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Jonathan Edwards After 300 Years: A Tercentennial View

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Along with the various Hodges and Alexanders buried there, I also came across the grave of President Grover Cleveland buried next to his friend, the great evangelical warhorse B. B. Warfield. As the autumn evening darkened, I was determined to find the grave I had driven hundreds of miles to see.

Across the cemetery I could see an American flag shifting in the wind. Under the flag lay a vault and marker indicating the grave of Aaron Burr, Jr.—the infamous Vice President of the United States, alleged traitor, and the man who killed Alexander Hamilton in the nation’s most famous duel. As I read Burr’s marker, I leaned on the vault to its right. This vault’s inscription was faded and worn, and written in a fine Latin script. Through the dim light I saw that this vault was the grave I had been seeking—the grave of Aaron Burr’s grandfather, Jonathan Edwards.

October 5 marks the 300th anniversary of Edward’s birth in East Windsor, Connecticut. Most Americans would consider that fact of little historical interest, and of even less personal significance. For evangelical Christians this historical milestone is something altogether different, for we all stand in Edward’s shadow.

Jonathan Edwards is the towering figure on the American religious landscape and the great theological intellect of evangelical Christianity. He has no rivals, in his time or in our own.

The late Paul Ramsey, one of the editor’s of the great Yale edition of Edward’s works, once explained his significance: “One studies the time and backgrounds of some men in order to understand them. Others have such rare greatness that one studies them in order to understand their times, or even to comprehend the deepest meaning of the intellectual and other influences that were effectual upon them. Jonathan Edwards was such an original.”

Like most figures of strategic historical importance, Edwards was both loved and hated—then and now. Mark Twain described Edwards as “a resplendent intellect gone mad.” Ashbel Green, one of Edwards’ successors as president of the College of New Jersey [now Princeton University] valorized Edwards as “one of the most holy, humble and heavenly minded men, that the world has seen, since the apostolic age.”

The dividing line in this divergence of opinion on Edwards is the question of ultimate reality. Edwards was a man consumed by a desire to know God and to declare His glory. The sovereign creating and redeeming God of the Bible was the entire frame of Edwards’ worldview. Once converted as a young man, this great passion drove Edwards to produce the most significant theological and philosophical writings ever produced by an intellectual on these shores.

Even without the writings, Edwards would remain a fascinating and formidable figure on our historical landscape. As George Marsden, Edwards’ most significant biographer, notes, Jonathan Edwards was not really an American at all. Though a contemporary of Benjamin Franklin, Edwards died almost twenty years before the American Revolution.

Marsden is right—Edwards' world was British, but he was also of the stoutest colonial stock. His family, drawn from Stoddards, Williamses, and Edwardses, represented the cream of colonial aristocracy. Furthermore, in a culture most concerned about spiritual matters and given to follow the authority of clergymen, Jonathan Edwards was both son and grandson to luminary ministers.

He was a child prodigy, graduating with two Yale degrees before he reached twenty years of age. He quickly gained an influential pastorate, eventually following his grandfather as pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts. There he preached the Word of God and cultivated the spiritual health of his flock through at least two revivals and various calamities. Eventually, he was to be dismissed from the church after he became convinced that the Lord's Supper was to be restricted to full members of the church—those who had demonstrated evidence of conversion. Unlike his famous grandfather, Edwards did not see the Lord's Supper as a "converting ordinance." This led to conflict within the church, and, in Edwards' words, "occasioned great uneasiness among my people, and has filled all the country with noise." Edwards was on sure biblical ground in his decision not to follow his grandfather's example and teaching on this matter, but the flock's feathers had been severely ruffled, and the pastor was dismissed. The church at Northampton has since gone down in history as the church that infamously fired the nation's greatest preacher-theologian.

Jonathan Edwards held an unshakable faith in the sovereignty and active providence of God. The center of this faith was absolute confidence in the goodness of God and His loving relations with His creation—especially His human creatures. After his dismissal from Northampton, Edwards went to western Massachusetts as a missionary preacher to the Mohicans and Mohawks. The seven years he spent there, without the burdens of a church so large as Northampton, enabled Edwards to write the greatest works of his literary legacy, including *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, *Original Sin*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *The Nature of True Virtue*.

The majority of Americans, if aware of Edwards at all, know him as the preacher of America's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Most high school and college-level anthologies of literature contain this sermon—most often introduced with apology as an example of the bizarre beliefs once held by primitive Americans. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" became fodder for "Jonathan Edwards in the Hands of Secular English Teachers."

The plain fact is that Edwards believed in Hell and Heaven, and was certain that the most important question of human existence came down to where one will spend eternity. As Marsden helpfully explains, Edwards can only be understood by asking the question: "How would this issue look if it really were the case that bliss or punishment for a literal eternity was at stake?"

In his sermon, Edwards reminded the congregation that God's wrath is a reality: "There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God, it would immediately burst forth upon you. The sovereign pleasure of God, for a moment, stays his rough wind; otherwise it would come with fury, and your destruction would come like a whirlwind, and you would be like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor."

But, Edwards continued, "Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open and stands in calling, and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners." Edwards was as confident in God's saving purpose in Christ as he was of God's certain wrath to be poured out upon sinners. With this as his consistent message, Edwards was a preacher-evangelist as well as a preacher-theologian. As the biographer of his young friend David Brainerd, Edwards was also one of the most significant figures in the rise of missionary commitment in the colonies.

Even the secular world recognizes Edwards as an exemplar of American scholarship. His penetrating philosophical explorations of beauty, the exercise of the human will, and the nature of virtue continue to shape the American mind. Edwards was an early exponent of science, having published his scientific observations of the spider—an animal that had fascinated Edwards from his boyhood. His confidence in the usefulness of science—driven by his belief that the divine Creator had given us an orderly and knowable universe—led him to take a smallpox vaccination just after he went to Princeton as president of the college. Instead of inoculating Edwards, the vaccination produced a deadly case of the disease, and Edwards died at his prime in 1758. Resting secure in the sovereignty of God and the goodness of His ways toward His own, Edwards died as he had lived.

In the end, we will see Edwards through our own lenses. Those who share his faith in God and his God-saturated worldview will claim Edwards as a great champion of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Those who sneer at the

Christian faith or seek to reduce it down to pious platitudes will see Edwards as a deluded intellect wasted on the quaint idea of the glory of God. Edwards would be undeterred.

In his sermon entitled “The Christian Pilgrim,” Edwards wrote: “The enjoyment of [God] 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 God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean.”

The passage of three centuries has not dimmed his words nor diminished his monumental contribution to Christian thought. May God send another of his kind to this generation.

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