

## Jonathan Edwards: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about Jonathan Edwards

Steven Gertz and Chris Armstrong

### Evangelical Co-founder

A man was born three months before Edwards and an ocean away who was to share the New England divine's twin passions for the church and the life of the mind. That man was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. The two never met, but they labored for their Lord on two continents, together helping to birth the movement called "evangelicalism." Wesley read Edwards appreciatively and reprinted his *Religious Affections*, revising where the Puritan theologian's Calvinism was most strongly expressed.

### Revival Mediator

Edwards, a strong supporter of the Great Awakening, nevertheless took a cautious view of what went on in the revivals. On one hand, Edwards criticized the Awakening enthusiast James Davenport, who hotly insisted that many New England ministers were in fact unconverted and bound for hell, and who once burned a pile of classic Christian texts he considered insufficiently spiritual. On the other, Edwards debated the Boston rationalist clergyman Charles Chauncy, who argued true religion was a matter of the mind rather than the heart. "We should distinguish the good from the bad," instructed Edwards, "and not judge of the whole by a part" (see p. 42).

### Chocolate Addict

Consumed as a beverage usually at breakfast, "cakes" of chocolate were in steady demand in the Edwards household. The family often had to rely on travelers to Boston to procure it. In one letter, Edward begs the courier to save some of the chocolate he paid for. "If you will bring what remains," he wrote, "you will much oblige your humble servant."

### Missionary to Mohicans

Most people don't associate Jonathan Edwards with James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. But during Edwards's stint in Stockbridge, Mohican children boarded at the mission school, and his son Jonathan spent a year in Mohican villages learning the language. Unfortunately, an arsonist burned the school down two years after Edwards's arrival, and the French and Indian War broke out shortly after. The Mohicans abandoned Stockbridge, some to fight alongside the English and others to settle in Moravian towns (see p. 38).

### Sabbath Progenitor?

Of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards's eleven children, the first four were all born on Sundays. This caused the people of Northampton to enjoy some merriment at their pastor's expense, as folklore had it that a child was born on the same weekday it was conceived.

### Kindred Spirit

Edwards was not the only one to enjoy revival in 1735; a group of students and recent graduates at Yale College also experienced a movement of the Spirit. One of these was Aaron Burr, Sr., later husband of Edwards's daughter Esther and father of the notorious Aaron Burr, Jr., second vice-president of the United States. In good Puritan fashion, Burr, Sr. first felt "polluted by nature and practice" and "almost concluded that my day of grace was past," and then had an experience in which God revealed to him "in the Gospel, an all-sufficient and willing Saviour." Burr eventually became Princeton College's second president, and when he died in 1757, Edwards took his place.

## Hedonist?

Rarely are the terms "Puritan" and "hedonist" put together, but Baptist pastor and author John Piper claims that Edwards was a hedonist. (That's a compliment.) Throughout *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, Piper draws heavily on Edwards in arguing that "the pursuit of virtue must be, in some measure, a pursuit of happiness. ... In all virtuous acts we pursue the enjoyment of the glory of God, and more specifically, the enjoyment of the presence and the promotion of God's glory."

As Edwards himself puts it in *Charity and Its Fruits*: "It is not contrary to Christianity that a man should love himself or, which is the same thing, should love his own happiness. That a man should love his own happiness, is as necessary to his nature as the faculty of the will is" (see p. 42 for more on Edwards, happiness, and self-love).

## Inspirational Biographer

Among his many writings, Edwards may be most widely known for his sensitive editing of David Brainerd's journal. *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, like *A Faithful Narrative*, has never gone out of print. The book records the heroic labors of this young missionary to the Indians, who died of tuberculosis at the age of 29, in the arms of his fiancée, Edwards's daughter Jerusha. It galvanized the early American missions movement and inspired thousands worldwide—including the Baptist missionary leader William Carey—with its challenge to holiness and sacrifice.

## Vaccination Victim

Edwards died from an inoculation to ward off smallpox, just after taking the presidency at Princeton. At the time, most physicians followed some variety of a practice called variolation when vaccinating patients. In one method, doctors took scabs from an infected person and blew them down the nostrils of a healthy one. Two to three percent of those variolated died. Forty years after Edwards's death, English physician Edward Jenner vastly improved the vaccine when he discovered that people exposed to cowpox, a less serious disease, more effectively resisted smallpox.

## Jonathan Edwards: From the Editor - Papa Edwards

Chris Armstrong

Conversion. Revival. Biblical authority. A warm-hearted faith touching all areas of personal and social life. Billy Graham believes in these things. So did Billy Sunday, D. L. Moody, and Charles Finney. And so do countless others today who would place themselves in the Protestant family tree most often termed "evangelical."

If you had to put someone at the very root of this tree, who would it be?

For my money, one of the two top contenders for the title "Evangelical Patriarch" is Jonathan Edwards. (The other is John Wesley.)

Edwards's preaching—aimed at breaking down and converting a group of Yankees who saw religion as more or less a do-it-yourself project—helped spark the first flames of the Great Awakening, the "mother" of all revivals on this side of the Atlantic.

The Bible was his constant guide as he reworked the grand theological tradition of Puritanism for an Enlightened age and as he taught a religion not just of doctrines but also of whole-hearted love for God.

He expected and encouraged a thorough moral reformation in every person truly converted as a result of the revivals of his day, and his teachings inspired a reformation in American education and society.

But his strongest claim to the title "father of evangelicalism" comes from the transatlantic influence of a single book, ***A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God***.

Mark Noll tells the story compellingly in a forthcoming book on the emergence of evangelicalism during the eighteenth century to be published by InterVarsity Press.

In November of 1734, Edwards, concerned by what he saw as a spreading tendency among Connecticut River Valley Christians to rely on their own abilities in seeking salvation from God, preached a two-sermon series on "Justification by Faith Alone."

In response came what Edwards later called, in grateful awe, a "surprising work of God." The people in Northampton and the surrounding area were, he said, "seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation; all the talk in all companies, and upon occasions was upon the things of religion, and no other talk was anywhere relished; and scarcely a single person in the whole town was left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. ...

"Those ... that had the greatest conceit of their own reason, the highest families in the town, and the oldest persons in the town, and many little children were affected remarkably; no one family that I know of, and scarcely a person, has been exempt."

Edwards organized small groups to encourage those experiencing such concern, and soon hundreds were "brought to a lively sense of the excellency of Jesus Christ and his sufficiency and willingness to save

sinner, and to be much weaned in their affections from the world." The revival spilled over into 1735, touching some 25 Massachusetts and Connecticut communities before its intensity began to wane that spring.

Even as the Northampton revival was abating, a member of John and Charles Wesley's Oxford "Holy Club," the evangelist George Whitefield, was experiencing his own deep conviction and conversion. Along with the Wesley brothers and others, Whitefield soon witnessed in England similar scenes of heightened religious concern and widespread conversion—events culminating in that country's "evangelical awakening."

Although the events in Connecticut and Massachusetts transformed the communal life of many towns in that area, they might have remained only local lore but for a request made by a Boston minister, Benjamin Colman, for a report. Edwards wrote a short response, Colman passed it on to friends in London, and soon the British were writing back, asking eagerly for more details.

Two years later, an enlarged and edited version of Edwards's report reached a London printer (one of the editors was the renowned British hymn-writer Isaac Watts), who published it as the ***Faithful Narrative***. Soon the book was capturing the imaginations of thousands (including John Wesley and the Welsh evangelist Howell Harris, both of whom devoured Edwards's revival account and recorded their impressions in their journals).

From that day to this, it has never gone out of print.

Why?

What the ***Narrative*** provided to the dynamic but scattered transatlantic revival of the mid-1700s was a pattern. As Christian leaders on both sides of the ocean celebrated, fostered, and organized the revival that was bringing new life to pew-sitters and salvation to the unchurched, they found in Edwards's book a sort of evangelical Baedeker's, Hoyle's, and ***Joy of Cooking*** rolled into one. The ***Faithful Narrative*** was not merely an inspirational account, but a complete map, guidebook, and how-to manual covering the preparation, onset, maintenance, regulation, dangers, and effects of revival—all, of course, with the understanding that the work of conversion was finally God's alone.

In Noll's words, Edwards provided, at the crucial moment of evangelicalism's birth, "a template for how conversions would proceed and for how they could effect social renewal." Everywhere, "evangelical preaching was inspiring the formation of local, predominately lay-led societies for the provision of spiritual nurture and community among those who were, or who would be, converted." The leaders of these societies held in one hand, as often as not, a copy of Edwards's little book.

So if you identify with the tradition of evangelicalism that emerged out of the awakenings of the eighteenth century, take another look at the man on the cover of this magazine. Then practice saying, "Hi, dad!"

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## A Modern Puritan

Edwards bestowed the riches of Puritanism on a world shaped by the Enlightenment.

The Editors

Modern Puritan." That's an oxymoron, right? Puritans, with their ultra-serious obsession with getting every detail of the Christian life just right, seem an anachronism in today's free-and-easy America. In this world, religion has become, for many, an accessory—like the frontier town that supposedly distributed the advertisement for a new minister: "Wanted: A man who takes his religion like his drink—in moderation."

That's certainly not Jonathan Edwards.

This is the man who, as a boy, built little forts in the woods to hold—not settlers-and-Indians games, but prayer meetings with his friends. He is the precocious 13-year-old entering Yale University (then called the Collegiate School), who bucked a trend among the students away from the Puritan faith of the college's founders and towards an elite Anglican rationalism—affirming instead the Reformed orthodoxy of his forebears.

Later, in true Puritan fashion, Edwards made a long list of spiritual and moral "Resolutions," reminding him to dwell each day on his own death and eternal destiny and to bring his every emotion, thought, and action in line with the Word of God:

48. Resolved, constantly, with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the strictest scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my soul, that I may know whether I have truly an interest in Christ or no; that when I come to die, I may not have any negligence respecting this to repent of.

But at Yale, Edwards also read and interacted with Locke, Newton, and all the "New Learning" of the Enlightenment. Many of his early writings were on scientific topics. He saw the physical world as charged with the glory of God. And he made a lifetime study of the inner mechanics of religious psychology.

As a young man freshly installed in his first pastorate, his college courses behind him, Edwards determined to leave no question unexamined in his quest for a more thorough, "scientific" understanding of God's Truth:

11. Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances don't hinder.

One modern biographer, Ola Winslow, echoed the assessment of countless others when she said she had met in the pages of Edwards's books "one of the great original minds of America."

Yet, as original and, in some senses, "modern" as he clearly was, Edwards never stopped being a Puritan. His interest in the weighty matters of theology and the fine shadings of religious experience was never merely speculative or abstract. A preacher foremost, he studied and communicated the repository of Reformed theology as a living thing.

The distinguished American sociologist Robert Bellah has called Edwards "the last Protestant theologian before the twentieth century to have in his control the entire imaginative resources of the Christian tradition." A child of the Puritans, a brother of the Enlightenment thinkers, Edwards bestowed the riches of the former on the modern world created by the latter.

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## A Mind on Fire

Throughout his eventful life, America's theologian was driven by a vision of the beauty in God's sovereignty.

Stephen R. Holmes

A battered file box, deep in the basement of Yale University's Beinecke Library, contains a startling memorial to the final years of Jonathan Edwards's life.

In other similar boxes, stacks of notebooks contain in their neat pages crisp rows of Edwards's spidery handwriting. Their content is remarkable: profound, vivid, masterfully argued, piercingly clear—the fruit of a lifetime of fervent thinking about the nature of God, humankind, and the world. But their physical form is unremarkable.

Not so the notebooks contained in this box. One after another is stitched together from a riot of scrap paper: Half a page of a friend's letter, left blank under the signature. The wide margin of a Boston newspaper. Several large sheets with semi-circles cut out of them.

Across these makeshift pages runs Edwards's cursive script—tiny, cramped. It crawls from edge to edge of the paper, even between the lines of newsprint, wasting no fraction of white space.

These notebooks date from the great theologian's Stockbridge phase—the period between 1751 and 1758. Ejected from his comfortable Connecticut Valley church after 21 years of loyal service, Edwards eked out these years with his wife and seven of their children at a mission church on Massachusetts's western frontier. There, paper was presumably scarce, expensive, or both.

Some of the sheets sewn together in the Stockbridge notebooks were off-cuts from the manufacture of paper fans, which his children decorated and sold to add a few dollars to the family coffer. The other scraps would once have landed in the rubbish pile—but they could not be wasted any more.

In thriving Northampton, the pastor-theologian had enjoyed the resources of a prominent pastorate in a major New England town (though his salary, as he complained, was not always paid on time). Now he wrote his most influential intellectual works on such scraps, between preaching to a small congregation, catechizing converts among the Housatonic Indians and other tribes, and championing these Native Americans' rights against the area's powerful merchants.

***The Freedom of the Will, True Virtue, Original Sin***—how often, as he scratched out the ideas for these great treatises on the pages of his patchwork notebooks, was his work interrupted by worries about whether there would be vegetables and meat enough for the week's meals, or how he would afford the wood necessary to mend a fence?

## Born again through beauty

Timothy and Esther Edwards had 11 children. Jonathan, the fifth, was the only son, born October 5, 1703. If, in New England, to be a minister was to be an aristocrat, he came from good stock. Timothy, a third-generation New Englander, served his East Windsor parish faithfully and ably; Esther's father was Solomon Stoddard, whose decades of ministry in Northampton added luster to an already noble New England family.

What we know of Edwards's childhood suggests that he was religiously serious even then, although he judged himself unconverted: the building of little dens in the woods is hardly unusual behavior for a young boy, but using them to hold prayer meetings alone or with friends certainly is!

Edwards describes his own conversion as an event that was not fundamentally intellectual (that is, about understanding the gospel in any better way) or even moral (that is, about desiring to follow Christ), but aesthetic: doctrines of God's absolute sovereignty, which had appeared "repugnant" to him, suddenly seemed beautiful. Both the defense of Calvinism as an essential part of Christianity, and conceptions of beauty, became lasting features of his theology, which suggests how significant this event was in his life.

He was conscious that he had come to faith in an unusual way, and this concerned him. He records having doubts about his conversion because he could not fit his experience to the standard Puritan maps of the way God leads a troubled soul to salvation.

### **Distinguished saints**

From his conversion onward, Edwards remained fascinated with the problem of how to tell whether a Christian's professed faith was truly real and saving. He contemplated the question throughout the Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, and eventually gave the subject his fullest and most influential treatment in his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746). Why was the question of such concern to him?

First, Edwards inherited a common Puritan concern about "temporary faith." This idea, introduced by John Calvin, is a way of explaining the fact that church members sometimes fall away after years of faithful service, even though the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints ("once saved, always saved") insists that true Christians cannot fall away. The way of squaring this circle was to suggest that there is something that looks like true faith but is not—temporary faith. Thus, finding distinguishing marks of true faith becomes a necessity.

Second, Puritans responded to this problem by identifying a particular set of steps in a particular order as "the" way to salvation. Edwards disagreed with this aspect of the tradition. It fitted neither his own experience nor his pastoral observation. Thus, when he discussed how to identify true faith, he was sometimes aiming a critique at this tradition—a tradition now remote for most modern readers.

Third, in his cultural context, Edwards believed—as many still do—that fallen humanity is inherently religious. There is that within us that desires spiritual fulfillment; as Augustine put it, "thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee." However, while today unsaved "seekers" for religious satisfaction might find it in myriad fashionable religious practices, in Edwards's New England, options were limited. Such seekers likely dwelt in the margins of the church, where they might appear to be zealous Christians while actually not being Christ-centered at all. Thus the issue of genuineness confronted the pastor in unavoidable ways.

So Edwards aimed to identify "The Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God."

### **The makings of genius**

That all lay in the future, however. Meanwhile, Edwards went to the Collegiate School, a new and troubled college, later to be called Yale, to train for the ministry. After graduating, he served, from 1723 to 1726, a Presbyterian congregation in New York. Then he came back to Yale to teach. While there, he suffered serious ill health.

Some time during this period, Edwards read and was deeply influenced by Locke's *Essay Concerning*



## ***Human Understanding.***

The precise date is difficult to determine, but a story told by one of his first biographers, which had a precocious, teenaged Jonathan reading it "with great delight and profit," is almost certainly false. (It was based in part on an assumption that a philosophical notebook Edwards kept, *Notes on the Mind*, was written very early in his career. Recent chemical analyses of the inks used in that notebook show that the entries in fact span his adult life. We can also now trace with some exactness when copies of Locke's work arrived at Yale, which again casts doubt on the older story.)

This is important, as Edwards has been painted as a precocious philosophical genius who failed to live up to his early promise when the fetters of anti-intellectual Calvinist theology gripped him. In fact, his philosophical development occurred alongside his theological development, and his thought in each of these areas deeply influenced the other.

## **Revival!**

In 1726, Solomon Stoddard celebrated his eighty-third birthday. His congregation, feeling their pastor needed some assistance, called Stoddard's young grandson to his side. A year later Edwards joined Sarah Pierrepont in what has become a fabled marriage (see p. 23), marked as it was by mutual support and admiration, not to mention a remarkable line of illustrious descendants.

Edwards's ministry was deemed acceptable, and when Stoddard died in 1729, his grandson was called to succeed him. He pastored the congregation for 21 years, through momentous times.

While local revivals of religion were not unusual in New England (Stoddard had seen five in his ministry), what began in Northampton in 1734 was something new. For six months through the winter, the town was seized by a deep and serious concern for religion. More than 300 professed to be converted; in Edwards's words, "the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy. ... There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. ... God's day was a delight ... everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth."

This spirit flowed out from Northampton and touched almost every community in the Connecticut River Valley.

Too soon, it came to an end. Edwards labored to re-ignite the flame, but that work belonged to another. On September 14, 1740 George Whitefield landed at Rhode Island. He announced his reason for coming by preaching six times in the first three days of his visit, and for two years following, religious fervor was common across New England.

Edwards took his part in the preaching, but his more significant contribution, perhaps, was a series of books defending the revivals against both those who would have no emotion in their religion, and those who would have nothing but emotion in theirs.

## **Sermons that sparked the flame**

In Edwards's mind there was no doubt what, under God, led to the beginning of this Great Awakening, and he later published five of his sermons that had sparked the original excitement in 1734. These are carefully argued defenses of various aspects of Calvinist doctrines related to salvation. Each ends with an application, to be sure, but they are mainly composed of theological argument.

Reading them today, we might find it difficult to believe that the hearers remained awake, let alone

responded as they did. Of course, compared to most modern churchgoers, Edwards's congregation would have been more used to following doctrinal sermons. And Edwards himself was clearly an able rhetorician. He also streamlined the form considerably. While his father, Timothy Edwards, had apparently once announced "and sixty-sixthly ..." from the pulpit, Jonathan developed and applied only a handful of points in each sermon.

There is more, however, to the reaction of Edwards's "awakened" hearers. Take his most famous composition, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741).

Rhetorically, "Sinners" is stunning: it recalls a then-current style of sermons preached to condemned criminals just before their execution, during which the minister would stress their imminent encounter with God and exhort them to repent. Such sermons were often published, so most would have recognized the genre.

In a shocking move, Edwards applied this form to his hearers in Enfield, emphasizing the sinfulness of even respectable church folk. As he hammered home the instability of their position before God, whose hand alone held them from immediate death and the judgment that followed, he was in effect comparing them to condemned murderers.

The form of the sermon echoes and reinforces its content in a magnificent way. But that is not the source of its power, or at least not the only source. We can know this because, a few weeks before preaching at Enfield to the accompaniment of the screams of convicted sinners and the joyful weeping of new converts, Edwards had preached virtually the same sermon (we have his manuscript and can see how few amendments were made) to his own flock in Northampton. But his flock responded only, as far as we know, by shaking his hand and saying "fine word, pastor" as they went home to lunch.

All of this reinforces Edwards's own analysis of the revivals: the word is the occasion for awakening, and a necessary one, but the Spirit of God does the work, and he "blows where he wills." His passing could be seen in lasting changes: People made humble, faithful, prayerful, holy. Churches made earnest in worship and hungry for the word. Towns where, to quote Charles Simeon, a century later, "goodness" became "fashionable."

Screams, faintings and other such spectacular phenomena were nothing either way: they did not demonstrate the Spirit's presence, and they did not preclude it either. Such was Edwards's final analysis of the revivals in *The Religious Affections* (1746).

### **Rejection, exile, and prolific publishing**

By the time this work was published, however, the Awakening had subsided. Edwards found it necessary to encourage the nascent transatlantic evangelical community, in print, to unite in prayer that God might renew his work.

On the home front, things were even bleaker, as the Northampton pastor found himself engaged in controversies over church order that would lead to his expulsion from his pulpit (see p. 35). On July 1, 1750, with no post to move on to, Edwards preached his farewell sermon to the church at Northampton.

He explored various possibilities, including a move to Scotland—he would have no problem subscribing to the Presbyterian scheme, he assured his regular correspondents there.

But he eventually accepted a call to Stockbridge, a post combining missionary endeavor among the Housatonic Indians there with pastoral duties to a small church composed of the New Englanders who lived in the town.

In August 1751 he was installed. The family endured just under seven years of hardship there, during which time Jonathan, bearing all the marks of worldly failure in his poverty and dismissal from his pastorate, produced a series of works that make him arguably still the greatest philosopher or theologian to have been born on the North American continent.

His output there was prodigious. Some works were responses to old controversies (the ***Humble Enquiry and Misrepresentations Corrected***, which addressed the disputes which had led to his removal from Northampton).

Others, not intended for publication, reflected his interest in the End Times, with analyses of how wars against Catholic Spain might fulfill prophecies in the Apocalypse (Edwards was of a generation that never thought to question the identification of the Pope as the Antichrist).

Two sets of works are particularly important, however: his private notebooks and his projected defense of Calvinism.

### **A checkerboard coat**

Throughout his life, Edwards wrote copiously in various notebooks, recording quotations, observations, ideas, and arguments on every conceivable subject.

His ***Miscellanies***, the largest and most important of these, are only now being published, a rich mine of general theological fare. But there are others: a book devoted solely to controversial subjects in which he was interested; the ***Blank Bible***, a small Bible in which he sewed a large sheet between every pair of pages, so he could record notes and comments on texts next to them; and so on.

For most of his life (though this seems to have changed somewhat during the Stockbridge years) he took such notes principally to help him develop sermons. When out riding, he would scribble his thoughts on scraps of paper as they struck him, then pin them to his coat. One of his early biographers gives us the wonderful image of the stern Puritan pastor arriving at his door after an intellectually fruitful trip, with his black coat a checkerboard.

Two sets of notebooks are particularly interesting: First, Edwards's belief that everything in nature and history spoke of Christ and his gospel, if only it was rightly understood, shines forth from a series of books on "Images," "Types," or "Shadows" of divine things (see p. 40).

In these he suggests, for example, that springtime's gradual progress is ordained by God to illustrate the gradual increase of the Kingdom on earth, and that the "filth" in which newly born babies are covered is God's way of stressing to us the sinfulness and guilt that is theirs even from birth.

Second, the ***Miscellanies*** are perhaps the center of the notes and can be used to trace the development of ideas that finally appeared in print, or would have, had he lived, as well as his exploration and rejection of other positions. Edwards struggled with concepts and changed his mind regularly on certain issues, all the while striving to be more and more faithful to the gospel of Christ. He recorded the whole process in books we can now read.

### **The pinnacle**

The defense of Calvinism produced three of Edwards's greatest works. Of these, The ***Freedom of the Will*** is perhaps the pinnacle. Had he written nothing else, this one book would have ensured his fame.

The main argument of the book is ethical: he sets out to prove that the Calvinist account of predestined

humanity is—far from a moral abomination—morality's greatest support. Better than the alternative views, it holds human beings responsible for their actions.

On the way to this point, Edwards pauses to develop an argument for why freedom and predestination are essentially compatible. Though a mere introduction to his main argument, this is the most intellectually powerful such defense ever published.

The companion volume, *Original Sin*, is a solid and cogent defense of that controversial doctrine, mostly on biblical grounds.

The third work is one that Edwards never published. To see why, we need to return to the events of his life.

After seven years of exile at Stockbridge, Jonathan Edwards's intellectual stature was finally recognized, and he was invited to become president of the college in Princeton.

At first his humility caused him to balk. But after seeking advice, he accepted and went ahead of his family to the town. Smallpox was then rife, and Edwards received vaccination on February 23, 1758. That science was in its infancy, however, and he contracted the disease. He never recovered.

### Voicing the vision

At his death, a work sat on his desk, ready to go to the printer. This was *Two Dissertations*. One part of this book, titled "True Virtue," is a profound theological analysis of ethics. In it, Edwards argues (against all cultural fashions of the day) that goodness can never be separated from godliness; so that which is not done to serve Christ in any way should not be called good.

The book's other part, "A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," is the closest Edwards ever got to expressing the heart and soul of his theology, his piety, and his life.

Why did God create the world? Edwards had worried over this question all his life, recording his successive analyses in the *Miscellanies*. What did God gain by having a creation? What caused his desire to do so?

Edwards traced the question to many of its dead ends, and his mature analysis is profound:

God gains nothing from creating, as God's happiness in himself is so perfect that it cannot be added to. But the perception of the beauty of God's perfection—his glory—is a great good; so God desired there to be intelligent creatures who could see his glory and respond with ecstatic joy, with abundant love, with extravagant praise. Everything that God has done tends toward this single end.

As a young man, Edwards had found faith in Christ when he glimpsed the beauty of God's sovereignty through nature. That vision drove much of what he said and thought thereafter. And now, at last, he found doctrines to express the vision's meaning.

These towering works were the mere run-up to a projected magnum opus. Edwards had in mind a synthesis of Christian doctrine and ethics, arranged historically.

This work would have ranked (there is every reason to suppose) alongside Aquinas's *Summa*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and few others in theological history. But his death, on March 22, 1758, at age 54, killed that Edwardsian *Summa* at its birth.

Jonathan Edwards's last words encapsulated his life. First he spoke of his love for Sarah and urged his

children to find faith in God. Then he asked that he not be given an elaborate funeral but that what money was available be given to charity. And then he looked once more to Jesus.

To those around, it seemed he had lapsed into unconsciousness, and they spoke freely of the loss that the college, and God's church, would have to bear. He heard still, and he spoke one last sentence: "Trust in God, and you need not fear."

To this, his last and briefest sermon, what could or should be added?

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Devoted Disciplinarian

Pastor Edwards spared neither loving care nor the rod.

Richard A. Bailey

In February 1740, Jonathan Edwards addressed an ordination sermon to the congregation of Cold Spring, Massachusetts. He reminded their new pastor, Edward Billing, that God had not left it to ministers to determine their mission.

"Ministers," proclaimed the Northampton divine, "are only sent on his errand. They are to preach the preaching that he bids them. He has put into their hands a Book containing a summary of doctrine and bids them go and preach that Word."

Just as the Word they preached came from beyond them, often clashing with merely human assumptions, so—Edwards believed—did the care of souls. Soft comfort must be mixed, at times, with hard challenge.

Such a time was the occasion of Edwards's accession to his Northampton pastorate. On February 11, 1729, the town had lost two prominent spiritual leaders—their minister of the previous 57 years, Solomon Stoddard, and their ruling elder, Ebenezer Strong.

Though sympathetic with the grief of his congregation, Northampton's new spiritual leader saw these deaths as signs of God's displeasure, and he pled for the townsfolk to repent:

"Let us consider what we have done to displease God. ... It should now be everyone's work to reflect on himself, to view his past life, to be looking into his own heart and turning his feet into God's testimonies."

From his earliest days as their pastor, Edwards mixed assurances of God's loving care for his covenanted people with stern reminders of what that covenant required of its human beneficiaries.

### Pastoral care but not coddling

Impressions of sternness—even coldness and distance—were reinforced by a decision Edwards made at the outset of his 21-year ministry at Northampton. He resolved not to pay the customary pastoral visits to his congregants, but rather to come to their side only when called in cases of sickness or other emergency.

His "disciple" Samuel Hopkins wrote that Edwards based this decision on a clear-eyed assessment of his own gifts. He simply decided that he was unable to match the graceful gregariousness of those ministers who had a "knack at introducing profitable, religious discourse in a free, natural, and ... undesigned way." Thus, he felt he would "do the greatest good to souls ... by preaching and writing, and conversing with persons under religious impressions in his study, where he encouraged all such to repair."

Hopkins remembered warmly the Northampton pastor's affection and concern for his people: "For their good he was always writing, contriving, labouring; for them he had poured out ten thousand fervent prayers; and they were dear to him above any other people under heaven."

Throughout the famous Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, the study at Edwards's home was "thronged," Hopkins said, with people seeking to "lay open their spiritual concerns to him." Edwards counseled them all.

Edwards also carefully and methodically catechized the town's young people. Based on his acquaintance with the children, Edwards crafted questions suited to their ages and abilities.

For example, Roger Clap's "short son" was to know that during Jehoram's reign the worship of Baal was first established in Judah. Questions were often personalized. Edwards expected Zadok Lyman to know something of his namesake, "Zadok that Solomon made high priest." Edwards examined African American children as well, for example asking "Amos, Negro" to number the kings who reigned in Judah after the captivity of the ten tribes.

During the revival years, Edwards continued performing all of the regular duties of a minister to his flock—among them, some forty weddings. Some of these involved young people he had counseled and catechized, such as Zadok Lyman, who wed Sarah Clark on January 31, 1745.

In addition to giving his parishioners spiritual counsel, teaching their children, and uniting them in marriage, Edwards encouraged their intellectual development by lending out his books. In the early 1730s, at least nine among his congregation received books from Edwards's personal library, ranging from a catechism by Isaac Watts to a treatise on infant baptism.

### **The kind of preaching God wants**

As the Awakening swept through Northampton, Edwards addressed what he saw as his primary pastoral responsibility—preaching. The faithful minister, he instructed, "labors to find out acceptable words and does what in him lies to speak so as to influence and affect his hearers, to see them attentive, willing to hear and learn, accepting of what he delivers with due concern to practice the same."

Like most Puritans, Edwards preached from the Bible, dividing his sermons into three sections—"Text," "Doctrine," and "Application"—each saturated with Scripture. Even his own phrasing was often strikingly biblical. He chose his words carefully for the images they created in the minds of his hearers.

Though early on, he relied on notes while preaching, Edwards came to view this habit as "a deficiency and infirmity" and so moved toward an outline format during the 1740s. His style, though restrained, was powerful.

"His words," remembered Hopkins, "often discovered a great degree of inward fervour, without much noise or external condition, and fell with great weight on the minds of his hearers."

Another person who heard him preach recalled his "power of presenting an important truth before an audience, with overwhelming weight of argument, and with such intenseness of feeling, that the whole soul of the speaker is thrown into every part of the conception and delivery."

The result, reported the observer, was that "the solemn attention of the whole audience is riveted, from the beginning to the close, and impressions are left that cannot be effaced." This admirer, at least, proclaimed Edwards "the most eloquent man I ever heard speak."

### **Open arms, blunt rebuke**

Not only did Edwards hope to see souls converted under his ministry, he also desired to create a vibrant community of professing believers. Longing for all of Northampton to experience a true religion of the

heart and mind, Edwards did not overlook the town's women, children, and slaves.

In his revival writings, he highlighted the awakening experiences of townspeople Abigail Hutchinson and another, unnamed woman who was actually his wife Sarah. He rejoiced in seeing the town's young people, like 4-year-old Phebe Palmer, who learned of the grace of God in 1735, "spend the time in talking of the excellency and dying love of Jesus Christ." And he opened the church's doors to African Americans to a degree rare in his day, admitting several black slaves as full members in the 1730s.

Edwards's concern for the spiritual welfare of his community led him to take disciplinary actions that seem harsh today, though they were common in colonial churches. One such action occurred in 1744, when several Northampton girls informed their pastor that some young men had used a midwife's manual to taunt them.

First, Edwards preached a sermon from Hebrews 12:15-16, speaking out against the sin. Then he called a church meeting. Shortly after this assembly, Edwards compiled a list of people involved or acquainted with the actions of the young men. In the days that followed, a church committee met to hear the facts about the case.

While the accused young men ridiculed the church and their pastor during the course of the proceedings, at least two of them ultimately confessed to "contemptuous behavior toward the authority of this church."

Throughout the proceedings, and indeed throughout his Northampton pastorate, Edwards defended this authority. He did this not out of pride for his position, but because he saw that when the people failed to respect the church's covenant, they often also failed to live up to their profession of faith.

### **Conditions for communion**

During his pastorate at Northampton, Edwards's understanding of this profession of faith changed. Solomon Stoddard, the town's former pastor and his maternal grandfather, had taught that the Lord's Supper was a converting ordinance, or a means by which God might impart saving grace. For the first decade or so of his ministry, Edwards agreed with his grandfather. As the fires of the Awakening cooled, however, Edwards grew concerned over the converts who failed to remain interested in spiritual matters. Consequently, he rethought his understanding of true religion and its effects on Christians.

His focus on religious affections, "the vigorous and sensible exercises" of the heart, prompted Edwards to expect religion to influence both the heart and the mind. Convinced that many of the conversions of the Awakening were counterfeit, he urged his congregation to adopt a stricter admissions policy, which required new members to profess their faith publicly before they were allowed to participate in communion. This move intensified tensions within the church and ultimately prompted his dismissal.

To Edwards, this was the price a faithful pastor must be prepared to pay for upholding an effective discipline. The stakes were too high to admit any ministerial waffling. At the ordination of David White in November 1736, he reminded his listeners that the "work of ministers is to rescue the lost souls and bring them to eternal happiness, which is the work that Christ himself came into the world upon and shed his blood for. It is to be instruments of Christ's success in the work of redemption, which God looks on and speaks of as the most glorious of all works."

Throughout his career, Edwards took with utmost seriousness this highest of callings.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

## The Trouble with George

Edwards worried that the strong emotions raised by George Whitefield's preaching would produce not steady Christians by religious hypocrites.

Chris Armstrong

It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience... . I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob."

These were the words of Sarah Edwards, in October 1740, describing British evangelist George Whitefield.

When, on February 12, 1740, Jonathan Edwards wrote to offer his pulpit to Whitefield, he no doubt hoped the British evangelist's visit would spark another revival like the one of 1734-35. But in a series of sermons Edwards preached during and after Whitefield's visit, we find that Jonathan's awe of the Grand Itinerant was more reserved than Sarah's.

Edwards's "sower" series, preached on Matthew 13:3-8 during November 1740, expresses the Northampton pastor's concern that, like many of those swept up in the excitement of the earlier revival, Whitefield's hearers might become "stony-ground hearers." Those who, in 1734-35, had been subject to the strongest emotions and told the most dramatic conversion stories had slipped soonest back into a cold, worldly state—though by belief and behavior they still seemed to be Christians.

Edwards worried that Whitefield's stirring, flamboyant preaching style was particularly apt to produce religious hypocrites. Such preaching raised the affections (the heartfelt convictions) of hearers by its force of argument, "aptness of expression," and "the fervency, and liveliness, and beautiful gestures of the preacher." But would such affections last?

"Religion that arises only from superficial impressions," said Edwards, "is wont to wither away ... when it comes to be tried by ... difficulties."

Such preaching had its place. Whitefield might scatter the seed. But it would be the pastor, Edwards, who would nourish the tender shoots and shield them from the heat of the noonday sun. Only thus would the perseverance that was the mark of true saving faith triumph in the lives of the awakened.

*Adapted from Ava Chamberlain, "The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards's Critique of George Whitefield," New England Quarterly, September 1997.*

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## Jonathan Edwards: A Gallery - The Mind Shapers

Edwards modeled himself as theologian, philosopher, and pastor after outstanding figures in each field.

Stephen J. Nichols

### John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin, the forerunner of the Reformed tradition, leaves his imprint upon Edwards in a variety of ways. The Reformer's influence especially pervades Edwards's writings and sermons on the Arminian controversy, including *Freedom of the Will* (1754) and *Original Sin* (1758).

Calvin's most significant contribution to Edwards's thought is related to the Puritan theologian's doctrine of the "new sense." While this doctrine owes something to British empiricist John Locke (see below), Edwards forged it with help from John Calvin. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote of a "sense of sweetness" (*sensus suavitatis*), that is, the believer's newfound ability, through the regenerating and illuminating work of the Spirit, to see the truth and beauty of the gospel.

Edwards uses this expression throughout his writings as he describes his new relation to God and the world. The river valley was sweet, the words of the Psalmist were sweet, the young lady in New Haven whom he would eventually marry was bestowed with the sweetness from God, and, above all, Christ's work was "sweet and glorious ... like green pastures" to his soul.

### Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729)

While Edwards learned how to preach from Puritan sermon manuals, he learned most from the "Connecticut River Valley School of Preaching." This informal school had a faculty of two: Timothy Edwards and Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan's father and maternal grandfather, respectively.

The young Edwards's grandfather wielded an impressive influence. Dubbed the "Pope of the Connecticut River Valley," he was held in such veneration that in his old age (tradition has it) a crude highway was built from Boston to Northampton to transport him to Harvard commencements.

Boston born and Harvard educated, Stoddard arrived as the second minister of the Congregational church at Northampton in 1672, holding the post until his death in 1729. Edwards joined his grandfather in 1727 as an apprentice and associate, a relationship cut short by Stoddard's death.

In the history of the Northampton church he traced in his *Faithful Narrative*, Edwards recounts five seasons of "harvests," or revivals, that contributed to the growth of that church. By the time Edwards arrived as associate minister, it had grown to be the largest church in New England outside of Boston—and Northampton had become a model Puritan town. As Edwards ascended to the pulpit and, over time, experienced his own "harvests," he saw these movements as but further waves of the revivals enjoyed during his grandfather's tenure.

Stoddard's "affectionate" preaching—aimed at moving the whole person, including heart, soul, and mind—

had contributed to these harvests. And this preaching left its mark on his young associate. It was the same sort of preaching that Edwards had heard, growing up, from his father, who ministered in East Windsor, Connecticut. As Edwards learned what the Puritans called "the art of prophesying" from these examples, he developed a respect for the power of bare rhetoric—of verbal imagery and metaphor. He learned to move congregations not by theatrics but by ideas brilliantly and vividly expressed.

Edwards did not, however, follow in his grandfather's footsteps entirely. Stoddard had handled church membership in the New England Congregationalist tradition of the Half-Way Covenant. This policy allowed for the baptism of children to parents who had not professed Christ and a fully open communion for both regenerate and unregenerate participants.

Initially Edwards followed his grandfather's practice. Eventually, however, he became convinced that the Half-Way Covenant was both unbiblical and unwise. His subsequent campaign against the policy led to his dismissal as Northampton's minister in 1750.

Visitors to Northampton will not find the house in which Edwards lived. A Roman Catholic church stands on the location. Stoddard's house, however, remains. Now a private residence, its impressive and expansive presence dominates the small hilltop overlooking the town, a lasting testimony to the watchful presence of the town's erstwhile "Pope."

### **William Ames** (1576-1633)

William Ames's influence loomed large in Old and New England, as he was the principal architect of the congregational form of church government and perhaps the most scholarly mind among the Puritans.

Edwards, like his fellow students at Yale and those at Harvard, had a standard textbook for theology: William Ames's ***The Marrow of Theology*** (1627). Students memorized the work. At any moment an upperclassman could call upon a younger colleague to recite a passage from ***The Marrow***. Those who flubbed the task got kitchen duty for the week—a strong incentive for study.

Edwards's personal copy of ***Marrow*** resides in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. He signed his name on the inside cover in 1721 and proceeded to annotate Ames's text generously.

Edwards also read, and quoted in ***Religious Affections***, Ames's ***Cases of Conscience*** (1631), a work widely influential during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Ames was known for wedding the mind with the heart, solid intellectual rigor with deep piety. Edwards followed this same path. In his ***Personal Narrative***, Edwards wrote, "On one Saturday night ... [I] had a particular discovery of the excellency of the gospel of Christ, above all other doctrines."

This epiphany led Edwards to desire "to follow Christ, and to be taught and enlightened and instructed by him; to learn of him and to live to him." Like Ames, Edwards would come to define theology not as a science or a dry academic study, but as "the teaching of living toward God."

### **John Locke** (1632-1704)

Edwards was no sheltered, isolated colonial Puritan, interested only in the dogma of the old theological writers. In his reading and writing, he engaged the brightest minds of his day and of the past—not only in theology and philosophy but also across a wide array of disciplines. His eager, omnivorous mind

interacted with the thought of Isaac Newton; the Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth, Henry More, and John Smith; and George Berkeley, among many others.

Standing out in this panoply of conversation partners was the British philosopher John Locke.

John Locke was the quintessential Enlightenment thinker. He is best known for developing an empirical approach to philosophy—that is, one in which truth is believed to derive chiefly from experience. In his famous image, each person is born with their mind a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, to be filled up with data gathered through the senses and refined by thoughtful reflection.

By the 1710s Locke's writings dominated the universities in England and were slowly making their way to her colonies.

Edwards's first contact with Locke came in 1718 or 1719 while a student at Yale. A rare copy of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) had crossed the Atlantic. Edwards could barely contain his enthusiasm. His reading of Locke gave him more pleasure "than the most greedy miser finds, when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold, from some newly discovered treasure."

Years later, Edwards would say of Locke, "How greatly distinguished is the speech of some men of great genius."

Specifically, Locke's stress on lively ideas and learning by experience influenced Edwards. In one of his early sermons, "A Spiritual Understanding of Divine Things," Edwards observes, "It is not he that has heard a long description of the sweetness of honey that can be said to have the greatest understanding of it, but he that has tasted." To know the thing truly, Locke argued and Edwards followed, one must experience it.

Yet, Edwards did not always follow Locke. For example, Locke compartmentalized the human self into separate faculties, such as the intellect or mind and the volition or will. Edwards, while using these same category terms, instead viewed the self as a unity, centered in the "affections," which undergird and unify the intellect and the will, and guide our lives as a ship's rudder. Edwards's discussion of the nature of this key concept (which makes frequent reference to Locke) occupies the first section of his *Religious Affections*.

References to Locke's writings pepper the writings of Edwards.

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## Those Exceptional Edwards Women

Jonathan spent his life surrounded by beautiful women, and it showed.

Heidi L. Nichols

When Jonathan Edwards was about to die, he dictated his final words to his daughter Lucy. His thoughts were of his wife, Sarah, who had not yet joined him at their new home in Princeton, New Jersey, where he had just become college president.

"It seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you," he said. "Therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue for ever. ... And as to my children, you are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all to seek a father who will never fail you."

Jonathan had, throughout his life, looked to Sarah as a spiritual paragon. But their "uncommon union" was not the only significant female influence in his life. Edwards's mother, sisters, and daughters also evidenced both high intelligence and strong spiritual mettle. Most likely as a result of his interactions with them, Edwards had a notably high view of women for the day, repeatedly holding them up as exemplars during his ministry.

His mother, Esther Stoddard Edwards, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, the Puritan minister dubbed the "Pope of the Connecticut River Valley." Growing up in a home filled with books and frequented by New England's elite, and highly educated for a woman of the time, Esther "surpassed her husband in native vigor of understanding," according to Edwards biographer Sereno Dwight. She instilled in the young Jonathan her own great love for books.

### Sixty feet of sisters

Esther was not alone in demonstrating to Jonathan the intellectual and spiritual capacities of women. He grew up surrounded by ten talented sisters, as bright as they were tall—the patriarch Timothy Edwards called them his "sixty feet of daughters."

Unusually for his time, Timothy prepared not only his son, but also each of his daughters for college. All but one of Jonathan's sisters made the trek from East Windsor, Connecticut, to Boston for finishing school, with sister Mary attending a finishing school in Hadley, Massachusetts.

Young Jonathan's sisters even assisted in his education. While serving as a chaplain during an Indian war, Edwards's father wrote home, charging the older sisters with tutoring Jonathan in his Latin studies.

Evidence of the Edwards sisters' intellect is found in a manuscript entitled "The Soul." For many years, Edwards scholars mistakenly assumed that the author of this essay, which uses wit and incisive satire to criticize a philosophically materialist view of the soul, was the great theologian himself. More recently, however, Edwards scholar Kenneth Minkema identified Jonathan's oldest sister, Esther, as its author.

A younger sister, Hannah, kept a journal later transcribed by her daughter Lucy. In this journal and in drafts of letters, Hannah not only reflects her own extensive learning, but also expresses progressive

sentiments about relationships between men and women—convictions fueled by her own experiences in courting. Seriously pursued by two men, first Matthew Rockwell of East Windsor, Connecticut, and then John Sargent of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, she found herself caught in a tug of war between them. She eventually rejected both of their proposals and married a third suitor, Seth Wetmore of Middletown, Connecticut. The situation created quite a stir, however, as Matthew Rockwell had been so convinced of Hannah's supposed obligation to him that he had built a house for her, inscribing her initials on the mantel.

### **Sweetness of mind and temper**

Though Edwards was clearly influenced by his spirited mother and sisters, his wife Sarah inspired him even more. Well-educated, Sarah was the daughter of a founder of Yale College. Edwards's early admiration of her spiritual devotion is evident in an apostrophe he wrote on the end paper of a book. Upon first seeing 13-year-old Sarah, the 20-year-old Jonathan wrote these words:

"They say there is a young lady from New Haven who is beloved of that almighty Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him—that she expects after a while to be received up where he is, to be raised out of the world and caught up into heaven; being assured that he loves her too well to let her remain at a distance from him always. There she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love, favor and delight, forever."

He continued his rhapsodic praise, describing Sarah as possessing "a strange sweetness in her mind, and sweetness of temper, uncommon purity in her affections," that gave her a "calmness and universal benevolence of mind; especially after those times in which this great God has manifested himself to her mind."

Jonathan viewed Sarah as a model of spirituality and conversion throughout their marriage. He wrote of her exemplary religious experiences in ***Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*** (1743).

In ***A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*** (1737), Edwards substantiated and described the revivals of 1735-1737 through accounts of the experiences of other females in Northampton, including four-year-old Phebe Bartlet. He used Phebe to illustrate true conversion, noting her devout prayer life and her conviction by the Holy Spirit after unwittingly taking plums from a neighbor's tree. In the same work, Edwards also described the conversion of Abigail Hutchinson, a "company keeper"—presumably a euphemism for a less than savory profession.

### **Thank heaven for brilliant girls**

His own daughters were also notable for their spiritual and intellectual qualities. His daughter Jerusha contracted tuberculosis in her devoted tending to the dying David Brainerd. Edwards later used Brainerd's diary to construct a biography of this early missionary to the Native Americans.

Another daughter, Esther, gained prominence and was known for her spiritual devotion. Edwards's correspondence with her suggests that their relationship was especially close. In one letter, Edwards offered Esther advice on the use of medicinal remedies, including a rattlesnake and some ginseng, both of which he sent with the letter.

Esther married minister Aaron Burr, Sr., after a whirlwind courtship of only five days and an engagement of less than a month. The couple lived in New Jersey, where Aaron pastored and served as president of the newly-founded College of New Jersey, later Princeton. Esther recorded her spiritual growth in

extensive letters to her close friend Sarah Prince, daughter of famed Boston minister Thomas Prince. She also candidly described her joys and hardships as wife of a minister and college president and as mother to two small children.

Esther concluded her literary exchange just before her husband's untimely death from malaria. The board of the college looked to Jonathan Edwards to follow in his son-in-law's footsteps as college president, and Edwards traveled from Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to Princeton in midwinter to accept the call, leaving Sarah behind to spare her the trek's severe conditions.

Edwards's tenure was short, however, and after only six weeks as the college's president, he died from a smallpox inoculation. Aware that he would never again see his beloved wife, Sarah, Edwards described in his final words their "uncommon union."

Esther had taken the same inoculation and died shortly thereafter, leaving her two children, Sally Burr and Aaron Burr, Jr., who would become the second vice president of the United States.

Sarah Prince eulogized Esther in her diary: "The God of Nature had furnished her with all that I desir'd in a Friend—her Natural Powers were superior to most women, her knowledge was extensive of Men and Things, her Accomplishments fine—her Prudence for thought and sagacity wonderfull—her Modesty rare—In Friendly Quality none Exceeded her—she was made for a Refin'd Friend."

These are fitting words to mark the legacy not just of Esther Edwards Burr, but also of the many intellectually and spiritually gifted women who surrounded Jonathan Edwards.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## Jonathan Edwards: Christian History Timeline - Passing the Torch

The claimers and reclaimers of Jonathan Edwards

Mark Noll

While Jonathan Edwards's intellectual agenda dominated America's formal religious thought until the mid-nineteenth century, his renovation of Calvinism and his writings on revival have continued to be read, debated, contested, and admired. He remains one of the few American theologians who has always been read intensely in the U.K. and other far-flung parts of the Christian world.

### New Divinity

"New Divinity" was originally a term of reproof denoting the supposedly unwarranted innovations of Edwards's students and closest professional friends. Chief among these first-generation Edwards interpreters were **Joseph Bellamy** and **Samuel Hopkins**. Bellamy's *True Religion Delineated* (1750) and Hopkins's *System of Doctrine* (1793) extended Edwards's teachings on, respectively, the nature of genuine godliness and the interaction of divine and human motives in redemption. But they modified Edwards. Bellamy made God's character as lawgiver central. Hopkins refocused Edwards's main ethical principle ("love to Being in General") from God to earthly usefulness. Hopkins's phrase was "disinterested benevolence"; it meant selfless, universal charity. For Hopkins sinfulness should not be viewed as residing in human character, but rather in sinful actions.

The next generation of students made more adjustments. **Jonathan Edwards, Jr.**, who studied with Bellamy and Hopkins, defended a "governmental" view of the atonement, in which the work of Christ restored balance in God's justice rather than placating the divine wrath. **Nathanael Emmons** was known as an "exercise" theologian, because, although he exalted God as the absolute determiner of all events (as had Edwards), he reduced human morality to what humans did. By contrast, **Asa Burton** argued that actions did proceed from an underlying "nature" or "heart" ("taste") oriented for or against God.

Overlapping this generation were some leading theological educators. Founders of **Andover Seminary** (1808) like **Jedidiah Morse** wanted to revive Edwards's orthodox Calvinism. Later professors at Andover, especially **Edwards Amasa Park**, were eager to track and defend what they considered the proper interpretation of Edwards. By contrast, the founders of Connecticut's **East Windsor Seminary**, **Asahel Nettleton** and **Bennet Tyler**, were more concerned with evangelism.

### New Haven

The most accomplished nineteenth-century theologians who viewed themselves as followers of Edwards were a president of Yale College, **Timothy Dwight**, and his two most famous students, **Nathaniel William Taylor**, a strong proponent of revival and the first theological professor at the Yale Divinity School, and **Lyman Beecher**, an energetic revivalist and social reformer. Taylor in particular combined, as Edwards had, an ability to reason metaphysically about human nature in subtle philosophical terms and a deep commitment to evangelism and church renewal. They modified Edwards considerably, especially by defending a modern concept of freedom (the power to choose among potential actions) as opposed to the view that Edwards upheld (the power to do what you have chosen to do—but only in consistency with your character).

### Second Great Awakening



Edwards's greatest impact on the public came as leader and chronicler of the American colonies' first great revivals. Eager to preach for conversion, willing to try new methods for revival, and clearly dependent upon the power of God to change lives, Edwards remained a steady inspiration to the leaders of "the Second Great Awakening" of the early nineteenth century. Congregationalists like pastor **Benjamin Trumbull** and historian **Joseph Tracy**, no less than Presbyterian theologian of revival **William Sprague**, found inspiration in Edwards. The most important nineteenth-century revivalist, **Charles G. Finney**, made no secret of both how little he regarded Edwards's formal theology and how much he admired Edwards's evangelistic work.

### **Brainerd's Life**

Edwards influenced a large circle of serious Christian readers by his work as editor and publisher of the diary of David Brainerd. As a grieving friend and would-be father-in-law, Edwards found in the late missionary's diary a perfect instance of what he had taught about the ideal Christian life. Editing a bit to cut out Brainerd's occasional lapses into despair, Edwards produced a work that has never been out of print. It was read with deep appreciation by leaders of domestic evangelism (like the Methodist **Francis Asbury**), domestic reform (the Baptist **Francis Wayland**), and missionary service (Samuel J. Mills, Adoniram Judson, Mary Lyon, A. J. Gordon). The work's great appeal remains its living testimony to what Samuel Hopkins styled "disinterested benevolence" in Brainerd's missionary labors among Native Americans.

### **England**

Edwards's important revival writings were published first in England, where they attracted considerable interest among Calvinist and evangelical believers. When, in the 1770s, the Baptist **Andrew Fuller** read Edwards on the will, he found a way to affirm both inherited Calvinism and a new evangelistic urgency. The key was Edwards's distinction between natural human ability (unimpaired by the fall) and moral human ability (damaged so as to require the quickening work of the Spirit). Edwards's influence on Fuller and others helped launch **William Carey** as the pioneer English missionary to India and his age's chief spokesman for foreign missionary service.

### **Scotland**

As early as the late 1730s, Edwards was corresponding with a circle of ministers in Scottish towns that later experienced revivals. These included **William McCulloch** of Cambuslang and **James Robe** of Kilsyth. Younger ministers like **John Erskine** soon joined in promoting Edwards's ideas. Edwards was praised as a subtle metaphysician by leading members of the Scottish Enlightenment, including **Henry Home**, **Lord Kames**, and **Dugald Stewart**, the major force behind the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. **Thomas Chalmers**, the leader of Scottish evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century, testified that Edwards's *Freedom of Will* played a key role in his own conversion. **John McLeod Campbell** (on the nature of Christ's work) and **James Edwin Orr** (on the comprehensive sovereignty of God over all of life), two of nineteenth-century Scotland's most creative theologians, also paid tribute to Edwards's influence.

### **Calvinist Presbyterians**

Mid-state Presbyterians always thought New England Congregationalists were too enamored with metaphysics. But despite that opinion, they also held Edwards in highest regard. To the first professor of Princeton Seminary, **Archibald Alexander**, Edwards was an honored predecessor as theological evangelist. To later Princeton theologians **Charles Hodge** and **Lyman Atwater**, Edwards represented the triumph of historic Calvinism over idle philosophy (a victory they thought Edwards's New England successors had forfeited in modifying his theology). To **Henry Boynton Smith**, who in the mid-

nineteenth century advocated a more romantic, Christ-centered theology, Edwards represented the best kind of theologian, since he was able to reason subtly while maintaining his humble trust in God's sovereign wisdom and in the saving power of the Holy Spirit.

### 20th-c. Academic

The opinion of Edwards among elite academics had sunk very low until a brilliant Harvard professor of English, **Perry Miller**, set out in the 1930s to rehabilitate his reputation. Miller, an agnostic who could not share Edwards's faith in God, argued in a 1949 biography that Edwards had addressed the world in the most realistic terms imaginable. An "Edwards revival" began at mid-century, as the Yale philosopher **John E. Smith** and many other first-rate academics joined Miller in studying the great theologian. Since that time, doctoral dissertations on Edwards have been doubling in number every decade. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* from Yale University Press began in 1957 under the editorship of **Perry Miller** and has continued to now more than 20 volumes under his successors **John Smith** and **Harry Stout**.

### 20th-c. Neo-Orthodox

Fresh attention and respect for Edwards came from the mainline Protestant churches. Here the pioneer was **Joseph Haroutunian**, a Turkish-born theologian at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, who in 1932 published *Piety Versus Moralism*. He argued that supposed improvements made by Edwards's New England successors had in fact obscured Edwards's own enthralling vision of the greatness and goodness of God. Haroutunian was soon joined by theologian-historian **H. Richard Niebuhr**, whose *Kingdom of God in America* (1935) likewise held Edwards up for special commendation, and ethicist **Paul Ramsey** of Princeton Seminary, who edited several key contributions to the Works of Edwards. To these and now many others, Edwards became not a brooding presence to flee but a landmark to recover.

### 20th-c. Evangelical

Evangelicals came late to the modern recovery of Edwards. Key pioneers were **Richard Lovelace** of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, who in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (1979) described Edwards as practicing the thoughtful activism that modern evangelicals should imitate, and **John Gerstner** of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, who in years of lecturing introduced thousands of students to what he considered Edwards's impeccable version of classical Calvinism. The Banner of Truth Trust, led by its editor, distinguished Edwards biographer **Iain Murray**, has also been a formidable force in bringing Edwards back to life for contemporary evangelicals. **John Piper**, a Baptist theologian-pastor from Minneapolis, has emphasized Edwards as a trusted guide in seeking God's own glory as the highest purpose of human life (e.g., *Desiring God*, 1986). At the start of the twenty-first century, the modern constituency that is in fact closest to Edwards's own concerns has at last begun to learn from him themselves.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Archive: Pilgrim's Paradise

Heaven's bliss was among Edwards's favorite preaching themes.

An excerpt from his sermon, "The Christian Pilgrim."

***"And confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country."***

—Hebrews 11:13-14

This world is not our abiding place. Our continuance here is but very short. ... If God has given us ample estates, and children, or other pleasant friends, it is with no such design, that we should be furnished here, as for a settled abode; but with a design that we should use them for the present, and then leave them in a very little time.

When we are called to any secular business, or charged with the care of a family, if we improve our lives to any other purpose, than as a journey toward heaven, all our labour will be lost. If we spend our lives in the pursuit of a temporal happiness; as riches, or sensual pleasures; credit and esteem from men; delight in our children, and the prospect of seeing them well brought up, and well settled, &c.—

All these things will be of little significancy to us. Death will blow up all our hopes, and will put an end to these enjoyments. "The places that have known us, will know us no more:" and "the eye that has seen us, shall see us no more."

Heaven is that place alone where our highest end, and highest good is to be obtained. God hath made us for himself. "Of him, and through him, and to him are all things." Therefore, then do we attain to our highest end, when we are brought to God: but that is by being brought to heaven; for that is God's throne, the place of his special presence. There is but a very imperfect union with God to be had in this world, a very imperfect knowledge of him in the midst of much darkness: a very imperfect conformity to God, mingled with abundance of estrangement. Here we can serve and glorify God, but in a very imperfect manner; our service being mingled with sin, which dishonours God. But when we get to heaven, (if ever that be) we shall be brought to a perfect union with God, and have more clear views of him.

There we shall be fully conformed to God, without any remaining sin: for "we shall see him as he is." There we shall serve God perfectly; and glorify him in an exalted manner, even to the utmost of the powers and capacity of our nature. Then we shall perfectly give up ourselves to God: our hearts will be pure and holy offerings, presented in a flame of divine love.

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is *infinitely* better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean.

—Works of President Edwards, ed. S. B. Dwight, vol. 7.

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## Testing the Spirits

The heart stirring revivalism of the Great Awakening led Edwards to develop a new religious psychology.

David W. Kling

Puritanism had lost its vitality, and for years, the "friends of vital piety" had prayed for revival. Finally, in the late 1730s and early 1740s, a great spiritual dam seemed to break in New England. Streams of Christian conviction and conversion rushed through the land.

One historian has compared the emotional force of the Great Awakening to the radical furor of the 1960s, with its civil rights demonstrations, campus disturbances, and urban riots.

The new excitement and new ideals of the awakened brought with them controversy and divisiveness—much of it over the nature of religious experience.

The controversy is easy to understand. Some converts claimed new religious insight. Others erupted in emotional outbursts. Still others censured their pastors for lack of spiritual fervor. Even friends of the revival could see that not all the fruit of this new season came from the Spirit.

But how to distinguish genuine religious experience from counterfeit? The question haunted Jonathan Edwards as he pondered the meaning and results of the Awakening.

### How do I know I'm saved?

Two short-lived revivals in his Northampton parish (1734-35, 1740-41) provided the laboratory for Edwards to observe what the Puritans had always called "experimental" (that is, experiential) religion.

For more than a decade, Edwards researched the fruits of revival. He publicized the results and his conclusions first in letters describing the revival in his own congregation, then in several sermons, and finally in his book-length treatise, *Religious Affections* (1746).

When the excitement had died down, Edwards emerged from this period with an insightful, biblically rooted scheme of evidences by which revival participants might discern the true meaning of their religious experiences.

Edwards did not want merely to describe the mental and spiritual state of the awakened. He sought to establish "signs" or indicators of those truly regenerated by the Spirit of God. Drawing from the Bible, traditional Puritan use of heart-language, and Calvin's notion of *sensus suavitatis*—a sense of God's beauty, sweetness, or holiness that saints apprehend or taste—he developed a new psychology by which to understand the regenerating work of God's Spirit.

### The revival laboratory

In "Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God" (first written as a letter in 1735 and then published in 1737), Edwards chronicled the events that triggered the revival of 1734-35, including several deaths that seemed to impress locals with seriousness about the state of their own souls.

Then he described the unusual number of conversions that ensued and sketched the changes he observed in the lives of the converted. Outwardly, the saved abandoned old vices and contentious ways; inwardly, they testified to a new or "lively" sense of the divine presence and a new "disposition" toward religious things.

"More than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ," exulted Edwards.

Yet, several occurrences marred the orderly work of the Spirit. In a state of spiritual despondence, Edwards's uncle committed suicide. Two people in nearby towns went mad "with strange enthusiastic delusions." Others "[broke] forth into laughter, tears often at the same time issuing like a flood, and intermingling a loud weeping."

Despite these incidents, in his "Faithful Narrative" and his subsequent "Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" (1741), Edwards defended the revival as God's work by demonstrating the authenticity of the conversions.

"In the main, there has been a great and marvelous work of conversion and sanctification among the people here," he reported.

He admitted there were irregularities and excesses but suggested heeding the advice of the writer of 1 John to "try the spirits whether they be of God" (4:1).

He proposed "signs" (both positive and negative) by which an experience might be judged legitimately the work of the Holy Spirit.

In "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England" (1742), Edwards expanded his discussion of "signs," calling the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, etc.) "religious affections."

Holiness, Edwards argued, came from the heart (the center of both thinking and feeling) or the will, rather than the understanding. And holy or religious affections (again, emotions and the will) are the substance of genuine religion.

Edwards thus rejected the widely accepted "intellectualist" view that associated passions solely with the body (the untamed "animal nature"), over which the reason must triumph.

"He that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection," he concluded, "never is engaged in the business of religion."

### **Between "Old Brick" and the radicals**

In 1746, two years after he declared the revival over, Edwards published his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. Here he attended systematically to the nature of revival and to religious experience generally.

The *Religious Affections* describes the spiritual character of the converted, those who grasp the beauty of God and delight in him. It is a taxonomy of the soul, classifying the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of the regenerate.

On one hand, the treatise shares the preoccupation of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment with scientific inquiry and empirical proof; on the other, it denies the Enlightenment confidence in the

autonomous human intellect.

Edwards defends "true religion" against such critics of revival as Charles "Old Brick" Chauncy, the respected minister of the First Church in Boston. Chauncy denounced the revival as "enthusiasm" (literally, a mad belief that one is directly inspired by God). At the same time, Edwards countered enthusiastic radicals who took it too far.

The book's "sermon text" is 1 Peter 1:8—"Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" [KJV]. Edwards argues that when "full of glory," the believer's whole being is endued with a sight, a sense, and a power beyond nature—a supernatural sense beyond the five senses.

### **My affections, right or wrong**

Drawing on English empirical philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), Edwards says that God created the soul or mind with two "faculties," intellect and will. While these faculties are interconnected, Edwards distinguishes between them in order to show the heart's priority in the believer's experience of God's saving work.

Intellect is the knowing or perceiving faculty, which Edwards calls "speculative knowledge." This involves assenting to "words" or "signs" without either approving or disapproving of them. For example, we may memorize a mathematical formula or the Ten Commandments, but the mere knowledge has no influence upon our motives or actions.

The faculty of will (or heart) not only "speculates and beholds," but also "relishes and feels." The most lively and intense operations of this heart-sense—the most "vigorous and sensible exercises"—are what Edwards calls the affections. These include love, hate, desire, joy, grief, and sorrow.

Some affections are morally and spiritually right. Some are wrong. Right affections incline the self away from self-interest and toward divine glory: "The Scriptures place religion very much in the affection of love, in love to God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and love to the people of God, and to mankind."

### **Heart signs**

Before considering signs of a true work of God, Edwards discusses twelve "no signs" that neither confirm nor deny the presence of the Spirit. Among them Edwards includes the immediate intensity of the religious experience, "bodily manifestations," extensive and fervent religious conversations, a devotion to religious practices, knowledge of Scripture, and even direct communication by God (for God spoke to the reprobate in Scripture). Though he calls these signs uncertain, he treats them as potentially good things in the life of the Christian.

Then Edwards turns to the twelve signs of a true Christian, all of which point to the glory of God. The first five highlight the divine source of the affections: they are wholly supernatural, "above nature," providing a new taste for divine things. Exercising that taste, the Christian loves God and Christ not for the benefits of peace, comfort, or eternal life—though these do come as by-products of salvation. Rather, the believer loves God for his own, intrinsic "beauty and sweetness."

Signs 6 through 11 focus on the character of the Christian. Edwards notes those who gave the appearance of change but then went back to their old, sinful ways.

Such people, says Edwards, are like a dirty pig that has been washed clean: the cleanliness is only temporary, for the pig will soon return to its pig nature—namely, its innate desire to wallow in the mud.

Self-deceived hypocrites are like Ephraim of old, "a cake not turned," half roasted and half raw: there is no uniformity in their affections. Or they are like meteors that flare suddenly in a blaze of light but soon fall back to earth.

True saints are like fixed stars that shine brightly through time and space. They are humble, loving in spirit, spiritually hungry, self-reflective, and steady and abiding in their display of holy affections.

### **The "sign of signs"**

The twelfth sign is "the chief sign of all the signs of grace," "the sign of signs, and evidences of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs." The true mark of a Christian is found in Christian practice or the outward display of love, for it is "the principal sign by which Christians are to judge, both of their own and others' sincerity of godliness."

Edwards dwells at length on this point: "Godliness in the heart has direct a relation to practice, as a fountain has to a stream, or as the luminous nature of the sun has to beams sent forth, or as life has to breathing." Holy action "is ten times more insisted as a note of true piety, throughout Scriptures ... than anything else."

Religious practice lived out consistently amid the trials of life is also the most empirically verifiable religious affection. In the laboratory of Christian life, "the saints have the opportunity to see, by actual experience and trial, whether they have a heart to do the will of God, and to forsake other things for Christ, or no."

Though Edwards valued emotion as a sign that a person was truly doing the "business of religion," he refused to see true revival as a matter of experience divorced from the everyday expressions of love. A person can feel—or indeed talk, listen, sing, and pray—incessantly, but these will not promote religious renewal or give verifiable evidence of spiritual integrity unless accompanied by works of love and mercy.

Made weary by congregants who spent more time embroidering and broadcasting their testimonies than doing the work of the gospel, Edwards offered a piece of pointed advice: "We should get into the way of appearing lively in religion, more by being lively in the service of God and our generation, than by the liveliness and forwardness of our tongues."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## The Book of James

The famed William James drew on Edwards's psychology but not his theology.

David W. Kling

To this day Edwards's *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* has, for profound insight into the nature of religious experience, only one rival. That is William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Indeed, at several junctures, James, the Harvard philosopher and psychologist, appeals to the insights of the colonial Northampton pastor to defend his thesis that the validity of religious experience is measured by its fruits.

James approvingly cites what he calls Edwards's "empiricist criterion" in the *Affections*.

"By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots," writes James. "The **roots** of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians." He agreed with Edwards that extreme physical and emotional expressions have little to do with genuine religious experience. These may make the religious experience memorable, but they "have no essential spiritual significance."

At the same time, James differed from Edwards in some fundamental ways. James considered genuine religious experience a universal phenomenon, not restricted, as it was for Edwards, to Puritan forms of Christianity. Unlike Edwards, who affirmed a divinely-given "spiritual sense" or "holy affection" as the essence of genuine religion, James wondered whether religious experience could be accounted for by natural explanations: "nature shows continuous differences, and generation and regeneration are matters of degree," not kind.

Finally, for James the "pay-off" of religious experience was whether it worked for the good of humankind—for example, through acts of charity. Edwards, while valuing these outward expressions, was less interested in consequences for their own sake. He focused on the motives and perceptual states (for example, humility over against pride or authentic over against self-deceiving experience)—that would inevitably, if genuine, find expression in acts of love. In this sense, he was as interested in roots as in fruits.

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## Language of Ecstasy

Edwards's interest in religious psychology arose from his own almost mystical encounters with God.

David W. Kling

Edwards first encountered God in an intensely experiential way while reading 1 Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever." He was overcome with "a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before."

The only language that seemed adequate, as he later recorded in his *Personal Narrative* (c. 1739), was that of ecstasy: "I thought with myself, how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapped up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him." Deeply moved, Edwards retreated to "a solitary place" outdoors where, under a broad sky, he was again transfixed by "a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express."

The *Narrative* is suffused with the same vividly empirical vocabulary of sense experience that marks his published works on revival.

Edwards wrote it out of a keen, Enlightenment-influenced interest in the psychology of the self. He included not only himself but also his wife, Sarah—always his paragon of true piety. He treated their experiences as models of the way God transforms the Christian's soul: not simply by providing new knowledge, but also by infusing a "new spiritual sense," enthraling the heart and mind. After conversion, what was most real to the self was *spiritual* reality, created and sustained by God.

Edwards met this new reality most powerfully in Scripture, where he gained his new perception of divine things—especially the beauty (or "excellency") of God.

"I seemed often to see so much light, exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing ravishing food communicated," wrote Edwards, "that I could not get along in reading." So he often lingered "long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders."

Edwards's *Narrative* follows the pattern of the classic Puritan conversion narrative. It moves from despair and humiliation to exaltation and a state of grace. As he made clear in other writings, however, Edwards rejected the Puritan notion that conversion would always follow a predictable pattern. God's sovereign and saving ways, believed Edwards, could not be so confidently calculated. God's was, as Edwards later said of the Northampton revivals, a "surprising work."

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## The Northampton Eviction

When a pastor's irresistible ideals met his congregation's immovable status-consciousness.

Allen Guelzo

Jonathan Edwards was, for the most part, a withdrawn, soft-spoken man. Yet much of his life was caught up in controversy, and he faulted himself for an argumentative tendency.

The "Resolutions" he drew up while serving a small congregation in New York in 1722-23 are laced with reminders "never to say anything at all against anybody." He clearly struggled with "egotism" and "dogmaticalness" (as he put it) that he afterwards regretted.

"If I had more of an air of gentleness," Edwards lamented while tutoring at Yale in 1725, "I should be much mended."

But he never quite developed that air. He had been the pastor at Northampton for six years when the Connecticut River Valley was scandalized in 1734 by the calling of Robert Breck, a Harvard graduate suspected of Arminianism, as the pastor of the church at Springfield, just downriver from Northampton. The ministers of the Hampshire Association tried to have the call rescinded. But they could persuade neither the Springfield church nor the civil authorities in Boston to interfere, and Breck was duly installed.

As the pastor of the Connecticut Valley's greatest church, Edwards played a leading role in the controversy, writing the Hampshire Association's **Letter** of protest and taking the occasion to preach against Arminianism. This earned him a reputation for "meddling with the controversy in the pulpit"—not to mention the lasting enmity of Robert Breck.

For a time, it seemed Edwards could afford to ignore the costs of

the Breck debacle. In December 1734, "the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in" among the people of Northampton in the first of the great revivals he would see there, and "a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion" brought "more than 300 souls ... to Christ."

But controversy was never far from his door. "The people of Northampton are not the most happy in their natural tempers," Edwards wrote ruefully, "They have, ever since I can remember, been famed for ... a difficult turbulent temper."

Some of this taste for argument was rooted in Northampton's changing circumstances. All through the 1730s, farm property in western Massachusetts increased in price. Younger families found themselves increasingly squeezed off the land, and town meetings in Northampton grew more and more acrimonious. Edwards's preaching was particularly well received by these younger people, who hungered for the hope he gave them in God's absolute predestination of all things. It went down less easily among the status-conscious, established families, who did not like being reminded that none of their personal achievements amounted to anything in God's estimate.

When the head of one of these families, a lawyer and spiritual depressive named Joseph Hawley, committed suicide on June 1, 1735, the Northampton revival collapsed. Edwards now had another group of enemies.

Once again, however, it seemed the gathering storm would disperse harmlessly. The arrival of George Whitefield in Northampton in 1740 marked a renewal of the revival energies that would culminate in the Great Awakening. A relieved Edwards became one of the principal figures in defending the Awakening against its critics.

Soon, however, Edwards felt he needed to place limits on this second revival's exuberance. By the beginning of 1742, the revival in Northampton had become a pandemonium.

"The people were exceedingly moved, crying out in great numbers in the meetinghouse," Edwards wrote, "There were some instances of persons lying in a trance, remaining for perhaps a whole twenty-four hours motionless," and "a great deal of caution and pains were found necessary to keep the people, many of them, from running wild." In the end, the revival in Northampton did not last, and Edwards was blamed.

What was worse, the Christian character of some of those touched by the revival fell noticeably short of the heights of their religious experience. Faced by worldliness among the newly revived (and among some of the church's established families), in March 1742 Edwards moved to require that applicants for church membership undergo screening and make "a solemn public renewal of their covenant with God."

On paper, this was not asking much. But Edwards was imposing this on Solomon Stoddard's congregation, which prided itself on Stoddard's innovation of open communion for the entire parish. Northampton interpreted Edwards's gesture as a power grab and a slur on the memory of Stoddard. Applications promptly dried up, and between 1744 and 1748, not one new candidate for membership appeared.

As early as 1743, the town began finding fault with Edwards's salary and the way his family spent money. And the following year, he mishandled a minor incident involving some of the young people who had been his choicest converts during the revivals.

In March 1744, Edwards learned that several "boys" in the parish had been using a midwives' manual for some untutored lessons in female anatomy. This was not, in itself, a serious matter. But Edwards handled it in almost the worst way imaginable: by reading the names of the offenders from the pulpit. Not only were several of them from very well-placed Northampton families, but some were not "boys" at all—the average age was twenty-four—and were really part of Northampton's rootless young people, who now turned on their former mentor as one who had betrayed them.

Meanwhile, Edwards had become more convinced than ever that the church membership policies, inherited from Stoddard, were unwise. In the spring of 1749, he wrote a comprehensive treatise on the subject, ***An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to ... Full Communion***. The book took aim at his grandfather's open communion doctrine and at any notion of church membership that did not restrict itself to "such as are in profession and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment godly or gracious persons."

Here Edwards was questioning the practice not only of Northampton, but also of much of Massachusetts Congregationalism. A number of ministers ripped off impassioned replies, including one of Edwards's distant relatives, Solomon Williams. Edwards, forgetting "gentleness" in the heat of dispute, thrust back a sharp riposte in 1752, ***Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated***, slicing up Williams's arguments in exquisite detail.

In 1749, a new applicant for church membership, Mary Hulbert, presented herself to Edwards and agreed to make the "profession of religion" he required. Though Hulbert was agreeable to Edwards's new requirement, the Northampton church's committee on membership was not, on the grounds that this would compel a complete re-constitution of the church.

In October Edwards asked the church to invite a council of ministers to judge the question. The church agreed "that it was therefore time that a council was called to bring the controversy to an issue." But what they wanted was a council "to endeavor after a separation." Edwards countered with a demand that he first have an opportunity to explain his position from the pulpit. After some backing and filling, he was allowed to begin a series of Thursday lectures in the church in February and March 1750.

There is no evidence that Edwards's lectures changed anyone's mind. On May 3, after a series of confused and acrimonious church meetings, it was finally agreed to call a council of ministers to recommend for or against a dismissal of Edwards.

Chief of the three Northamptonites chosen to represent the town before the council was, as Edwards later remembered, "a young gentleman of liberal education and notable abilities, and a fluent speaker ... a man of lax principles in religion, falling in in some essential things with Arminians." This was Joseph Hawley, whose father had committed suicide fifteen years before and who "very strenuously urged before the council the necessity of an immediate separation."

The council, made up of ten clergy and nine lay delegates, met on June 19. Among the clergy, none was more prominent than Robert Breck of Springfield. After three days of examination, the council voted to recommend "that this relation be immediately dissolved." The Northampton congregation ratified the decision by a resounding 230 to 23.

On July 1, 1750, Edwards preached his farewell sermon. He could not resist a final warning: "Let me therefore earnestly exhort you, as you would seek your own future good, hereafter to watch against a contentious spirit."

A person can be undone as easily by their virtues as by their flaws. Edwards's conscientious insistence on congregational purity embarrassed Northamptonites who were increasingly concerned with social standing in the church.

But it was not just the zealous pursuit of theological ideals that got Edwards into trouble with his congregation. The time he spent on his writings was time taken away from the life of his people—a steep cost, as it turned out when he needed to appeal for their loyalty and sympathy.

"He did not make it his custom to visit his people in their own houses, unless he was sent for by the sick, or heard that they were under some special affliction," wrote his protégé Samuel Hopkins, "for it appeared to him, that he could do the greatest good to the souls of men ... by preaching and writing, and conversing with persons under religious impressions in his study."

Hopkins's assessment may be accurate. Edwards's motives throughout his tenure at Northampton may have been impeccable. But in the end, Jonathan Edwards found himself too distant from his congregants at too many points to salvage his relationship with them.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Holy Pagans

Could a person be saved without knowing Christ? Among the Indians, Edwards began to wonder.

Gerald R. McDermott

On the Massachusetts frontier in April 1753, a famous preacher, known for his belief in an angry and highly selective God, sat in his Stockbridge study, writing a letter. In it, he described his neighbors, a group of unconverted Indians, as excelling "in religion and virtue."

Surprising? This doesn't fit the stereotype of the preacher, Jonathan Edwards. But during this period, Edwards was assembling a "Catalogue" of hundreds of notebook pages filled with evidence that pagans had received knowledge about God the Redeemer both from the Jews and from traditions going back to Noah's sons.

Whence this open-mindedness toward those who had not heard the name of Christ? The explanation starts with the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century explorers of the East and the New World, who had discovered not just spices and trade routes but also "heathen" who exhibited better morals than most European Christians.

### Edwards vs. the monstrous God

Seventeenth-century geographers estimated that only one-sixth of the planet had heard the gospel, so, according to hyper-Calvinists of the day, at least five-sixths of the world's population was doomed to hell.

Beginning with Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the deists, those self-appointed guardians of a reasonable religion, suggested that the Calvinist god responsible for this scenario was a monster. These deists succeeded at popularizing the disjunction between the heathen who were damned but morally good and the Christians who were saved but morally bad.

Edwards, disturbed by deist use of non-Christian religions to attack God's goodness and justice, worked hard to learn about these religions. He sought out and read travelogues, dictionaries, and encyclopedias of religion available in his time. The books cited in his "Catalogue" include George Sale's translation of the *Qur'an*, reports of the Jesuits in China, an analysis of the Qabbalah, comparative mythology, and a wide range of reference works—from skeptic Peter Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* to Daniel Defoe's *Dictionary of All Religions Ancient and Modern*.

Edwards developed three strategies to defend Reformed orthodoxy against deist charges.

First, he used the idea of a *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) to try to prove that vestiges of true religion were taught by the Greeks and other non-Christian traditions. Therefore, he concluded, five-sixths of the world had **not** been deprived of the basic truths of the gospel.

Second, he developed an elaborate typological system to show that God is constantly communicating Reformed truths wherever the eye can see and the ear can hear—in nature, history, and even the history of religions.

Finally, Edwards taught that an inner "disposition" is better evidence of regeneration than precision in belief. He described the necessary disposition as "a sense of the dangerousness of sin, and of the dreadfulness of God's anger ... [such a conviction of] their wickedness, that they trusted to nothing but the mere mercy of God, and then bitterly lamented and mourned for their sins."

Therefore, some people can be regenerated before explicit conversion to Christ: elect infants, Old Testament saints, and New Testament saints (such as Cornelius before he heard the gospel from Peter, Nathaniel, "probably" John's two disciples, and several others who were "good men before [they met Christ]"). In all these cases, "conversion may still be by divine constitution necessary to salvation in some respect even after [a person] is really a saint."

### **The un-churched saved**

A fourth class of people who Edwards thought enjoyed salvation without explicit knowledge of Christ were those we might call holy pagans.

In his 1739 sermons on the history of the work of redemption, Edwards surmised that conversion to true religion, justification, and glorification have occurred in all ages of the world since the Fall. He cited examples of such holy pagans living outside of Israel: Melchizedek, the posterity of Nahor (Job and his family), Job's three friends, and Elihu. These were individuals outside the national covenant with Israel, and of course without explicit knowledge of Christ, who nonetheless seem to have been regenerate.

### **Virtue among "the devil's captives"**

In correspondence during his last years, Edwards wrote of a group of Onohquaga Indians from the Susquehanna River Valley as excelling "in religion and virtue" and "far the best disposed Indians we have had to do with, and [who] would be inclined to their utmost to assist, encourage, and to strengthen the hands of missionaries and instructors, should [any] be sent among [them]."

The letters do not claim that these Indians were converted. But it is significant that Edwards said they excelled in both religion and virtue. In his sermons and private notebooks he criticized pagan moralists who sometimes had good ideas about religion and virtue but failed to live virtuous or religious lives. Yet Edwards praised these Indians not for the truth of their ideas but the quality of their lives, just as Luke had commended Cornelius for the quality of his practice.

In another letter during that period, Edwards wrote that "many" members of that tribe "that used to be notorious drunkards and blood-thirsty warriors, have of late strangely had their *dispositions* [my emphasis] and manners changed through some wonderful influence on their minds."

Edwards had only contempt for Native American religion and referred to Indians generally as "the devil's captives." But he seemed deeply moved by the uncivilized natives at Stockbridge who showed more civility and virtue than the educated English "saints" who had thrown him out of Northampton.

Early in his tenure at Stockbridge, he boasted to his father that "the Indians seem much pleased with my family, especially my wife." Later he referred to them warmly as "my people" and noted happily that "they steadfastly adhere to me" despite his enemies' efforts to alienate them from him.

One would never guess this from Edwards's learned treatises or most of his public statements about Indian religion, but his private correspondence and notebooks suggest that in his last decade, while in exile, the great theologian might have concluded that he had found holy pagans who, like Cornelius, were sincerely seeking the gospel.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## Thunderstorms & Flying Spiders

Edwards saw the Exuberant Goodness of the Creator in every detail of nature.

Thunderstorms & Flying Spiders is adapted from Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought, Stephen J. Nichols, (P&R Publishing), "Spiders & Rainbows: the Invisible God in the Visible World," 159-171. Used by permission.

Puritans were "people of one Book," right? Not Jonathan Edwards. He was a person of two books: the Bible and the book of nature. Nature was the showplace of God's glory and the reflection of his beauty.

In his *Personal Narrative*, the great theologian recalls of his days as a young Christian in love with God: "I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things." Hardly the austere Puritan.

To be fair to the Puritans, during the first, killing winters they had spent in New England, its howling wilderness had seemed to offer little in way of glory and beauty. By Edwards's day, that landscape had become at least partly tamed. It was easier, now, to look out one's window or stroll one's fields and see the hand of a benevolent God at work all around.

But even in this gentler age, young Jonathan stood out among his Christian contemporaries for the theological intensity of his love for nature.

### Saved in "God's country"

In one sense, it all started at his conversion, around the age of 17. "The appearance of everything was altered ... " he remembered in his *Personal Narrative*. "There seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything." After his conversion, "God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind."

Edwards was especially captivated by the power and majesty of thunderstorms. Whereas before his conversion, they had terrified him, now he found them "sweet":

"I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such times, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightning's play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder ... leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God. While thus engaged, it always seemed natural to me to sing, or chant for my meditations; or, to speak my thoughts in soliloquies with a singing voice."

His appreciation for nature had deep roots. He had grown up in "God's country" itself—the lush Connecticut River Valley (see p. 3)—riding horseback and walking along the riverbanks.

As a fifteen-year-old student at Yale, Jonathan's scientific curiosity about nature bloomed. Isaac Newton's *Optics* captivated his imagination, leading him to meditate on God's intimate involvement in the workings of the natural world. He wrote essays on atoms, light rays, rainbows, and other topics in "natural philosophy."

### Solving a webby puzzle

Working in the mold of the Enlightenment "gentleman scientist," Edwards wrote his first piece for publication. This was not a sermon or a theological treatise. Rather, it was a scientific essay he sent in 1723, in the form of a letter, most likely to the Honorable Paul Dudley, associate justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts. Dudley was a member of the British Royal Society who contributed often to its ***Philosophical Transactions***.

The letter concerns New England's "flying spider," known for "marching in the air from one tree to another, sometimes at the distance of five or six rods, though they are wholly destitute of wings." With the probing scientific mind Edwards would later apply to the religious experiences of those swept up in the Great Awakening, he set out to observe and explain the spider's ability to "fly."

It flies, he discovered, by excreting two webs. The first anchors it to its starting point, and the second sails through the air to a branch or some other object. The spider then releases the first web and retracts the other.

Characteristically, Edwards sought in this spidery mode of propulsion lessons about God. First, he saw "the wisdom of the Creator in providing of the spider," and second, "the exuberant goodness of the Creator, who hath not only provided for all the necessities, but also for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects."

### **God's type of world**

Illustrations from nature permeate Edwards's sermons. When he wanted to communicate God's character to the Mohicans and Mohawks gathered on the plains of the Housatonic River at Stockbridge, he declared, "God's goodness is like a river that overflows all of its bounds." In another sermon at Stockbridge he likened the Bible to the sun: "We invite you to come and enjoy the light of the Word of God, which is ten thousand times better than [the] light of the sun."

These illustrations were part of a larger habit of typologizing. Edwards often looked to the visible, physical, and earthly to illustrate the invisible, spiritual, and divine.

One of the most intriguing of Edwards's typological writings is his "Images and Shadows of Divine Things." Here he interpreted trees, rivers, stars, and other natural objects as spiritual types. He saw, for example, a cat playing with a mouse as "a lively emblem of the way of the devil with wicked men." The difficulties encountered in climbing a mountain reminded him of the challenges faced in the Christian life.

Edwards stood in awe of the beauty of God's creation. For him it provided meaning in life, even in the midst of pain and misery. In a short essay, "The Beauty of the World," he wrote, "The reason why almost all men, and those that seem to be very miserable, love life: because they cannot bear to lose the sight of such a lovely and beautiful world."

Through his writings on nature, Edwards reminds us, even in our technological age, to explore the mysteries of the natural world and to see the stamp of the Creator's wisdom, beauty, and goodness on his entire creation. He helps us to see the invisible God in the visible world.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## Expect Joy!

Edwards found the Christian life sweet and said so often.

Douglas A. Sweeney

A dour, killjoy Puritan. This is the image many have of Jonathan Edwards. After all, he's that fellow who preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," hanging his listeners over hell by a slender thread, right?

His portrait seems to bear out the judgment. The Joseph Badger painting of Edwards (see p. 11) depicts a man deeply somber, even severe—as if he has never enjoyed a summer day or a chocolate bar.

Edwards, however, enjoyed not only summer days (see p. 40) and chocolate (see p. 2), but also, above all, the Christian life itself. He insisted that believers should **expect** joy from their religion.

"It would be worth the while to be religious," he preached in one of his favorite sermons, on Proverbs 24:13-14, "if it were only for the pleasantness of it."

Christianity, he argued, brings a new and delightful harmony to social relationships. It "begets love and peace, good will one towards another, brotherly kindness, mutual benevolence, bounty and a feeling of each other's welfare." It "sweetens" the fellowship of those who believe, and makes people "delight in each other."

## Amazing Grace, how sweet

Edwards also taught that the Christian gains a new pleasure in the things of religion. He remembered how his own conversion, in the Spring of 1721, had given him an inward, "sweet" sense both of Christ and of the way of salvation.

"My soul," he reminisced, "was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged, to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ; and the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in him."

In these contemplations he experienced "a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world." No mere intellectual, abstracted pleasure, this was the delight of intimacy—"a kind of vision ... of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, ... sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God."

## Where happiness dwells

Edwards devoted most of his life to helping others experience this intimate joy. He liked to say that "true religion" is first and foremost an affair of the heart, in which God reaches down to us and reorients our souls. In fact, for Edwards, the most important thing God does in regeneration is to turn our hearts around, transforming our affections, and causing us to love His will and take delight in pursuing His ways.

Given that God Himself is the source of all that is good, true and beautiful, Edwards believed that our deepest longings find their fulfillment in things divine.

Edwards found support for this teaching in the ancient tradition of Christian *eudaemonism* (the Greek term eudaemonia means "well being" or "happiness").

This tradition was founded in the philosophy of Aristotle, Christianized by the Greek Fathers, and bequeathed to the West in the work of St. Augustine. Its thrust was that self-love—that is, the desire for personal happiness and fulfillment—is not at odds with the love of God. A life of virtue is a happy life. Both virtue and happiness emerge out of a fervent pursuit of one's highest good.

And what is that highest good? Quite simply, a loving union with God. The self—when its affections are *rightly ordered* by God's Spirit—finds satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and unprecedented joy in a biblical love of God and neighbor.

Thus, to put it bluntly, the call of salvation is a call to personal happiness. The love of God and human self-love go hand in hand. In the famous words of Augustine's *Confessions*, "you arouse [us] to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

### **Self-love, true and false**

Many early Protestant leaders (Martin Luther chief among them) were wary of Christian eudaemonism, for it seemed to sanction the selfish pursuit of personal pleasure.

Indeed, Edwards himself was nervous about a related doctrine, beloved by later capitalists and known as "enlightened self-interest," which underwrote attempts to promote social welfare by the pursuit of private gain. Edwards experienced first-hand this social ideal's negative effects: The greed of several leading businessmen in Northampton frequently undermined his ministry there. In Stockbridge, the English settlers alienated the Indians with dirty business deals, swindling them of their land and thus thwarting Edwards's ministry among them.

But while Edwards knew the dangers of *unregulated* self-love, he distinguished this from his confidence in *rightly ordered* self-love, which he considered a blessing made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So he argued, with his usual logical force and precision, in his sermon on "Charity Contrary to a Selfish Spirit." Self-love and the desire for happiness are perfectly natural. A person's will must always be inclined, by preference, in one direction or another. It leads the person into sin only when it becomes disoriented, fixing its desires on the wrong objects or in the wrong ways (which, in the state of original sin, it always does).

Therefore, regeneration does not eradicate self-love; rather, it reorients it and sets it on the path to its true, ultimate fulfillment. It does not lessen our desire for happiness; rather, it reveals the true, ultimate object of that desire—God Himself.

With Augustine, Edwards wholeheartedly believed that God has created us to have a longing only He can satisfy. The bad news is that we are sinners who try to fill this God-shaped vacuum with lesser gods—things like sex, money, and power. But the good news is that God is love and wants to be our all in all. His regenerating grace can reorient our souls, re-attune our wayward affections, and magnify His glory, while granting to us a joy unspeakable.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

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## Jonathan Edwards: Christian History Interview - On His Own Terms

Jonathan Edwards has much to say to us today, if we can get past his peculiar accent.

A conversation with George Marsden

Great thinkers like Jonathan Edwards can be hard to approach. Many who have read him are convinced that the Northampton divine has much to offer the church today. But he seems to float somewhere above us—severe, austere, out of reach. What a shame! He is surely one whose teachings transcend his own time.

There's no denying that, unlike John Wesley, his colleague in the transatlantic awakening, Edwards can seem distant and forbidding. But some of this is a factor not of who he was, but of the distance between our world and his. We see him through a glass darkly.

In search of the "real Edwards," *CH* spoke with George Marsden, whose biography, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, is being published in 2003 by Yale University Press. Marsden helped us see beyond our misconceptions to the precious legacy of this imposing man.

**Was Edwards a "cold fish"? He refused to do regular pastoral visitation, he seemed more comfortable with his books than his people, and eventually he pushed his ideals on his congregation so hard that they tossed him out.**

There is some basis for the stereotype. Edwards was a serious person, particularly serious about matters of salvation. When he wrote letters to his children, almost invariably the first thing he said was, "You are away from home, and it is possible you might die, and we hope that you will care for your eternal soul—that would give us great joy," or words to that effect. There's not a lot of chit-chat about family news.

When his son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., was 10 years old and away on a missionary trip to learn Indian languages, Edwards wrote him a letter. The week before, the elder Edwards had fallen off a horse and been badly injured. But in this letter, he never mentions that to his son. You would think he'd mention it as an example to say, "be careful," or as a good story, but he limits his letter to salvation and serious matters. That is characteristic.

On the other hand, he apparently could relate well to people who were close to him. He had 10 sisters and 11 children, and they all seemed very affectionate toward him. Also, relations of the heart were at the center of Edwards's theology. The heart was more important than the intellect in his personal relationships and his relationship with God. His whole theology was built around the love of God and the ways we should be reflecting that love.

So along with that seriousness, there is a lot of warmth and genuine concern for others. Edwards is thought of as a stern, cold minister, but in fact, he had his entire congregation and the entire town of Northampton completely "under his spell." Though this relationship did eventually go awry, the intensity of the breakup mirrors the intensity of their earlier affections.

**Socially, he seems an elitist, someone who might even have been out of step in his own, increasingly egalitarian age.**

Think of him as a creature of the world of British hierarchical relationships—think (even though they were later) of the novels of Jane Austen. Whereas today we tend to see structures of patriarchal privilege as demeaning, people of the eighteenth century tended to see social hierarchy and the deference that went with it as good things. These relationships held society together.

There was no question where Edwards stood in that social hierarchy: He played the role of an aristocrat—part of an important family of ministers and magistrates. The most significant of these was his uncle and chief patron, John Stoddard. He ran much of the government of Western Massachusetts and was chief judge and a military leader as well. Edwards was related to a whole network of people like that.

Now, it is true that there was some chafing under that hierarchical system. So Edwards was coming into conflict, in the 1740s, with

those who wanted to see change. But he did sometimes break the old molds. Like his father, Timothy, he worked against some of the prerogatives that men had and women did not. He encouraged his sisters, wife, and daughters to pursue education—though this did not include college, since women did not go to college in his day.

On the other hand, like most in his age, he had a blind spot toward slavery. Though affirming a kind of spiritual equality by welcoming slaves into his congregation, he himself held slaves and saw no need to set them free. In the decades after Edwards's death, though, during the era of the American Revolution, Edwards's closest disciple, Samuel Hopkins, became an anti-slavery leader.

### **If we can get past some of these things, how should we understand the legacy of Edwards? Do we see his fingerprints on American religion today?**

He was the first person to publicize revival on a large scale, and he became part of the wider movement that, during his lifetime, birthed what we now know as evangelicalism. His was not an itinerant or mass-meeting revivalism, however, but a local, church-based one.

His legacy can be most clearly seen in the many churches today that still have ongoing and renewing "revivals." He was also the great theoretician of revivals; he analyzed them, seeking to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate revivals. Revivalists ever since have referred back to that work.

His fingerprints are also seen in American education. Most of the important colleges and even state universities founded in America in the first half of the nineteenth century were founded by New Englanders seeking both to educate and to evangelize the nation. They moved into the Midwest, taking ideals of education with them inspired directly by Timothy Dwight, Edwards's grandson and president of Yale. Many of these college founders looked to Edwards himself as one of their inspirations.

Many of those same people pursued a related program of national social reform, founded on Samuel Hopkins's notion of "disinterested benevolence"—a reworking of an Edwards idea. Their efforts profoundly shaped the nation.

### **What can we learn today from Edwards about religious experience?**

Edwards spent his whole life working on the question of discerning which religious experiences were valid and which were not. At first, he defended most of the extravagant manifestations of revivals, the physical things, on grounds that they don't prove anything one way or another.

But by the time he wrote *Religious Affections*, he was more cautious. The signs of true affections he offers in that book are all about how your experiences play out in the quality of your Christian life—in attitudes, fruit of the spirit, love, joy, peace, and so forth. He argues that people are missing the point if they say that there is some sort of physical manifestation that is characteristic of true Christianity.

He still wants to say that there's nothing intrinsically wrong with such manifestations. But his principle is that every revival will be imitated by Satan—that's why it's hard to tell whether revival experiences are really benefiting those involved. The long-run test was the qualitative change in your life, not the joy bells ringing for a while.

### **What about Edwards's theology? What does it offer today?**

First, Edwards's theology was God-centered. That seems obvious, but the Enlightenment was pushing God to the borders of the universe and inflating the human self. In Edwards's time and ever since, Enlightenment-influenced theologies have started with humans, built a system of morality that suits us, then tried to tailor God to fit our morality.

Edwards, on the other hand, insists on starting with God, as He is portrayed in Scripture. Whatever is true virtue, he says, must be first a virtue that is related to the loving God who stands at the center of reality.

### **What did "Edwards the scientist" do with the Newtonian universe, with its distant God and its mechanical processes?**

For Edwards, the universe itself is the language of God, declaring His glory. It is not identical to God, but it is the medium through which He speaks. So Edwards saw types of Christ not only throughout Scripture, but also through nature (see pp. 40-41). If you are given the eyes or ears to do so, you can see and hear the beauty of God in all reality.

Edwards didn't buy the clockwork universe and absent clockmaker god of the deists. He said that in a dynamic, Newtonian universe, the most basic, important relationships are personal ones, not mechanical ones. Everything is in relationship with God and is upheld by his love.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Jonathan Edwards: Recommended Resources

Chris Armstrong

An excellent way to get to know Edwards is through one of several modern biographies. Ola Winslow's *Jonathan Edwards: 1703-1758* (Macmillan, 1940; Collier paperback, 1961) overcomes what now seems a dated style with memorable scene-setting and penetrating insights. Iain H. Murray's *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Banner of Truth, 1987) is perhaps the biography Edwards himself would most have liked. George M. Marsden's *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press, forthcoming in spring, 2003) is a compelling new account written with Marsden's characteristic care and wisdom.

Another good introduction is a book modeled closely on Edwards's *Religious Affections* (in some ways this is really simply an abbreviated and updated version of Edwards's book): Gerald R. McDermott's *Seeing God: Twelve Reliable Signs of True Spirituality* (InterVarsity, 1995).

John Piper, a modern Edwards cheerleader, pays tribute to Edwards in many of his books. One of these, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Crossway, 1998), reprints a multi-part essay by Edwards on a subject where the Puritan divine's deep spirituality met his profound theological thought, "The End for Which God Created the World." Piper lovingly contextualizes the essay with several introductory chapters, beginning with "A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards."

### Edwards's own writings

Web surfers will want to browse the Yale Jonathan Edwards website, [jonathanedwards.com](http://jonathanedwards.com). This provides an Edwards chronology, links to eight short online biographical sketches, and annotated lists of key Edwards writings. Particularly valuable are the links to online versions of many Edwards writings, including tidbits like the "Resolutions," the "Farewell Sermon," and the "Spider Letter"; mid-length writings like the "Personal Narrative"; and his three masterworks, *Original Sin*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *Religious Affections*.

For a printed copy of *Original Sin*, you will need to go to the definitive Yale Edwards *Works* series. *Freedom of the Will* is available from Soli Deo Gloria (1996), which also publishes the work of John H. Gerstner, one of the foremost retrievers of Edwards's theology for the modern church.

*Religious Affections* is available in paperback from Banner of Truth (1986). If you have access to a large library, you may wish to browse the Yale *Works*, which currently comprises over 20 volumes. Most of these are summarized and reviewed at <http://www.yale.edu/yup/series/edlist.htm>.

For lighter browsing, the best Edwards anthology currently in print is John E. Smith, Harry Stout, and Kenneth Minkema, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (Yale, 1995).

### Books on Edwards

John E. Smith, past general editor of the Edwards *Works*, summarizes and explains a number of Edwards's most important works in his slim volume, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher,*

**Philosopher** (Notre Dame, 1992). Other recent books introducing Edwards's life and thought include two by authors featured in this issue, Stephen J. Nichols, ***Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour to his Life and Thought*** (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) and Stephen R. Holmes, ***God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*** (Eerdmans, 2001).

For those daring enough to dive into the imposing mass of literature on Edwards but wise enough to seek a guide, M. X. Lesser, ***Jonathan Edwards: An Annotated Bibliography, 1979-1993*** (Greenwood, 1994) is the place to go. A much briefer but more recent list, briefly annotated, resides at the Yale website (see "Edwards's own writings," above).

For insight into the early Puritan background that shaped Edwards's life and thought, there are few better guides than Harry Stout, ***The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*** (Oxford, 1986) and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, ***The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England*** (University of North Carolina, 1982).

Stout impresses on the reader the cultural power of Puritan preaching in a colonial world largely devoid of other media, then extracts key themes from his exhaustive reading in several centuries of Puritan sermons. Hambrick-Stowe's book provides meticulously researched, consistently fascinating details on Puritan spirituality, with a warmly sympathetic approach and a wealth of engaging period illustrations.

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