

# Jonathan Edwards

## Legacy

### Revival theology

- At the beginning of the evangelical movement, Edwards' main role was to be the top theologian of revival.
- Edwards taught that revivals would usher in the return of Christ.
- For a long time, evangelicalism was defined by revivalism.
- A big feature of revivals has often been emotionalism. Pro-revivalists have often gone to Edwards for support, because he was accepting of extreme emotional responses. Critics of revival have also gone to Edwards for support, because he taught that the proof of a genuine revival isn't whether it makes people feel something but whether it makes people love each other.

### Social reform

- Edwards' era of greatest influence came forty years after his death, from 1800 to 1860, among Upper Northern evangelicals, especially Congregationalists and Presbyterians (but not exclusively). They ignored some things he wrote but were heavily influenced by others.
- Edwards taught that "true virtue" was "disinterested benevolence to Being in general."
- Edwards also taught that as time went on, the gospel would reach wider and wider, and more and more people around the world would experience spiritual awakening. It would not come without conflict, but eventually the whole world would live in the condition of a New England town in the middle of revival—the optimum situation short of heaven. Then Christ would return. (Known as "postmillennialism.")
- These teachings made for optimistic activism among Northern evangelicals in the early and mid-1800s. We would look at their beliefs and call them conservative. But their social vision was highly progressive.

## America's ambiguous place in God's plan

- Puritans saw their settlement in New England as a modern version of Israel—God's covenant people.
- Edwards largely agreed. He also believed that America had a special role to play in God's unfolding plan of redemption.
- But Edwards didn't believe that because the English in America were God's covenanted people that they were therefore good; more that they were *bad*. He was most sensitive to how they fell short of their covenant responsibilities.
- The notion of American exceptionalism got a boost with the Revolution. But in the 19th century people in other parts of America were uncomfortable with the triumphalistic attitude that Upper Northerners often had about it. That changed with the Civil War when the Confederacy adopted it whole hog.
- Now many American Christians live with mixed feelings similar to Edwards'—on the one hand believing that America as a nation has a special relationship with God and a special role to play in God's plan, but on the other hand grieving how badly the nation falls short and expecting divine punishment as a result.

## The pastor as intellectual

- Puritan pastors were the intellectual elite of their culture. Edwards is the ultimate example.
- Among Christians influenced by Edwards, the pastor was seen as most like a scholar. Later, in the 20th century, under the influence of Dwight L. Moody, the pastor was seen as most like a businessman (manager, entrepreneur, salesman). Even later or among others, the pastor was seen as most like a therapist or social worker.
- These different models still compete today. You can choose a seminary based on which model you favor. It's no accident that Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in New England sees Edwards as an unofficial patron saint.

## "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

- This sermon became part of literary anthologies and high school textbooks—often abridged.
- For many people it summed up the caricature of the Puritan as an angry, stern zealot for a sadistic, anti-human religion.

## Calvinists' mixed feelings (a.k.a., Reformed)

- Edwards recast Puritan orthodoxy in modern terms. In his own day and in the centuries after, that has made some Reformed people uneasy.
- On the other hand, Edwards' writings *Original Sin* and *Freedom of the Will* argued compellingly for the parts of Reformed theology that are most disliked and most criticized by non-Reformed people—namely that we're born depraved and we can't do anything about it.

## Theology of beauty and desire

- Edwards traced every feeling and disposition in the human soul back to a basic set of two options: attraction and repulsion—you either want something or you don't. Virtue is wanting the right thing more than anything else.
- Edwards saw God as ultimate beauty, as the thing most greatly to be desired. He talked about his "excellencies" and "perfections." He talked about God's holiness and God's goodness as one and the same: together God's glory, splendor, light.
- To Edwards, faith meant not just belief, not even just trust. It meant "seeing" God as if with a sixth sense and wanting what you see—both seeing the light and being drawn to the light. This is a theme you find in other imaginative and mystic Christians throughout history—e.g., C. S. Lewis.
- A contemporary person who was profoundly influenced by this is John Piper. Thanks to him, this strain of Edwards' teaching has done much to make Reformed theology attractive again to many people.