American's Greatest Theologian

Jonathan Edward (1703-1758) played a leading role in The Great Evangelical Awakening (1735-1744)

and in defending the Reformed Faith against the attacks of Deists and Arminians. Jonathan Edwards has been recognised, even by secular historians, as one of the most original thinkers, and influential intellectuals in the history of New England and of American theology. He has also been described as: "America's greatest theologian."

Certainly the writings of Jonathan Edwards have attracted more attention and study in England, Europe, and further afield, than any other American theologian over the last two and a half centuries.
The Making of a Genius

Jonathan was born 5 October, 1703, the fifth child of Timothy and Esther Edwards. Jonathan was their only son out of eleven children. He had ten sisters!

Jonathan's father, Timothy Edwards, was a third generation New Englander, a pastor, who served his East Windsor parish faithfully. Jonathan's father, Timothy Edwards, also served as a chaplain during an Indian war.

Jonathan's grandfather, from his mother's side, was Solomon Stoddard, a famous Puritan minister who served as a pastor for over 55 years.

Jonathan's mother, Esther Stoddard grew up in a home filled with books and frequented by New England's elite. She was described as "highly educated" and she instilled in her young son Jonathan her own great love for books.

Even before he was a teenager, Jonathan was fluent in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. From a very early age he was very methodical and showed astonishing early maturity both in making scientific observations and philosophical speculations.

As a young boy, Jonathan built little forts in the woods to hold prayer meetings with his friends. He entered the Collegiate School of Connecticut (with later became Yale University) at age thirteen and graduated at 17 years old at the head of his class.
Converted to Christ

Shortly before his graduation, at age 17, he was soundly converted. As he was reading: "Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory, forever and ever. Amen."
1 Timothy 1:17, "
There came into my soul" a sense of the glory of the Divine Being, a new sense, quite different from anything I’d experienced before from about that time I began to have a new kind of apprehension and ideas of Christ, and the work of Redemption and the glorious way of Salvation by Him.

The doctrines of God's sovereignty, which had previously appeared 'repugnant’ to him suddenly became "

"exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet"
to his soul. He rejoiced in God's sovereignty, glory and majesty. From this point Edwards noted that he continually saw in nature: "

God's excellency, His wisdom, His purity and love in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds and blue skies; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature"
and this greatly fixed his mind. The next time he experienced a thunderstorm he was captivated to see the spectacular lightning and

"hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder my great and glorious God "it always seemed natural for me to sing?"

A Puritan Faith

From the beginning Jonathan Edwards bucked the trend among the students away from the Puritan faith of the college's founders. Jonathan went against the spirit of his time and began to devour the writings of the Reformers and the Puritans. The glory and majesty of God became Edwards' compelling passion in life.
Called to the Ministry

After studying Divinity for two years, Edwards was called to be an assistant pastor to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was mentored by his grandfather in the pastorate for two years. Upon the death of Solomon Stoddard at 85 years (after being a powerful preaching influence in Massachusetts for over 55 years), the church in Northampton called Jonathan Edwards to become its pastor.

By all accounts, Jonathan Edwards was a dedicated and dutiful pastor. He spent an average of 13 hours a day in study and sermon preparation. Edwards described the minister’s calling: "To rescue lost souls and bring them to eternal happiness."

He was distressed by the wickedness and worldliness of the society he was called to reach. This spiritually-minded pastor preached harsh and scathing sermons which cut to the heart of many. He saw the people of his congregation as immersed in immorality.

_The Gospel seemed to me the richest treasure; the treasure that I have most desired "the way of Salvation by Christ" glorious and excellent, most pleasant and beautiful._ Holiness was described by Jonathan as _"a sweet, pleasant, charming, serene, calm, inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness and ravishment to the soul."_
The preaching of Jonathan Edwards was described as 'arresting', 'awakening', 'remarkable' and 'instructive'.
He employed no 'theatrics' in his preaching, but convinced "with overwhelming weight of argument and with much intenseness of feeling."
He preached against sin as an affront to the sovereign majesty of God. He proclaimed the need for divine grace through Christ Jesus. At an ordination sermon Jonathan Edwards proclaimed: "Ministers are only sent on His errand. They are to preach the preaching that He bids them. He has put into their hands a Book containing a summary of doctrine and bids them go and preach that Word."

An Uncommon Marriage

When he was 20 he met Sarah Pierrepont. After four years of often agonizing courtship Jonathan Edwards married Sarah and thus began what was described as an 'uncommon union.' Jonathan and Sarah were blessed with eleven children. (In 1900, a study tracked down the 1,400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards and revealed that this one marriage has produced: 66 physicians, 30 judges, 65 professors, 13 college presidents, 100 lawyers, 1 Dean of the top law school, 1 Dean of a Medical School, 3 US senators, 3 mayors of large cities, 3 state governors, 1 controller of the US Treasury, and 1 Vice-President of the USA - who the very next year became President of the USA - Theodore Roosevelt. In addition, members of the family had written a 135 books and edited 18 journals. They had entered the ministry 'in platoons' and sent out over 100 missionaries overseas).
George Whitefield wrote of his time in the Edwards' home as having been a tremendous blessing and inspiration. Of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards he wrote: "a sweeter couple I have not yet seen." He described their children as "examples of Christian simplicity."

He described Sarah Edwards as: "Adorned with a meek and quiet spirit. She talked solidly of the things of God, and seemed to be such a helpmeet of her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers that He would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife."

Sarah saw it as her spiritual duty to keep her home peaceful and pleasant so Jonathan could devote the maximum amount of time to his studies and ministry. How she was able to do this with eleven children whom she home schooled is a wonder. At the end of each day, Jonathan and Sarah would ride on their horses through the nearby woods and they would encourage one and another with the spiritual riches they had discovered that day.

Revival

In 1734 Jonathan Edward's preaching on Justification by Faith sparked a Spiritual Revival in his
parish. In December there were six sudden conversions. By Spring there were about thirty per week. The town seemed to be full of the presence of God; it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy there were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house God's Day was a delight everyone earnestly intent on public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister.

This work of the Holy Spirit spread throughout the Connecticut River Valley, across the whole of North America, and then across the Atlantic to the British Isles.

Edwards' careful account of this Revival: "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God" was published in 1737. Soon it was republished in England (edited by the famous hymn writer Issac Watts). English Evangelist George Whitefield read Edwards' book and made it a point to visit him when he came on his preaching tour to America.

When Whitefield preached at Edwards' church it was reported: "The congregation was extraordinarily melted almost the whole assembly being in tears a great part of the time." Through the itinerant preaching of George Whitefield, the Great Awakening spread throughout the English colonies in North America and further abroad.

The Most Famous Sermon

It was shortly after Whitefield's visit that Jonathan Edwards preached his most famous sermon, possibly one of the most famous sermons in history, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' It was 1741. The style was similar to the sermons preached to a condemned criminal just before execution. The minister would be expected to stress their imminent encounter with the Judgement Seat of God and he would exhort them to repent. As these sermons were often publicized, most would have recognized the style.

In a most shocking move, Edwards applied this form of sermon to the 'respectable' church going people and relentlessly hammered home the instability of their position before a Holy God. The total depravity of man, the holiness and wrath of God and the only way of Salvation through Christ was most powerfully presented in this devastatingly effective sermon. Lives were transformed, previously lukewarm and worldly church members abandoned questionable practices and communities were dramatically transformed.
Many of Edward’s Bible studies and sermons were later published. This included *Justification By Faith* (1737), *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Thoughts on the Revival* (1742), and *Religious Affections* (1746).

In 1749 Jonathan Edwards published the diaries of missionary David Brainerd (1718-1747). In Brainerd, the young dedicated missionary who brought the Gospel with great impact to the Indians, Jonathan Edwards found a living example of all that he had preached and written about concerning a Christian’s transformed life of holiness. Brainerd was engaged to be married to Jerusha Edwards, but contracted tuberculosis and died in the Edwards’ home at age 29. Shortly afterwards Jonathan Edwards’ daughter, Jerusha, died from the same tuberculosis that she had contracted while caring for her fiancé.

Edwards’ book: *The Life and Diary of Rev. David Brainerd* was mightily used to inspire the 19th century missionary movement. It galvanized countless missionaries, including the Father of the Modern Missionary Movement, William Carey, into foreign fields.

**A Dedicated Pastor**
Jonathan Edwards was convinced that he could accomplish the greatest good by study, preaching, writing, counselling, and through prayer. Much of this was accomplished in his study where he poured out his soul in fervent prayer and counselled many members of his congregation.

His sermons were carefully written out, reasoned, doctrinal statements, based on solid Biblical exegesis and with the characteristic Puritan application to head and heart, to faith and practice. He divided his sermons into three sections: Text, Doctrine and Application each saturated with Scripture. His style was described as: restrained, and powerful. Edwards encouraged the intellectual development of his members by lending out his books.

**A Strict Disciplinarian**

When it became apparent that some of the conversions in his midst were not sincere, Edwards forbade their participation in the Lord's Supper. This caused much dissention amongst his congregation. He insisted that only persons that had made a public profession of faith, which included a description of their personal conversion experience, could receive Communion. This reversed the Open Communion position of his grandfather and led to him being voted out of the church by an overwhelming 230 to 23.

Some complained of Edwards practice of not visiting the homes of congregants, but rather receiving those seeking counsel in his study. In order to make more time for his writing ministry, Edwards preferred those needing counsel to come to his study, rather than traveling to visit every member in the congregation as a matter of routine. Others were offended by Edward's 'harsh' dealing with several young men, who had transgressed accepted ethical standards, by reading their names from the pulpit. As several of these were from well-placed Northampton families, it
earned him the enmity of several families. Many status-conscious, established families, did not like being reminded that their personal achievements amounted to ‘filthy rags’ in God’s sight. Edwards’ conscientious insistence on congregational purity had embarrassed many of the Northamptonites who were more concerned with their social standing.

**Exiled**

On 1 July, 1750, with no post to move to, Edwards preached his farewell sermon to the church at Northampton. He then became a missionary to Housatonic Indians in the frontier town of Stockbridge. This began seven years of hardship and practical exile. He was regarded as a worldly failure, having been dismissed from the pastorate, and forced to live in abject poverty. And yet, in many ways, this missionary posting on the frontier led to the most productive time of his writing ministry.

**True and False Conversions**

In his *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), Jonathan Edwards distinguished between true and false conversions. *In the main, there has been a great and marvelous work of conversion and Sanctification among the people here.*

However, he reported irregularities and excesses requiring one to "**Try the spirits whether they be of God.**"

1 John 4:1

Outwardly, the saved abandon old vices and contentious ways. Inwardly they testify to a new and lively sense of God’s presence and a new attitude and disposition towards spiritual matters. However, the Revival was marred by emotionalism and disorderly behaviour by some. Edwards pointed out that God created the soul with two faculties: intellect and will. One could possess speculative knowledge without a transformed heart.

For example, we may memorize a mathematical formula or the Ten Commandments, but the mere knowledge may not necessarily influence our motives and actions. Edwards discussed non-signs that neither confirm, nor deny, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Amongst these Edwards included intense religious experience, ‘bodily manifestations’, extensive and fervent religious conversation, devotion to religious practices, knowledge of Scripture and even direct communication by God. As he pointed out, in the Scriptures, God even spoke to reprobates.
The Marks of a True Christian

The signs of a true Christian Edwards identified as wholeheartedly love for God and our Lord Jesus Christ, not for the benefits of peace, comfort or eternal life though these do come as by-products of salvation. Rather, however, the true Believer loves God for who God is. Not only for what God does.

Spiritual affections incline our sinful self away from self-interest towards God's glory. The real distinguishing marks of a true believer can be seen in the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Holiness comes from the heart, or the will, rather than from our understanding. Holy affections (emotions and the will) are the substance of genuine faith.

The work of the Spirit of God is seen in those who are: humble, loving in spirit, spiritually hungry, self-reflective and steady, and abiding in holy affections. The chief sign of all the signs of grace, the true mark of a Christian, is found in Christian love in action. 'Godliness in the heart has direct a relationship to practice as a fountain has to a stream or as the luminous nature of the Sun has to beams sent forth, or as life has to breathing.'
True Love is Seen in Sacrifice

Christian faith in action, lived out consistently, amidst the trials of life, is the most convincing evidence of true Christianity. A person may feel intensely, talk, listen, sing and pray, but unless they are accompanied by integrity and works of love and mercy, they are not convincing proof of the work of regeneration. Edwards encouraged his readers to distinguish genuine Christian experience from the counterfeit, not so much by what people said, but by what they did.

A Joyful Faith

Jonathan Edwards insisted that believers should expect joy from their faith. True Christianity "begets love and peace, goodwill one towards another, brotherly kindness, mutual benevolence, generosity and a concern for one another's welfare."

A Matter of the Heart

Edwards taught that 'true religion' is first and foremost a matter of the heart. One can see one in whom the Spirit of God is working because the Holy Spirit re-orientates our soul. The most important evidence of regeneration is the turning of the heart, transforming our affections, causing us to love God's will and take delight in pursuing His ways.

God Himself

God Himself is the source of all that is good, true and beautiful. A loving union with God brings unprecedented joy and personal fulfillment and a Biblical love of God and our neighbour. He quoted Augustine's Confessions: 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'

Edwards taught that God has created us to have a longing that only He can satisfy. However, we sinners try to fill this God-shaped vacuum with idols of pride, greed and lust. He taught that goodness can never be separated from Godliness. That which is not done to serve Christ can in no way be called good.
Edwards taught that everything in nature, and history, speaks of Christ and His Gospel, if only it is rightly understood. He showed images, types and shadows of Divine things in nature and history.

For example, he taught that Springtime's gradual progress is ordained by God to illustrate the gradual increase in the Kingdom of God on earth. And that the ’filth’ in which newly born babies are covered is God's way of stressing to us the sinfulness of all men.

**Calvinism vs Arminianism**

He taught that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination provides the greatest support for true morality. Better than any other alternate view, he showed that Calvinism holds human beings responsible for their own actions. Freedom and predestination are essentially compatible. His book, *Original Sin*, is a solid defense of the controversial doctrine of predestination. He showed the logical incoherence of Arminianism. Edwards was not a fatalist. People are accountable to God and fully responsible for our own actions. Yet it is God’s grace alone which saves sinners.

**Emotion vs Emotionalism**

Many of Edwards works defended the Revivals against those who would have no emotion in their religion, and those who would have nothing but emotion in theirs.

Jonathan Edwards was a very disciplined person who maintained a life-long habit of rising at 4am. Most of his days were devoted to intensive studying, sermon preparation and writing. He insisted that true Christianity is rooted in a changed heart. His *Treatise on Religious Affections*
(1746) is a masterpiece of Spiritual discernment. Jonathan Edwards combined intellect and piety, head and heart, doctrine and devotion in an extraordinary balance. He encouraged the singing of new Christian hymns, notably those of Isaac Watts.

With the Last of the Mohicans

During his seven years missionary work in Stockbridge, Jonathan Edwards was associated with the last of the Mohicans. Mohican children boarded at the mission school, and his son, Jonathan, spent a year in Mohican villages learning their language. When the French and Indian War broke out, the Mohicans abandoned Stockbridge, some to fight alongside the English.

Called to Princeton

Finally, after seven years of exile at Stockbridge, Jonathan Edwards intellectual stature was finally recognised when he was invited to become President of the new college at Princeton. He arrived in January 1758, but due to an experimental inoculation against smallpox, which he received on 13 February, he died of the disease 22 March. He was just 55 years old.

Called to Glory
His last words spoke of his love for his wife Sarah (who was still packing up their belongings in Stockbridge in preparation for their move to New Jersey) and urged his children to find faith in God. He asked he not to give an elaborate funeral, but that what money was available rather be given to charity. His last words to his daughter, who was caring for him, were: 'Trust in God, and you need not fear.'

He Still Speaks to Us Today

Tragically, the major work which Jonathan Edwards was beginning, that of arranging a synthesis of Christian doctrine and ethics, arranged historically was barely begun. However, numerous of his other works which were almost complete at his death were later finalized and printed including: The End for Which God Created the World (1765); Nature of True Virtue (1765) and History of Redemption (1774). Because of his writings, his personal example of holiness, and his influence as a dedicated church leader, Jonathan Edwards has continued to exert a tremendous influence on Reformed churches in America and Great Britain. His defence of historic Calvinism held back the oncoming tidal wave of rationalism and romanticism. In many ways Edwards long years of isolation on the mission field helped produce some of his greatest writings, which continue to bless the church today.

Edwards call for prayer for Revival: A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Unity of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion (1749) was widely circulated throughout the British Isles and had a tremendous influence on William Carey who carried this book to India. Jonathan Edwards insistence on a vibrant faith of head and heart, holiness and service, continues to challenge and rebuke Christians to this day.

'Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.' 1 Timothy 1:17

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