the Puritan theology of his father's preaching, teaching, and theological library. Then, at college in his teens, he immersed himself in the works of Isaac Newton and John Locke, who were revolutionizing the thought of his day. As his protégé, friend, and first biographer, Samuel Hopkins, put it, Edwards said concerning John Locke's volume on human understanding that he "had more satisfaction and pleasure in studying it, than the most greedy miser in gathering up handfuls of silver and gold from some newly discovered treasure."[6] He also eagerly read the witty observations and intelligence from the world of sophisticated thought in the fashionable British journal *The Spectator*, edited by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Such reading helped keep him current with a wide range of science, metaphysics, and philosophy, all the elements in what we now call "the Enlightenment." In his private notebooks of his late teen years, we find highly sophisticated reflections on how the modern outlooks fit with the ancient theology.

Creative insights involve seeing things in new ways. Often crosscultural experiences may trigger such insight—as when a visitor from a very different culture notices things that we may not see. Similarly, great thinkers who lived at dramatic turning points in their civilization have particularly profound insights as a result. Augustine is the classic case in point. Living, as he did, to witness the demise of the Roman Empire and a crisis in ancient thought as Christendom was taking shape, he offered

[6]Samuel Hopkins, *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (S. Kneeland: Boston, 1765) as reprinted in *Jonathan Edwards: A Profile*, ed. David Levin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 5-6.

profound insight on both theology and civilization. Jonathan Edwards was in a similar position. Some of his most acute inspirations arise from his being there at the dawn of a new age that still helps shape our own. Yet he also was heir to many centuries of Christian thought that had occupied some of the greatest thinkers of the Western world. Furthermore, the international Reformed or Calvinist network of theologians in which he was immersed had been—for the past century and a half—second to none in its intellectual rigor. Much of Edwards's most creative work involves reflections on how these two outlooks might illumine each other, especially in how classic Christianity might help challenge some of the most basic underlying assumptions of modernity. As we shall see, many of his best spiritual and intellectual insights remain illuminating for Christians today.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/an-infinite-fountain-of-light

ivp | InterVarsity Press