

## The continuing ministry of Jonathan Edwards'

Iain H. Murray

The propensity of Edwards' *Works* to regain attention and to re-assert their message is an historical fact worthy of notice. More than once they have been forgotten and judged obsolete only to re-appear afresh with new power and significance. For Edwards himself such a phenomenon would not be surprising. Such variations in influence belong to the Christian Faith itself. The message is timeless. Edwards re-asserted, in eighteenth-century language, much that was best in the doctrinal and practical divinity of the Reformed churches. He did so, not because of any adherence to the tradition of Calvinistic theology as such, but rather because he believed that theology to be scriptural. Only for that reason has it abiding and international relevance.

Herein lies Edwards' enduring strength. He was not an originator. He proposes no re-formulation of the doctrine and creed of the Protestant Churches. Rather he was ready to work from the basis of existing foundations. Whether in the Hampshire Association or among the Housatonics, he was content with the theology of the *Westminster Confession* and of the *Shorter Catechism*. His assessment of God's providential purpose in history was that the eighteenth century was not intended to be an age for new confessions and catechisms. These were already richly provided. What was needed was preaching, revival and missionary endeavour. It was a day for prayer and action, for seizing the opportunities offered by the new horizons of an expanding world.

But just because the eighteenth-century church was stronger in the realm of action than in doctrinal knowledge, Edwards has a vital role in securing continuity with the Christianity of the Reformation. The advance—and the new missionary age to dawn before the century closed—needed to be upon the basis of the doctrinal foundations al-

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ready laid. Had Edwards not occupied the role of the foremost theologian of his century, the Christianity which was then revived might have been estranged from the Faith of the Reformers and Puritans. Edwards played a major role in conserving what was best in the past and in securing continuity for the future. "He strove after no show of originality," writes Warfield. "He enters into the great tradition which had come down to him, and 'infuses it with his personality and makes it live'."<sup>2</sup> Thus to interpret Edwards, is to assert that he belonged to a tradition. His message and influence is not merely that of one great individual. Taken alone, Edwards can neither be rightly understood, nor rightly prized. Any assessment of his worth will always be determined finally by the assessor's view of the message and the tradition for which Edwards spoke.

There were, of course, those who conceived the needs of the eighteenth century to include the need for revision of traditional orthodoxy. They included such latitudinarian divines as Daniel Whitby, William Warburton and John Taylor, on the one hand, and such an inconsistent evangelical as John Wesley on the other. Wesley's respect for Edwards, did not include respect for his theology, and he attempted to make Methodism a movement for doctrinal change. Given the success attending Methodist preaching, it was to be Wesley's type of Arminianism (and its more serious variant initiated by C. G. Finney) which posed the greater temptation to evangelical Christianity. The weakness of biblical evidence for the teaching which Wesley wished to substitute was half-hidden behind a charge that Calvinistic belief and evangelism are incompatible. "Calvinism has been the greatest hindrance of the work of God," was Wesley's repeated assertion.

While George Whitefield's ministry was a powerful counter to this charge, in the long term it was Edwards' *Works* which were to be the more formidable and permanent obstacle to the success of Wesley's argument. No book did more to create concern for wider

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missionary endeavour than Edwards' *Life of David Brainerd*. Gideon Hawley (his assistant at Stockbridge), who carried the book in his saddle-bag as he pioneered among the Iroquois, was only one of the first in a long line of Calvinistic missionaries. About the time Hawley died (1807), William Carey and his associates in India were writing their *Serampore Covenant* which included the words, "Let us often look at Brainerd."<sup>3</sup> John McDonald Jr., a next generation missionary in India, likewise regarded Brainerd as "his favourite, and, in some respects, his model."<sup>4</sup> Nor was it simply the example of Brainerd which counted. From the early 1780s it was Edwards' theology which was used to shape the vision of the Midland Baptists who led the way in the era of modern missionaries. Shortly before his death in 1815, Andrew Fuller, friend of Carey and first Secretary of The Baptist Missionary Society, dictated a letter to his old friend John Ryland which contained the following:

We have some who have been giving out, of late, that 'If [John] Sutcliff and some others had preached more of Christ, and less of Jonathan Edwards, they would have been more useful.' If those who talk, thus preached Christ half as much as Jonathan Edwards did, and were half as useful as he was, their usefulness would be double what it is. It is very singular that the mission to the East should have originated with men of these principles; and, without pretending to be a prophet, I may say, If ever it falls into the hands of men who talk in this strain, it will soon come to nothing.<sup>5</sup>

It may be said that the nineteenth-century argument against Calvinistic evangelism finally prevailed on the ground of ignorance of history as well as ignorance of Scripture. C. H. Spurgeon—the last great representative of the Puritan tradition until Martyn Lloyd-Jones—was not being heard by the Christian world at large when he protested:

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Did not Charnock, Goodwin and Howe agonize for souls, and what were they but Calvinists? Did not Jonathan Edwards preach to sinners, and who more clear and explicit on these doctrinal matters. ...In the history of the church, with but few exceptions, you could not find a revival at all that was not produced by the orthodox faith. ...If you turn to the continent of America, how gross the falsehood that Calvinistic doctrine is unfavourable to revivals! Look at that wondrous shaking under Jonathan Edwards and others which we might quote.<sup>6</sup>

The key to an understanding of Jonathan Edwards is that he was a man who put faithfulness to the Word of God before every other consideration. At critical points in his life, most notably in not deferring to the "advice" of Israel Williams in 1734, and again in the communion controversy of 1749-1750, he put the truth first. He did this when considerations of personal interest—"my own reputation, future usefulness, and my very subsistence"—all made the opposite course of action seem expedient. It was this which Edwards rejected. For, at bottom, Solomon Williams' case for retaining the *status quo* over qualifications for communion was an argument for expediency. Edwards' views, he complained, would lead to a small uninfluential church. But Edwards, while replying that it was a lack of holiness, not a lack of numbers, which hindered the advance of the church,<sup>7</sup> was content to leave influence and results with God. He knew that "success" is not to be judged in the short-term. The Christian's business is to honour God, and in his own time God will honour his truth and those who are faithful to it.

The history of Edwards' writings bears testimony to this fact. Twenty years after the communion controversy the issue was still in debate but the tide was turning. The Rev. Israel Holly writing to a friend of looser views on the subject, said: "If I was to engage you in the controversy, I would say *Read Edwards*. And if you wrote again, I would tell you, *Read Edwards*. For I think it needless for any man to write after him, and fruitless for any man to write against him on this

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subject."<sup>8</sup> Edwards' convictions on church membership, writes Charles Hodge, "gradually changed the opinions and practices of the Congregational churches throughout the land, and to a great extent those of Presbyterians also."<sup>9</sup>

The ministry of Jonathan Edwards is, very clearly, not yet concluded. He is being read today as he has not been read for over a century and in more countries than ever before. Such a recovery of truth has commonly been a forerunner of revival. For this let all Christians pray, and let it also be remembered that the Word of God never yet prospered in the world without opposition. There is no guarantee that men faithful to God will be recognizable by their numbers, their talents, or their success. But in due course, if not in this life-time, they will witness the fulfillment of the promise, "for them that honour me I will honour" (1 Samuel 2:30).

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is a slightly edited version of Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards—A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 468-472. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup>"Edwards and the New England Theology" in his *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 531.

<sup>3</sup>S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1923]), 249.

<sup>4</sup>W.K. Tweedie, *The Life of John MacDonald* (1849), 263-264.

<sup>5</sup>Letter to John Ryland, April 28, 1815, in John Ryland, Jr., *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Button & Son, 1818), 545-546.

<sup>6</sup>C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography. Volume 2: The Full Harvest 1860-1892* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1973), 46.

<sup>7</sup>*An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* [*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, rev. and corr. Edward Hickman (1834 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) 1:474, note].

<sup>8</sup>*Historical Magazine* (1867), 234.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3:569.

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Iain H. Murray is a founding trustee of The Banner of Truth Trust and author of *Jonathan Edwards: A Biography*.