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One

Jonathan Edwards: A Theological Life

Kenneth P. Minkema

New England and the Young Edwards

The world into which Jonathan Edwards was born, on Oct. 5, 1703, was one steeped in theological history and controversy. His family had been part of the Puritan migration from England to escape religious persecution and to establish a “Bible Commonwealth” that would fulfill the promise of the Reformation. The son and grandson of pastors, and related to some of the most influential church leaders of New England—Mathers, Hookers, and Stoddards—Edwards inherited the Calvinist orthodoxy of New England, its grandeur and its tensions. Within this orthodoxy, nation, province, town, church, and individual were joined in a network of interlocking covenants and obligations that bound the fabric of society. Theology served to justify God’s ways to humankind, to prescribe proper channels for human inquiry and redemption, and to define the nature of human interaction. Even more, nature was imbued with religious meaning. Seemingly mundane natural phenomena and human events were seen as “illustrative providences” that contained supernatural messages of reward, punishment, and warning.

Chief among this society for interpreting God’s word and the meaning of events was the clergy, and this was the class into which Edwards was born. Timothy Edwards, Jonathan’s father, had been the pastor of East Windsor for more than sixty years by the time he died, only a couple of months before his only son. Under the direction of his father, mother, and sisters, Jonathan acquired the necessary knowledge for a young gentleman bound for college and the ministry. Reason and learning went hand in hand with the heart and “affections.” He sat under his father’s preaching week after week, witnessing his father’s trials with his congregation as well as his triumphs. The most happy times of all were “awakenings,” times when the Spirit of God moved among the church to convict and convert a number of souls. Also famous for the “stirs” in his church was Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, of Northampton, Massachusetts. During his pastorate, no less than five “harvests” occurred, making Stoddard one of the most respected ministers in New England, and possibly

the most powerful outside of Boston. Timothy was also renowned in Connecticut as a revivalist. It was during one of these “seasons” in his father’s church, when Jonathan was about ten years old, that he built a “prayer booth” in the swamp behind his house. Edwards’ earliest extant letter dates from a few years later; fittingly, the letter is an awakening report, a genre he would make his own.

But theology cannot remain static. Forces from within and outside of New England forced the theology of the founding Puritans to change dramatically. The revocation of the Massachusetts Bay charter at the end of the seventeenth century ended the practice of limiting the franchise and office-holding to full church members, effectively unseating the Puritan theocracy. Such political changes had deep religious implications. For a quarter-century or more, the nature of the New England Way was under stress, because—despite innovations such as revival preaching—fewer and fewer of the descendants of the founders were joining the churches. As a result, the Congregationalists were slowly losing their monopoly on religious and political culture. Measures to ease membership requirements, such as the Half-Way Covenant of 1662, entailed a reexamination not just of ecclesiastical practices but also of how conversion occurred and how the very nature of covenant itself was defined.

The tensions between church and society were played out in Edwards’ closest role models, his father and his grandfather. Although both defended the prerogatives of the ministry, Timothy did so (albeit not without complaining) within the context of the autonomous local congregation, while Stoddard sought a Presbyterian-like hierarchy that could coerce conformity and obedience from above. And while both were famed revivalists, each had different notions of conversion and admission to the church: Timothy put less emphasis on the order and nature of the steps to conversion—the traditional “morphology” that Puritan theologians had outlined—but was strict about admitting people into covenant, requiring a lengthy conversion narrative by applicants and careful scrutiny by minister and congregation. Stoddard, on the other hand, abided strictly by the steps to salvation but slackened the obstacles to membership, even arguing that the Lord’s Supper was a converting ordinance, a means of grace.

The young Edwards himself reflected these tensions and shifts. He tells us in his *Personal Narrative* that as a boy he questioned the central doctrines of his Calvinist heritage. In particular, he resented the doctrines of God’s sovereignty (that everything was absolutely dependent on divine will for continuance) and God’s eternal decrees (that everything divinely preordained must come to pass). Also, in his diary he noted that the stages of his spiritual life did not match what the “old divines,” including his grandfather, taught. He pledged to solve the discrepancy through

study and self-examination. The task of understanding the human heart—including his own—would take him a lifetime.

Larger shifts in Puritan thought and society, felt so palpably on the personal level by individuals such as Edwards, were related as well to new modes of thought making their way across the Atlantic. In the wake of the divisive and violent reign of the Puritans in England, the cultural and intellectual climate favored tolerance, reason, and latitude. Inexorably, and despite the efforts of the most talented of New Englanders, such as Increase and Cotton Mather, colonial religion and society grudgingly deferred to the dictates of the mother country.

College Years and Early Preaching

Growing diversity of opinion on theological topics—from the nature of God and the Trinity to the terms of salvation to the nature of the church—reflected this new climate and were on the rise as Edwards matriculated at the Wethersfield branch of the fledgling Connecticut Collegiate School in 1716. When the students were able to take up residence in the new Yale College building on the New Haven green three years later, so attuned was Edwards to the potentially corrupt influences of heterodoxy that, upon meeting tutor Samuel Johnson (later an Anglican missionary), he promptly returned to Wethersfield. Only after Johnson was dismissed did Edwards go back to New Haven.

Everything from physics to psychology was undergoing reappraisal too. The discoveries of Locke, Newton, and Berkeley presented a new world and a new order to Edwards' fertile mind. Here, however, were ideas that could be accommodated to Protestant orthodox thought, and Edwards energetically set about doing so. Newton's universal laws confirmed to Edwards the wisdom and benevolence of the Creator; Locke's psychology, how God communicated to "perceiving being"; and Berkeley's philosophy, the immanence of God in all reality.

Edwards finished his undergraduate work in 1720 and then returned for graduate studies. This was an especially fruitful time for him, both intellectually and spiritually. Reading voraciously in the college library, he wrote copiously and innovatively on cosmology, being, natural philosophy, light, optics, atoms, and the nature of the mind. He outlined a treatise on a history of the mental world and compiled a stupendous list of subjects on which to write—from the world as "one vast spheroid" to gravity to comets. He commented on Locke's theories, selectively adapting his epistemology but questioning him on other issues, such as the nature of identity and of the will. During this period Edwards developed the concept that all reality is an idea in the mind of God, even that "space is

God,” and that spirit, rather than matter, is true substance. This idealism—the notion that God upholds reality from moment to moment—became a signature feature of his thought. Eventually, out of this idealism would arise an aesthetic perception of the “excellency,” or beauty, of God and holy living.

If his idealism was an answer to philosophical currents flowing from Europe, it was also an indication that he was embracing divine sovereignty and Calvinist notions of God and humankind. In the summer of 1721, he experienced what he called, using Lockean terminology, a “new sense” of God’s glory while reading certain passages of Scripture. He thirsted for more. Then, while home during a break from studies, he had what he later described as a pivotal religious experience. After talking with his father about his “discoveries,” Edwards walked abroad in the pasture, and, looking around and at the sky, he perceived the simultaneous, paradoxical “majestic meekness” and “awful sweetness” of God.

This experience at once changed his focus and prepared him for ministry. In the summer of 1722, he went to preach to a small group of English Presbyterians in New York City for a period of about eight months. Here he began his “Miscellanies,” his private notebooks, with meditations on “holiness” that were keenly personal in nature. Indeed, much of his preaching to this intimate band of Christians reflected the personal contours of his budding spirituality, encouraged by the familylike atmosphere that the group provided. It was with sorrow that he had to leave, but other duties called.

East Windsor, New Haven, and Northampton

His New York City sojourn over, Edwards returned to East Windsor in April 1723. After some travel, he settled down to compose his Master’s *Quaestio*, the final requirement for his graduate degree. Through the summer he worked on it and, at the great day in September, delivered it in New Haven before the assembled college community and colony dignitaries. Here, for the first time in public, he took on the forces of heterodoxy. He defended the proposition that sinners are saved through faith in the sacrifice of Christ alone. This was a standard enough Reformed tenet, but in the context in which it was delivered, Edwards’ words were fraught with meaning.

When Edwards had finished his undergraduate work, he had been chosen to give the valedictory address. In his oration, he had praised in flowery terms the rector Timothy Cutler, the tutors, and the trustees. He, and many in the audience, would come to regret the trust and praise they had lavished on the college’s leader. For at commencement exercises in 1722,

Cutler, the tutors, and several area ministers revealed their conversion to the Church of England. Thus, when Edwards and his fellow graduates mounted the platform a year later, everyone paid close attention to them in order to detect any lingering heterodoxy. Edwards' defense of justification by faith alone and his criticism of any who would make a "new law" did not disappoint. From this beginning, he faced the challenge presented by new theological opinions coming from abroad and from within New England.

While Jonathan had his eyes on a brave new world, his father was intent on bringing him back home, or as near to it as possible. Timothy had been in contact with the newly formed church at Bolton, Connecticut, not far from East Windsor, to interest them in his promising son. Through 1723, he apparently continued to cultivate the relationship, because by November Jonathan had signed on as pastor. Before going there, however, he had some free time, which he used for writing. Besides beginning a commentary on the Book of Revelation, he revisited earlier notes on insects and wrote them up in October as a letter to Massachusetts judge Paul Dudley, a member of the Royal Society. Timothy Edwards was a friend and correspondent of Dudley, who had communicated some of Timothy's botanical observations to London for publication in the Society's famous *Transactions*. At his father's urging, Jonathan addressed his "Spider Letter" to Dudley in the hopes that the good judge would deem that worthy of publication as well. He did not. However, Edwards would later on make famous rhetorical use of spiders in his sermons.

Bolton was able to keep Edwards only until the spring of 1724, when Yale again beckoned, this time with an offer to serve as a tutor. As Edwards noted in his "Diary," this began a spiritual slump, caused by the endless concerns and diversions of his post, that lasted for about three years. But if the life of the spirit did not fare well, the life of the mind thrived. With the college library to rummage and academic classes to teach, Edwards built on his reading and study. Always physically frail, however, he succumbed in late 1725 to exhaustion and spent three months recovering under his mother's care. As soon as he was able, he was back at his studies, adding to the "Miscellanies" and beginning other notebooks.

Then, in August 1726, he was asked to assist his grandfather, the venerable Stoddard, at the prestigious church in Northampton. From here on, milestones came fast. In February he was ordained and in July married Sarah Pierpont of New Haven, whom he had met as a student. Now a pastor, Edwards' attentions shifted from the meditative and abstract to the practical. He now had to deliver sermons at an increasing rate, including the full round of regular sermons (two each sabbath) as well as

occasional sermons for sacraments, fast days, and political and military events. Also, his private writings shifted to more pastoral topics, such as faith and signs of godliness. He even started to scrutinize his grandfather's views on the church, sainthood, conversion, and the sacraments with increasing dissatisfaction, committing these reservations to the "Miscellanies" and to other notes.

While learning the exigencies of the parish round, Edwards also kept his vision on the wider world and the "fashionable schemes of divinity" that were everywhere gaining strength. By 1731, he was ready to enter the larger fray. Invited to preach a lecture in Boston in August of that year, Edwards delivered *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption*, his first published work. Here, in the spirit of his Master's disquisition, he skewered any positions that sought to establish a different relation between God and humanity beside that outlined in the Bible (as he interpreted it). God was sovereign in his disposal of everything, especially the plan of redemption, which was God's greatest work, the be-all and end-all of creation itself. Humanity, meanwhile, was absolutely dependent on God for everything, even, as Edwards had privately formulated, for existence from moment to moment. Nothing human beings did could merit favor, much less salvation. Sinners, he could now assert with a certainty based on personal experience, were utterly reliant on the sovereignty and decrees of God. Furthermore, it was to God's glory that this relationship of sovereignty and dependency, of depravity and redemption, was established.

Pastor of a large, prominent church, and with his theological stance firmly in place, Edwards now looked to take his doctrines and preaching a step further. He sought to emulate his father and grandfather by sparking a revival. It would not take long.

The Connecticut Valley Revivals, 1734–1735

In August 1733, Edwards preached a sermon in Northampton that would be published the following year as *A Divine and Supernatural Light*. His second printed writing, *A Divine Light* set forth the scriptural and rationality of God's indwelling presence in the hearts of believers. This inner light renovated the entire psychic constitution, or "affections," of the individual. Asserting doctrines like these, Edwards saw a "softening" among his congregation, especially young people, toward the end of 1733.

What seemed to have a special effect on his congregation—at least according to Edwards—was a lecture on justification in which he reached back to his Master's *Quaestio* to construct a detailed defense and analysis

of the doctrine of *sola gratia*. That Edwards should preach in 1734 on this doctrine was polemical as well as hortatory, for in this year the threat of foreign ideological invasion in the form of Arminianism had, to Edwards' way of thinking, become a reality right in Hampshire County. William Rand of Sunderland was preaching an Arminian take on works and salvation, and Robert Breck, who also was rumored to be infected by this humanistic theology, was seeking ordination in Springfield. While neither *Justification by Faith Alone* nor the Hampshire Association's campaign succeeded in thwarting Breck's ordination, it had the desired emotional effect. By mid-1734, Edwards was overseeing a blossoming revival, the first major one in Northampton since Stoddard's heyday.

Edwards encapsulated the Connecticut Valley awakenings that were sparked by the justification discourse in *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*, which went through several iterations, each one longer than the previous. This account, which was eventually translated into several languages, became a manual for revivalists in the Anglo-American world and beyond. It also catapulted Edwards into the international limelight as a leading evangelical, as a scientist of revivalism, and as an expert on conversion psychology. Throughout the rest of his career, revivalists seeking to make a name for themselves would emulate Edwards' *Faithful Narrative*—right down to the title—and he would be consulted on a number of awakening-related issues.

After an all-too-brief period of piety, blissful social accord, and rapturous church singing—even the men sang in three-part harmony—the revivals came to an abrupt halt. First, a man named Thomas Stebbins, who was apparently mentally unstable, tried to slit his throat. Then, in June 1735, Edwards' uncle Joseph Hawley, in a fit of melancholy over his eternal state, followed Stebbins' lead but, tragically, was successful in taking his life. Edwards' emphatic plea for conversion just a few months before in *Pressing into the Kingdom*, "'tis NOW, at this day; NOW is the accepted time, even while it is called today!" had become the devil-inspired parody, "Cut your own throat, now is good opportunity: *now, NOW!*" Edwards is often unjustly portrayed as driving Hawley to suicide. Hawley apparently suffered from chronic depression, and for his part, Edwards was deeply affected by his uncle's desperate act, so much so that from that time forward he set melancholy aside as a special category in his writings on the conversion process.

Edwards' response to Hawley's death, as well as more generally to the "backsliding" of his congregation into their pre-revival viciousness and impiety, prompted him to rethink his approach. Certainly the cooling affections of the hundreds he had let into full membership played a part in this reappraisal too. Added to this was the ridicule Edwards was facing both at home and in neighboring towns. Edwards, quite frankly, came to

realize that his inexperience and his people's enthusiasm had misled both him and them. *A Faithful Narrative* was still hugely popular, which pleased its author. But it had also become an embarrassment to Edwards, who feared comparison of the real Northampton with the one he had created in the minds of readers. In the months and years following the Connecticut Valley stir, he preached and wrote in a remedial vein, seeking to restore balance to his views on the true marks of conversion, in effect to qualify *A Divine and Supernatural Light* by reinstating other important dimensions of religious experience. In sermons, in notebooks such as the "Miscellanies" and "Signs of Godliness," and in memoranda such as "Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences," he moved away from an emphasis on the affections alone and toward an emphasis on perseverance and enduring Christian behavior. Sanctification was now to become as important for Edwards as justification had been earlier.

Through the late 1730s, Edwards alternately browbeat his congregation, comparing their present "dullness" to their engagedness during the awakening, and pursued the doctrine of true Christian practice in some of the most ambitious and extended sermons and discourses of his career. In late 1737 and early 1738, he delivered a nineteen-sermon series on Matthew 25, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Here he pointed up the similarities and differences between true and false saints, and how many in Northampton were evangelical hypocrites with empty lamps. To demonstrate the content of Christian living here on earth and in its final state in heaven, he spent the rest of 1738 preaching a series on 1 Corinthians in twenty-one installments, later published as *Charity and Its Fruits*. Not content with this, beginning in early 1739 he spent no less than thirty preaching occasions laying out the cosmic narrative of salvation, sermons later collected as *A History of the Work of Redemption*. Here he sketched the histories of heaven, hell, and earth, and God's unfailing covenantal arrangement with the church through all time, culminating in the establishment of the church's period of peace during the millennium.

The Great Awakening

One of the central features of *A History of the Work of Redemption* was the argument that human history was propelled by periodic revivals. If Edwards had been handed a hard lesson after the high times of 1734 and 1735, his faith in the necessity and efficacy of revival was not shaken, and he anticipated the day when the next awakening, possibly the prelude to the millennium, would come. He had good reason to believe it was not far off. Already in late 1739 he had heard of the efforts of the English itinerant George Whitefield and of the Wesley brothers and relayed news

of awakenings abroad. In his sermons and through his correspondence, Edwards sought to rekindle the flames of revival locally and to learn of similar events from across the globe. In early 1740 he preached a lengthy series on Hebrews 12 that extended the millennialistic tone established in the *History of Redemption* discourse by portraying the company of true Christians coming to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. Reaching out to the young people, who had spearheaded the Connecticut Valley movement, Edwards exhorted them to live pious lives and to avoid the temptations offered by competing secular sites such as the tavern and nightly “frolics.” Meanwhile, he sent letters to individuals highly placed in the transatlantic evangelical network, through which he collected news and became a regular correspondent with religious leaders in the colonies and in England and Scotland.

Whitefield himself became one of Edwards’ correspondents and acquaintances. When Edwards invited the Grand Itinerant to preach in Northampton on his journey through New England, Whitefield accepted. In October 1740, he preached to packed, weeping auditories who were carried away by his dramatic style. And then he departed, leaving the settled pastor to pick up the pieces. As in the aftermath of the previous awakening, Edwards turned to a parable. This time he picked the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, warning listeners who had been impressed by Whitefield’s eloquence that sudden conversions, like seeds planted on hard or thorny ground, can flourish temporarily but then die quickly. In the sermon *Sinners in Zion*, which picked up on the Hebrews sermon from earlier in the year, Edwards, seeking to direct the secure and the newly awakened, severely excoriated his congregation, declaring, “*You* are the sinners in Zion!” In another, more famous sermon on sinners, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Edwards set forth a world in which humankind have nothing to rely on, nothing in their own power to keep them from a dismal fate, but the power of God. To make his point clear, he depicted sinners held over the pit of hell by God much as one would hold a “loathsome” spider.

Clearly, Edwards was trying to channel the energy of the awakening in ways he had not before. He knew he ran the risk of a less intense, less prolonged stir, but the experience of the earlier revival had taught him that it was more important to insure the experiences of the few who were true subjects of the new birth than to multiply communicants inadvisedly. But despite Edwards’ caveats, conversions, “high transports,” and other intense religious experiences continued among the congregation through 1741, and he was encouraged, so much so that his hope for the millennium grew to its greatest height. On fast days in 1741 he called on his congregation to pray for millennial glory and described “seasons of in-gathering” as sure signs of its prelude. “Miscellanies” entries from this

period are peppered with chiliastic information and speculations. In *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revivals*, written in 1742, Edwards for the first and only time publicly dared to hope that the millennium would begin in New England. And, through his network of correspondents, he would become involved in the Concert of Prayer, quarterly days of supplication for the ushering in of the “glorious times,” in support of which he would publish his *Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Prayer*.

Still, Edwards was ever on the alert to stand against new forms of religious thought and practice. For all of his idealistic hopes for the “great and general awakening” of the 1740s, he was a cautious observer. When engaging the colonial leadership, he had to be, for the ministry and magistracy had split over whether the revivals were an authentic work of the Spirit, or the product of human imagination, or, worse, a delusion of the Devil. As a politician of revival, if we may call him that, Edwards came out against many of the things to which antirevivalist Old Lights objected, including Separatism, claims to revelation, lay preaching, and female exhorters. We know, too, that he opposed some of Whitefield’s central teachings, such as spiritual “impulses” and assurance of salvation. Furthermore, Edwards’ 1741 Yale commencement lecture, *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, delineating true and false signs of grace, was meant to placate the college faculty upset by student separatism and censoriousness. Here, in *Some Thoughts*, and in *Religious Affections*, Edwards was standing in judgment of the conversion phenomena his times had witnessed.

But in these major revival treatises and elsewhere, Edwards’ careful analysis and his moderate position served another end. He was advocating that, ultimately, though intermingled with corruptions, the revivals were the real thing. By providing models of piety, first in the persons of Abigail Hutchinson and Phoebe Bartlett in *Faithful Narrative*, then Sarah Pierpont Edwards in *Some Thoughts*, and then David Brainerd in his *Life*, as well as by scrupulously separating false and true signs of grace, Edwards empowered clergy and laity alike to examine their experiences and to model their behavior accordingly. Significantly, the lesson learned back in 1734–35 had stuck. The twelfth, final, and most developed positive sign of true grace in *Religious Affections* famously states that “Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.”

Qualifications

Through the 1740s, continuing his campaign against heterodoxy, Edwards worked on a number of fronts toward a defense of Christianity and the Bible against critiques by Deists and others. One of the goals of

the *History of the Work of Redemption* was to show, through prophecies, the verity of Christian revealed religion. Edwards had been stockpiling observations along these lines in scriptural commentaries, such as his “Notes on Scripture” and “Interleaved Bible,” and in the “Miscellanies,” under rubrics such as “Christian Religion.” But in the 1740s he produced lengthy compositions on the prophetic tradition that demonstrated the necessity of revelation and the accuracy of the Bible. One ambitious project, “The Harmony of the Old and New Testaments,” was to show, through comparison, the similarity of spirit, genius, and teachings between the two revelations. Elsewhere, he took on the messianic prophetic tradition in three massive entries in the “Miscellanies.” Nos. 1067 and 1068 assembled “Prophecies of the Messiah” in the Old Testament and showed their fulfillment in the New, while 1069 dealt with biblical types of the Messiah. In “Traditions of the Heathen,” a series of entries compiled through the decade, Edwards defended Christian faith and doctrines by pointing to similar teachings in ancient pagan writers, evidence he amassed from a number of sources. For Edwards, these similarities argued a common revelation to humankind in the distant past that had become corrupted with “human additions” through time but that had been kept alive in Judaism and restored with the coming of Christ.

Edwards was able to accomplish all of this writing during a relative lull following the subsidence of the revival. He was even able to begin work on a long-projected study on freedom of the will, aimed against Arminians. But then, starting in late 1748, he and his church were taken up with a prolonged dispute over the qualifications for admission to the church. Even before coming to Northampton, Edwards had been uncomfortable about Stoddard’s views of the church and his procedure for admitting communicants, but for the sake of peace he had kept his qualms to himself. The revivals only heightened his uneasiness about who could get into covenant. After an extensive search of Scripture, he came to the conclusion that requirements had to be stricter.

The noncommittal form developed by Stoddard—and used by Edwards for more than two decades—no longer satisfied Edwards’ conviction that a profession had to be an expression of a sincere belief in the workings of grace and a desire to live a Christian life. His aim was to establish a purer church that was, as much as possible, the domain of real saints and that kept out hypocrites. His early writings, especially his “Miscellanies,” showed a tension between the notions of a “visible” versus an “invisible” church and a concern for how to achieve a proper balance of real saints and a “mixed multitude.” Furthermore, the awakenings had shown him the dangers that fanaticism, censoriousness, schisms, and claims to higher revelations posed to the churches. Ironically, Edwards found that his “new” views on qualifications were most

popular among Separatists and “Strict Congregationalists.” This unanticipated sympathy—which Edwards’ opponents used to bolster their accusations of heresy—may help explain why he so consistently criticized Separatists, antinomians, and other “enthusiasts” in regular sermons, ordination sermons, and published treatises. Ironically, Edwards came to be identified with the very religious extremism that he had opposed since his college years.

Whatever ecclesiastical questions Edwards was trying to resolve, for many in his congregation he had gone too far. His views threatened their status as church members and the baptismal qualifications of their children. On top of other differences that had arisen during the 1740s—for example, over his salary, the necessity of renewing the church covenant, and the notorious “Bad Book” affair, in which young men ridiculed young women with knowledge obtained from midwives’ manuals—Edwards’ effort to change church admission policies was the last straw. After a bitter and protracted dispute, Edwards was dismissed on June 22, 1750. A week later he delivered his famous *Farewell Sermon* that anticipated the day when he and his former congregation would have to meet before the judgment seat of God to give account of themselves. However, dismissal did not spell the end of Edwards’ involvement in the debate over church membership. The controversy would engage him for the next couple of years, as he answered an extended criticism of his *Humble Inquiry* with a polemical riposte, *Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated*. But by that time, he was in a very different position.

Stockbridge

The Indian mission at Stockbridge had been founded back in the 1730s. Northampton leaders, such as Colonel John Stoddard, had been instrumental in establishing it, and Edwards too had participated. Edwards himself had shown keen interest in spreading the gospel to the Indians—and in “civilizing” them into English allies. His efforts to raise funds for the mission from his congregants, his nurturing of missionaries-to-be, such as Elihu Spencer and Gideon Hawley, and, most importantly, his publication of *The Life of David Brainerd*, which presented to the world the selfless model of a missionary martyr, are ample proof. After being deprived of the Northampton pulpit, Edwards trolled for a new pastorate, preaching in small towns in the Berkshires and receiving invitations to take churches in Virginia and even Scotland.

But he had his eye on the Stockbridge post. The first missionary, John Sargeant, had died in 1749, leaving a congregation of over two hundred Mahicans and a small group of English settlers (about twelve families).

Through 1749, Edwards wrote to Boston church leaders about the necessity for a successor, in effect setting himself up for consideration once the dismissal that he was almost sure would come had occurred. Through late 1750 and early 1751, Edwards commuted back and forth between Stockbridge and Northampton, preaching to the Indians and English. He was finally installed in the summer of 1751 and set to work.

He had no lack of things to do. Stockbridge was no sylvan retreat where he could finally sit back and compose the theological treatises he had envisioned for years. Although he managed to produce some of the most significant of his works during this period, he did so while dealing with a broad range of complex and divisive issues and individuals. One problem was stopping the English from exploiting the Indians by taking their lands and disenfranchising them in town meetings. Related to this was the challenge of keeping the Indians at the mission in the face of the abuse and neglect they suffered. Another challenge was wresting control of the Indian boys' and girls' schools from the hands of his own relatives, who were personally benefiting from the funds meant to support the schools and from labor provided by the students who were supposed to be attending them. Also, disapproving members of the oversight boards tried at every turn to have Edwards removed. And still another concern was the threat of attack by the French and their Indian allies, particularly with the beginning of the Seven Years' War in 1754. At one point, Edwards' own house was "forted in" and quartered by militia because of the fear of enemy attacks.

Somehow, Edwards persevered through all of these trials. He obtained sole charge of the mission from its chief benefactor in England. But the cost of his personal victory was great for the mission. By 1754, many of the Indians had left, the schools were almost nonexistent, and Edwards had succeeded in making a great number of enemies.

With all of these distractions and responsibilities, it is all the more remarkable that Edwards was nonetheless able, during a space of about five years, to write some of the most important theological and ethical disquisitions in the history of American thought, not to mention Christian thought as a whole. He had been compiling notes and drafting pieces of *Freedom of the Will* off and on since the late 1720s, which helped him, when he finally was able to write, produce a draft of it in just three months. By early 1755, he had also written at least one of the two dissertations that form the basis of his ethical thought: *The End for Which God Created the World*, which he read to his colleagues Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy, and *The Nature of True Virtue*. These pieces were composed during a year-long illness including "fits" and "agues" that left Edwards weakened and even thinner than normal. Nonetheless, by early 1757 he had completed yet another treatise, *Original Sin*, which would

not be published till after he was dead. *Original Sin* had its inception in 1748, when Edwards received John Taylor's treatise on the subject from his Scottish correspondent John Erskine. Taylor continued to concern Edwards, who in his *Farewell Sermon* warned the people of Northampton not to fall prey to Taylor's comfortable assertions about human nature. Here, Edwards forged a synthesis of opposing schools of thought on the doctrine of imputation, introducing his views on identity and his idealistic conception of continuous creation to describe the "constitutional" unity of humankind with its progenitor, Adam.

These writings, not to mention the extensive notes made in his private manuscripts, range across the broad spectrum of topics that are described in the essays in this volume. But they do share certain qualities that bear mentioning here. Most of all, they are polemical in nature. Each treatise is aimed at a particular person or persons who represented a certain mode of thought to which Edwards objected. In this sense, they are a culmination of Edwards' efforts, begun in his *Quaestio* and *God Glorified*, to reverse the changing tide of theology. *Freedom of the Will* was a vestige of his old campaign against the Arminians, begun all those years ago on the New Haven green in 1723. The subsequent productions, however, were aimed at proponents of "humanitarian" philosophies who sought to remove God from the moral and salvific landscape. In this way, the ethical concerns hark back to his earliest writings.

Another thing to note about the Stockbridge treatises is that—for all of their reputation and influence—they were of secondary interest to Edwards, who was pursuing larger projects. Following the death of the Reverend Aaron Burr, president of the College of New Jersey, in September 1757, the college trustees pitched upon Edwards as the successor. The following month, Edwards wrote a letter describing his current and future interests in detail. One of the "great works" he planned to produce was his *Harmony of the Old and New Testaments*, begun a decade before, which would take in the voluminous materials on messianic prophecies and typology. Still another was *A History of the Work of Redemption*. From his college days Edwards had outlined a summa defending the rationality of the main doctrines of Christianity. By the late 1730s, however, the traditional systematic format gave way to an "entire new method": a narrative that would incorporate cosmology, natural philosophy, doctrine, anthropology, and scriptural exegesis in a grand historical account of heaven, earth, and hell. His lengthy series on Isaiah 51:8, preached in 1739, would form the nucleus, but since then he had scoured his writings, keying pieces for inclusion, adding material in his "Miscellanies," and constructing a series of notebooks devoted to the topic.

It was left to his devotees to publish the History Discourse, for Edwards would never finish it. A council in January 1758 freed him from

his Stockbridge responsibilities, and he accepted the Princeton post. He went on ahead, set up housekeeping, preached in the chapel, and began to meet with students. However, smallpox was in the vicinity. Among the many who had fallen ill was Edwards' oldest son, Timothy, preparing to matriculate at the college. The trustees recommended that Edwards take an inoculation. Though inoculation was still a controversial—and risky—procedure at the time, Edwards, a man of science at the beginning and the last, set an example by submitting to it. Unfortunately, the serum was corrupted. After a promising initial reaction, Edwards sank into a secondary fever, characterized by severe swelling of the throat. Expressing resignation to the will of God, he died on March 22, 1758.

Edwards had begun his career amidst changing theological currents. He spent his career dealing with those currents, sometimes conforming to them, often drawing from them for his own purposes but also constructing a considerable critique of them. Ultimately, his defense of the Calvinist version of Christianity, featuring innovative and forceful arguments, may have failed. But in mounting his defense, he left behind a legacy that, as the essays in this volume testify, is still felt to this day.

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