

# THE LEGACY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

*American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*

Edited by  
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## INTRODUCTION

The publication of this volume of essays coincides with the tercentenary of Jonathan Edwards' birth. During the past three hundred years, more attention has been paid to Edwards than to any other figure in American religious history. And, as Harry Stout points out, there are "no signs of abatement."<sup>1</sup> Stephen Stein adds, "The study of Jonathan Edwards—his life, thought and influence—remains a growth industry today. . . . An astonishing amount of scholarly attention is being paid to him today. And there appears to be no end to this stream of publication."<sup>2</sup> While the sheer volume of Edwardsian scholarship is remarkable, it is equally matched by the range of scholarship and interest. Philosophers look to Edwards as he engages perennial questions related to the will, virtue, and beauty. Historians find that Edwards is a seemingly never-ending source of material for understanding the eighteenth century. Theologians find their own work enriched by returning to their Puritan forebear. Yet interest in Edwards extends beyond these disciplines and beyond the academy deep into the church. Pastors and laity from Baptists to Episcopalians—and all points in between—admire, read, study, and even emulate Jonathan Edwards. Indeed, the contributors to this volume represent a variety of disciplines and make their allegiance to no fewer than eight denominations. In short, Edwards has remarkable staying power.

Accounting for this phenomenon (or in Stein's words, "growth industry") begins with the figure at its center. At first glance, Edwards, clad in Geneva bands and powdered wig and graced with a stern countenance, appears quite foreign to contemporary onlookers. Yet,

1. Harry S. Stout, "Introduction," in *Edwards in Our Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), ix.

2. Stephen J. Stein, "Introduction," in *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), ix–x.

his writings betray this initial assumption. Far from being an isolated colonial, Edwards read the latest works from Europe and proved a formidable interlocutor in the intellectual discussions of his own day. His training, deeply rooted in the classic texts of the Augustinian and Calvinist tradition, also included extended forays into Newtonian science and Lockean epistemology. While such divergent strains quickly led to the diversification of the disciplines of academia that pervades the modern university, Edwards managed to weave all of these strains into a cohesive whole. He exegeted Paul in as facile manner as he explored the wonders of the flying spider. His was an active and far-reaching mind, which resulted in a literary legacy that attracts scholars from a variety of fields. In other words, there is a reason that philosophers, historians, and theologians wrestle with Edwards: they all find something worthwhile in his writings.

Yet his writings do not belong merely to the past or to the academy. Edwards addressed ideas and tackled issues that transcended his own day, and he did so with a timeless style. The central issue that engaged his mind throughout the 1740s, the nature of true religious affections, remains crucial to religion and spirituality. To this we could add his discussion of what God is doing in this world in *History of the Work of Redemption*, his discussion of virtue and morality in *The Nature of True Virtue*, and his discussion of the implications of trinitarian dogma in various shorter writings and sermons. In other words, there is also a reason he captures the attention of so many in the church: they also find something helpful in his writings.

If the saying that you can learn a great deal about a person by the company he or she keeps holds true in the case of Edwards, then we stand to learn about him by looking at those who work with him. To be sure, Edwards may not recognize himself in all of the alleged portrayals of him, and he might not appreciate all of the alliances made with him. Nevertheless, looking at those portrayals and alliances is instructive. The interest in Edwards has some rather distinct manifestations. One such manifestation is the Works of Jonathan Edwards office at Yale Divinity School, currently under the leadership of Harry Stout and Kenneth Minkema. Since 1957, the Works of Jonathan Edwards has undertaken the ambitious and monumental task of producing the most comprehensive and scholarly edition of Edwards' writings, which, when finished, will span twenty-seven volumes. As the center of, and more than likely the reason for, academic interest in Edwards, the Works office also has sponsored numerous conferences and assisted the work of countless scholars and doctoral students working on Edwards.

Another distinct manifestation of interest in Edwards is the Banner of Truth Trust, a Reformed publishing house that, along with other such houses, tirelessly promotes and distributes the writings of Edwards through numerous reprints. In addition to the reprints, Banner also publishes Iain Murray's biography, another volume influential in introducing Edwards to the contemporary generation. The Works of Jonathan Edwards and the Banner of Truth Trust are just two of the many centers of Edwards studies and interest. Certainly, they appeal to different audiences and even represent a variety of approaches and historiographies. Yet, the fact that they both take their cue from the same subject bears notice. Among other things, this points to the relevancy and importance of Edwards for scholar and laity alike, for both the academy and the church.

The essays in this volume testify to these observations. They demonstrate that interest in Edwards continues and is not waning. They reveal that Edwards has something to say to a variety of disciplines, including theology, philosophy, and history. They further show that Edwards, even after three centuries, still has something meaningful to say both to the academy and to the church. Not all of the authors of these essays agree, however, in their assessment of Edwards' impact. Some celebrate his ideas and life as having continuing relevance, importance, and even urgency. Others see Edwards' legacy more ambivalently, if not suspiciously. Here Edwards is seen, not as a conveyor of the heritage of Reformed orthodoxy, but as progenitor of a much broader approach, what we call "evangelicalism" today. Both camps of interpretation are likely to meet criticism and disapproval by readers. That does not disconcert us. In fact, we hope that is the case.

Wrestling with Edwards is an important task. It is important from a historical perspective, given Edwards' prominence over the landscape of American religious history. It is also a present and urgent task, given Edwards' engagement of ideas that shaped and continue to shape our identity. So we offer these essays in the ongoing effort of understanding Edwards' place both in the past and in the present.

We have grouped these essays under the categories of vision, theology, legacy, and reflections. Harry Stout's lead essay explores Edwards' tri-world vision of redemption. Edwards used the interwoven histories of heaven, earth, and hell to encompass all the truths of Christianity. Edwards believed these histories could contain all facets of philosophy and systematic theology and present them in a more compelling and popularly accessible way. This narrative of redemption, Stout argues, was the capstone of Edwards' remarkable body of systematic reflection. Stephen Nichols' essay demonstrates that Edwards' vision

was not merely abstract or ethereal. Rather, Edwards was profoundly interested in missions to Native Americans, and the opportunity to go to Stockbridge was the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition. Offering a revisionist reading of those seven “missing” Stockbridge years, Nichols believes that Edwards’ preaching of redemption to the Native Americans was central to Edwards’ life narrative. Richard Bailey also offers a revisionist understanding of Edwards’ vision for preaching. Bailey holds that Edwards’ preaching was passionate for God’s glory and that this passion evidenced itself in his preaching style. Based on a reading of Edwards’ sermon manuscripts, as well as Edwards’ ministerial reading, Bailey claims that Edwards’ preaching was far from staid and boring; rather, it was enlivened by divine passion. Finally, Charles Hambrick-Stowe presents Edwards’ vision of spirituality. Edwards attempted to assist his parishioners into a “sweet sense” of Christ. Conversion was only the beginning of life with Christ; Christian spirituality consisted of continued communion with him.

Of course, Edwards’ importance was not restricted to his vision. Rather, he is most frequently remembered as “America’s theologian.”<sup>3</sup> The four essays in the section entitled “theology” seek new directions in the study of Edwards’ theology. George Marsden uses the posthumously published *Two Dissertations* to explore the ways Edwards challenged the intellectual presumptions of the age. While Enlightenment thought led some to abandon Christian principles in philosophy and theology, Edwards devoted some of his best thought in *The Nature of True Virtue* and *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* to challenging the rising tide of materialism. C. Samuel Storms uses Edwards to challenge contemporary presumptions, specifically those of the newly emergent open theism. Those who decry God’s exhaustive foreknowledge will find no friend in Edwards, Storms believes. In his seminal *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards defended God’s exhaustive foreknowledge from the attacks of eighteenth-century Arminians; Storms seeks to use Edwards to defend the same truth, which is under attack today. K. Scott Oliphint also believes that Edwards has something to teach evangelicals when it comes to apologetics. The core of Edwards’ Reformed apologetics wrestles with the pervasiveness of sin upon human understanding and with the necessity of a “divine and supernatural light” in order to illuminate the sinful mind and enable one to come to Christ. In the final essay of this section, Gerald McDermott investigates Edwards’ public theology. Edwards perpetuated a long-standing Protestant tradition of interpreting national and public events

3. Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

from the perspective of God's national covenant with New England. This covenantal approach was an extension of the same kind of interpretation scattered across the pages of the Old Testament. While noting several difficulties with Edwards' approach and stressing the need for humility, McDermott argues for a qualified appropriation of this way of reading providence.

Edwards' theology and vision did not die with him in the cold winter days of 1758. Rather, Edwards' legacy continued far into the nineteenth century, providing fodder for important ecclesiastical debates, as well as serving as the baseline for several theological arguments. D. G. Hart believes that Edwards' legacy is intimately connected with his defense of experimental Calvinism. Yet that legacy is not all positive; rather, Edwards' understanding of conversion—which carried the day among later American evangelicals—actually represented a move away from the older Reformed tradition represented by John Calvin and later revived by John Williamson Nevin. Setting the stage for evangelicalism's exaltation of the revivalist bench over family-centered catechesis, Edwards' legacy ultimately paved the way for the lost soul of American Protestantism. Douglas Sweeney explores the contested battle over Edwards' legacy that occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century in Connecticut. The epic duel between the Taylorites, followers of New Haven theologian Nathaniel Taylor, and the Tylerites, disciples of Bennett Tyler and Ashael Nettleton, involved more than political turf. Rather, the contest centered on the cultural authority and theological legacy of Jonathan Edwards and had import not simply for the church but for all New England society. Edwards' legacy, however, was not localized in New England. Rather, as Sean Michael Lucas demonstrates, southern Reformed theologians also wrestled with Edwards' legacy. While the southern Presbyterians, led by Robert Lewis Dabney, paid the New England sage great respect, they were not afraid to critique Edwards and his later New Divinity disciples, particularly in regard to Edwards' teaching on freedom of the will, the imputation of Adam's sin, and virtue. Southern Presbyterians finally distanced themselves from Edwards, leaving the New England divine to the enthusiastic southern Baptists, who were drawn to Edwards' theology of revival.

The final section of reflections offers the observations of George Claghorn, editor of the *Letters and Personal Writings* volume for the Yale edition of Edwards' works. Claghorn reminisces about the thirty-five-year journey that began with Perry Miller's invitation to work on the Yale edition and concluded with the publication of the *Letters* volume in 1998. In addition, Claghorn pastorally examines some of the

lessons he learned from transcribing Edwards' difficult hand. The volume concludes with a very different sort of reflection—the intellectual labor of scholars and writers on Edwards. Sean Michael Lucas' bibliographic essay charts evangelical writing on Edwards as well as mainstream academic writing on Edwards from 1994 to 2000.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato." Paraphrasing him, one might say, "Jonathan Edwards is American religious history, and American religious history Jonathan Edwards." Edwards captured the attention of his own day and cast his shadow over significant events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now, as the twenty-first century gets underway, Edwards continues to impact the life and thought of the church. Though a New England Congregationalist, except for a few brief moments as a Presbyterian, Edwards belongs to many—to evangelicals. Perhaps, looking to this figure from the past might help evangelicals of the present navigate the future. This volume is offered toward that end.