

Jonathan Edwards

A. Background

1. He was reared in a godly home, a brilliant young man (perhaps a genius) who graduated from Yale as a teenager.
2. Edwards was converted around 1721 while at Yale after reading I Timothy 1:17. He wrote, "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 any thing 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 for ever!"
3. His main ministry was in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he began as assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who had enjoyed several revivals ("harvests") in his ministry.

B. Contribution

1. He saw his first remarkable revival in 1734, which led to his first writings about revival and caught the attention of Europeans such as John Wesley and George Whitefield.
2. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"; Enfield, Connecticut 1741
 - a. This sermon was based on "Their foot shall slide in due time" (Deuteronomy 32:35), Moses' powerful declaration of the wrath that will certainly overtake the wicked.
 - b. It is his most famous sermon, although in part because people like to caricature Puritans, Edwards, and biblical preachers in general as "breathing out hellfire and brimstone." It was not necessarily typical of his sermons – Edwards also preached often on the beauties and joys of salvation (e.g., "They who come to Christ come to a banqueting-house where they may rest, and where they may feast.").
 - c. Sample: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire... O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in; it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath

is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell.”

- d. A hearer of the sermon wrote in his diary: “There was a great moaning and crying out through the whole House – ‘What Shall I do to be Saved – oh I am going to Hell – Oh what shall I do’ ... so that the minister was obliged to desist... Amazing and Astonishing the power of God was seen.”
3. “Theologian of Revival”
 - a. One contribution of Edwards was restoring the place of emotion to religion by stressing the biblical nature of the word *heart*.
 - 1) In Scripture, “heart” is the seat of the entire inner person (emotion, reason, and will) not just the emotions. (“Bowels,” strange as it sounds to us, is the seat of emotion in biblical imagery – cf. “bowels of compassion” in I John 3:17.)
 - 2) “That if thou ... shalt believe in thine *heart* that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9). All the elements come together – reason (belief in the resurrection), emotion (trust), and will.
 - b. In doing this, Edwards avoided two dangerous extremes:
 - 1) Too large a place to emotions – the danger we often recognize; emotions must be attached to reason.
 - 2) Too small a place to emotion (the rationalist, “unenthusiastic tenor of the times – “the Age of Reason”). Emotions cannot be separated from the rational. Emotional appeal in religion is not wrong as long as it is not totally emotional or unreasonably emotional.
 - 3) Consider the soaring majesty of Edwards’ “conversion verse,” we realize that biblically, both the head *and* the heart must be engaged in worship and service.

C. Later Years

1. Edwards became convinced that the Half-Way Covenant was wrong, that only those truly converted could be church members and present their children for baptism. For this, and other reasons, Northampton dismissed him. But his position was a natural result of the teaching he promoted – no Christianity without conversion.
2. He pastored for several years in Stockbridge, a small church on the Massachusetts’ frontier, where he also served as a missionary to the Indians. Here he wrote some of his most famous works, such as *Freedom of the Will*.

3. Called to become president of Princeton, he died shortly thereafter from a smallpox vaccination.
4. Edwards, not Spinoza, was truly “the God-intoxicated man,” as his conversion account illustrates. Another illustration is his disagreement with the thinkers of his age concerning the nature of the universe.
 - a. Most Enlightenment leaders, and even most Christians, pictured the universe as a machine set in motion by God and governed by natural laws. (Christians, at least, allowed for miracles.)
 - b. Edwards argued that the universe owed its existence to the constant activity of Christ, who “upholdeth all things by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3) and by whom “all things consist” (Colossians 1:17). Our very existence, and certainly our religious life, is a constant dependence on Him.
5. Edwards’ contribution to the Great Awakening lay in his advertising and defending it in his writing, in his theological explanation (showing that it was biblical and not simply fanatical emotionalism), and in serving as a minister of the revival in his preaching.