

Jonathan Edwards
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We have already seen how there was developing in New England a certain liberal tendency in regard to theological problems. We have traced in a general way the life of Chas. Chauncy, who was the leader of that free movement, and noticed that in the three great controversies, the Great Awakening, the Episcopal controversy, and the Theological Controversy, Chauncy was the champion of the ideas that were in accord with the developing movement of the times. In the Great Awakening he stood for the extreme democratic congregational ideas. In the Episcopal controversy, he was again democratic. In the Theological controversy his position was marked by the emphasis that he laid on means of Grace and common sense.

Opposed to him was Jonathan Edwards, a man of great power, who represented the Calvinists' thought, and had the courage to carry his thought to its logical conclusions, and paved the way for the overthrow of Calvinism.

Edwards was born Oct 5, 1703 in the town of So. Windsor. He came of a family of great intellectual power, coupled with great activity. His father, Timothy Edwards, was a minister of great power. Edwards' mother was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard of Northampton, one of the ablest ministers of the period.

As a child he was very precocious, and in September before he was fourteen years old he entered Yale College, from which he graduated in 1720.

At about the age of 19 or 20 he passed through a great religious experience of conversion. This was of great importance in his life, and was the foundation of his theological system. After a trial of preaching in New York, and a period of two years when he was tutor at Yale he was called to and ordained at the Church of Northampton to act

as colleague to his grandfather Solomon Stoddard. During the same year he was married to Sarah Pierpont, daughter of James Pierpont, minister of New Haven.

His preaching in Northampton soon began to give evidence of the fact that he was no ordinary person. Walker says, The town was not unfamiliar with religious quickenings. At least five had occurred under the able ministry of Solomon Stoddard. But Edwards' sermons were on themes calculated to stir a community, and especially an isolated rural community. Two sudden deaths in the spring of 1734 excited the concern of the little town—a concern which was deepened by a vague alarm lest the spreading Arminianism which the Northampton pulpit denounced was a token of the withdrawal of God's redemptive mercy from sinful men. (*Ten N.E. Leaders*, Walker, p. 233¹).

During the winter of 1734 and 5 Edwards conducted a revival in his own church, when there were about three hundred conversions. These conversions in general carried the people through three stages according to Edwards himself. The first stage was an awful apprehension of the condition in which men stand by nature. This was so overwhelming as to produce oftentimes painful physical effects. Next followed, in cases which Edwards believed to be the genuine work of the Spirit of God, a conviction that they justly deserved the divine wrath, not infrequently leading to expressions of wonder that 'God has not cast them into hell long ago.' [And] from this state of extreme humiliation they emerged [often suddenly,] into 'a holy repose of the soul in God through Christ'"²

It is not strange that his sermons should have had such an effect on the people, when he says that the wicked are

¹ *Ten New England Leaders* by Williston Walker. New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1901.

² *Ten New England Leaders* by Williston Walker. New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1901, pp. 233-4.

useful simply as objects of the destructive wrath of God. When he tells the uncommitted members of his congregation that they are withheld for a brief period by the restraining hand of God from the hell into which they are to fall at their appointed times; when [he] pictures the damned glow in endless burning agony like a spider in the flame; when he heightens the happiness of the redeemed by the contrast between the felicities of heaven and the eternal torments of the lost, visible forever to the saints in glory, one is not surprised to hear that the people sat on the edges of their pews and clutched convulsively on the backs of the ones in front. Not only were many converted by Edwards one was led to commit suicide, and two others contemplated doing the same thing.

But the fruits of these sermons are not all seen in the 300 conversions, for after the excitement was over there came a great relaxation, Edwards became especially estranged from his young people. He even waited at one time for from years from 1744-48 for a single person to join his church. One is not surprised that he lost his hold, when one learns that he said, "Man is loathing because of his inherent wickedness," or "As innocent as children seem to us, yet in God's sight they are evil and loathsome like a viper." or "Men are a generation of vipers," or the simple subject of his famous Enfield sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God."

Thus you see that Edwards was prepared by his own experiences for the Great Awakening of 1740 and he welcomed Whitefield to his pulpit, and went himself to other places as a preacher of the revival Gospel. It is but natural therefore that Edwards, himself having experienced conversion, and been the human means (to say the least) of 300 conversions in his own church, should have taken up the Revival Controversy, and opposed Chauncy and the general Arminian movement.

His theological system rests upon the idea of the Absolute Sovereignty of God. If God is absolute, and yet there is evil in the world, then God must be responsible for sin. Edwards went the full length of his logic and declared God responsible for sin, urging that God's hatred of sin could not be shown. There is sin in the world, and

he punishes the sinners. In his sermon, "Sinners Useful in their Damnation," he brings out this idea showing that they are useful to glorify God.

But one is forced to say that a man who regards God as a God of love and justice cannot put together these two ideas of Edwards. (1) his idea of absolute sovereignty. (2) the damnation of men.

In 1750 Edwards came into trouble with his church over the question of a pure church, and was dismissed from Northampton and came to Stockbridge, then but a small village but with his duties as pastor he combined the duties as missionary to the Housatonic Indians.

In January 1758 Edwards was elected President of Princeton College in New Jersey and moved there but died in about one month, on Feb 13, 1758 of small pox inoculation.

Despite Edwards theology, he placed great emphasis upon the ethical side of life, and he was especially strong in emphasizing the moral fruits of the spirit.

To make a summary of Edwards and note the things for which he stands:

- (1) The idea of the Absolute Sovereignty of God.
- (2) His spiritual mystical theology, i.e., man coming face-to-face with God himself (seen in his idea of conversion).
- (3) His high standard of ethics.

It was the high ethical standard of Edwards that Channing and Parker used in fighting against Edwards' God.