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**"A solid, excellent Christian":
The life of Jonathan Edwards in brief¹**

Ian H. Clary

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) has been well described as the "American Calvin."² His influence has been extensive, deeply impacting many Christians throughout the years, from influential figures like Andrew Fuller and Thomas Chalmers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Piper in more recent days. To quote one of these men, Lloyd-Jones: "Indeed I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest! He has always seemed to me to be the man most like the Apostle Paul."³ Edwards' treatises, such as *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections* (1746), *Freedom of the Will* (1754), and *Original Sin* (1758), have been some of God's richest literary gifts to the church, melding profound theological insight with deep pastoral care. It was such works that led Paul Helm to describe Edwards as a "complete stranger to that separation of 'heart' and 'head' that has often plagued evangelical religion."⁴ Edwards' life and theology therefore deserve much attention in light of our day's unstable theological climate. As a theologian and philosopher, evangelist and pastor, Edwards epitomizes everything the church currently needs.

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, to Congregationalist pastor Timothy Edwards (1669-1758) and his wife Esther (1672-1770), the daughter of the esteemed preacher Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729). Of their eleven children, Jonathan was their only son. It is interesting to note that when Timothy Edwards' ten daughters walked down the street together, people would sometimes refer to them as Timothy's "sixty-feet of daughters" as each was quite tall.⁵ In keeping with Timothy Edwards' Puritan roots, young Jonathan was taught Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

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By the time he was thirteen he had a strong knowledge of all three languages. That was the age at which he entered the Collegiate School of Connecticut (later Yale College) in 1716. He graduated with his B.A. in 1720. By 1723 Edwards had also received his M.A. from the same school.

It was not until 1721 that Edwards felt what he called a "sense of divine things" or a saving work of the Spirit of God in his life that he identified as his conversion to Christ. The account of this event can be read in his *Personal Narrative*, a model of late Puritan spirituality. Edwards had been reared in a godly household, and the need for personal spiritual rebirth was very evident to him. Through the inward quickening of the Holy Spirit Edwards became a new creation in Christ after reading 1 Timothy 1:17.

In 1723, Edwards met Sarah Pierrepont, who was then 13 years old. He soon fell deeply in love with her and they married on July 28, 1727. "Sarah was the perfectly embodied ideal of all that he [Edwards] aspired to be, the pure spiritual being, sweet tempered, singing sweetly, always full of joy and pleasure."⁶ In time, Jonathan and Sarah had eleven children.

After pastoring two small charges in New York and Bolton, Connecticut, Edwards returned to Yale in 1724 as a tutor. Two years later, in August, 1726, the church of Edwards' well-known grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, a Congregationalist work in Northampton, Massachusetts, called Jonathan to assist his grandfather in the pastorate. For two and a half years Edwards and Stoddard shared in the ministry together until the death of the older man in February of 1729. Edwards was called to succeed his grandfather that same year.

Revival came to the congregation in 1734-1735. A larger, more significant religious revival in American history, the Great Awakening, occurred between 1740 and 1742 impacting all of the American colonies, including Edwards' church. Edwards' ministry played an important role in this awakening, alongside the preaching of George

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Whitefield (1714-1770). It was during this revival, for instance, that the now famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* was preached with powerful results to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut in 1741. Reports of this sermon declared that the worshippers who heard it had been struck with such a profound fear of God that many wished the ground would open up and swallow them whole as a means of escape. This has become Edwards' most famous sermon, if not the most well-known sermon in American history, although it is not typical of Edwards' preaching or writing. Edwards took greater delight in preaching on the beauty of Christ and the wonders of eternal life in heaven, rather than on the paralyzing fear of hell.⁷

Included in the list of his remarkable sermons and writings during his Northampton pastorate are *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption* (1731), *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734) and *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Edwards continued as the Northampton church's pastor until 1750, when he was dismissed for not allowing unconverted members of the church to partake of the Lord's Table, *contra* his grandfather's teaching. After Edwards left the pastorate in Northampton he went to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to minister at a Congregational mission church that had a significant population of Housatonic and Mohawk Indians. It was during his time in Stockbridge that he wrote some of his most important works, including the *Freedom of the Will* (1754), a powerful defense of Calvinism.

Edwards received a call in 1757 from the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University, to become their president. However, shortly after he arrived at the College in early 1758, he was inoculated for smallpox due to an epidemic that was raging in the area. Initially, all seemed well, but an adverse reaction developed and he died on March 22, 1758.

Although Jonathan Edwards is recognized as a great theologian and philosopher, it is important to note that he had a great love for the

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sciences and nature. Throughout his life, Edwards studied God's creation and wrote some interesting pieces concerning it, such as *Of Insects*, *Of Atoms* and *Of Rainbows*.

In concluding this brief account of Edwards' life, it is appropriate to give Edwards the last word. The text below comes from his funeral sermon for David Brainerd (1718-1747), a young missionary to native North American Indians in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey who died of tuberculosis in Edwards' own home. This young man made a deep impression on Edwards, for in him Edwards saw a model of the piety he had so earnestly recommended in his *Religious Affections*. Brainerd was a man, in Edwards' words, "who had indeed sold all for Christ and had entirely devoted himself to God, and made his glory his highest end."⁸ As he concluded the sermon he prayed these words—and we can substitute Edwards for Brainerd:

Oh, that the things that were seen and heard in this extraordinary person, his holiness, heavenliness, labor and self-denial in life, his so remarkable devoting himself and his all, in heart and practice, to the glory of God, ... may excite in us all, both ministers and people, a due sense of the greatness of the work we have to do in the world, the excellency and amiableness of thorough religion in experience and practice, and the blessedness of the end of such whose death finishes such a life, and the infinite value of their eternal reward, when absent from the body and present with the Lord; and effectually stir us up to endeavors that in the way of such an holy life we may at last come to so blessed an end. Amen.⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹ The quote is a remark made by George Whitefield about Edwards. See http://www.desiringgod.org/news_events/edwards/schedule.html; accessed October 2, 2003.

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Repr. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1950), VIII, 544.

³ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1987), 355.

⁴ Paul Helm, "Edwards, Jonathan", *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed., J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 1974), 334.

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⁵ Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1987), 9.

⁶ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 94.

⁷ See John Piper, "Can Joy Increase Forever?" (http://www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/1998/050598.html; accessed October 2, 2003).

⁸ *A Sermon Preached on the Day of the Funeral of the Rev. Mr. David Brainerd* [*The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985), 548]

⁹ *Sermon Preached on the Day of the Funeral of the Rev. Mr. David Brainerd* (*Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Pettit, 553-554).

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