

Church History (50): Jonathan Edwards

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of Jonathan Edwards: "I would assert that Puritanism reached the fullest bloom in the life and ministry of Jonathan Edwards. I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest."¹

I. Jonathan Edwards

1. *Personal life.* Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut into a Puritan household. His father, Timothy Edwards was a Congregational minister. His mother, Esther Stoddard, was the daughter of the Reverend Solomon Stoddard of Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards was the only boy born among eleven children. Educated at home by his parents and sisters, he entered Yale College in 1716, graduating in 1720. He received a Masters of Arts (in theology) in 1723. "Edwards answered a call to serve as the assistant minister in Northampton, Massachusetts. This was the hometown of his mother. Her father, Solomon Stoddard, had been pastor since 1669 of this church. The congregation decided that Stoddard needed an assistant, whom the senior minister would groom to succeed him. Edwards officially became assistant minister in the church in 1727" (Nichols).² Later in the same year, Edwards married Sarah, who he met four years earlier. "Together they had eight daughters and three sons. His daughters married lawyers, a politician, and a minister who became a college president. One son was a lawyer, another was a politician, and another was a minister and a college president. Edwards had seventy-two grandchildren, although he did not live long enough to see many of them" (Nichols).³ "Due to Solomon Stoddard's untimely death in 1729, Edwards suddenly found himself in one of the most prestigious and influential pulpits in New England before his twenty-seventh birthday" (Nichols).⁴

The home of the Jonathan and Sarah Edwards was always open. In addition to raising their own children, they welcomed young boarders, who came to train for the ministry. "During the 1730s and 1740s Jonathan and Sarah's home was full not only of children, but also of ministerial candidates drawn by Edward's preaching and writing. Among them were Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Buell, and Samuel Hopkins, all of whom became influential figures in New England" (Nichols).⁵ "Most parsonages were akin to inns, with almost constant visitors and guests and certainly this was the case in Northampton" (Murray).⁶ "One winter day in 1741, Samuel Hopkins showed up at the door unannounced. 'When I arrived there,' wrote Hopkins, 'Mr. Edwards was not at home; but I was received with great kindness by Mrs. Edwards and the family, and had encouragement that I might live there during the winter. Mr. Edwards was absent on a preaching tour as people in general were greatly attentive to religion and preaching'" (Murray).⁷

Though he was of tender constitution, yet few students are capable of a closer or longer application, than he was. He commonly spent thirteen hours, every day, in his study. His usual recreation in summer, was riding on horseback and walking. He would commonly, unless prevented by company, ride two or three miles after dinner to some lonely grove, where he would dismount and walk a while. At such times he generally carried his pen and ink with him, to note any thought that might be suggested, and which

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, 351

² Stephen Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards*, 47

³ Stephen Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards*, 48-53

⁴ Stephen Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards*, 53

⁵ Stephen Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards*, 58

⁶ Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 179

⁷ Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 179-180

promised some light on any important subject. In the winter, he was wont, almost daily, to take an axe, and chop wood, moderately, for the space of half an hour or more.⁸

2. *Pastorates*. (1) Northampton (MA). Having pastored a Presbyterian church in NY for a year and tutored at Yale for another year, Edwards accepted an invitation to assist his grandfather at Northampton in 1727. Solomon Stoddard died two years later at age 85. Edwards became the sole minister experiencing two seasons of revival in 1734/35 and 1740/42. Eight years following the revival (1750), Edwards was voted out of the church by the majority. A note in the Church Record of June 22, 1750 simply reads: "Reverend Jonathan Edwards was dismissed." At least three reasons have been suggested: (a) Spiritual decline. In 1750 spiritual apathy returned. Edwards wrote in 1750: "It is indeed now a sorrowful time on this side of the ocean. Iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxes cold. Multitudes of fair and high professors, in one place and another, have sadly backslidden; sinners are desperately hardened; experimental religion is more than ever out of credit, with the far greater part, and the doctrines of grace, and those principles in religion that do chiefly concern the power of godliness, are far more than ever discarded."

(b) Church divisions. According to Edwards, these were largely the result of spiritual pride. "There is great reason to think that the Northampton people have provoked God greatly against them, by trusting in their privileges and attainments. And the consequences may well be a warning to all God's people, far and near, that hear of them."⁹ Two prominent and influential families fell at odds with Edwards. One of them was his relation (cousins). The breach may have originated from a disciplinary case involving both families. Years after Edwards' departure from Northampton, Joseph Hawley, a leader of one of the families, confessed in a public letter in 1760: "In the course of that most melancholy contention with Mr. Edwards, I now see that I was very much influenced by vast pride, self-sufficiency, ambition, and vanity. Such treatment of Mr. Edwards, wherein I was so deeply concerned and active, was particularly and very aggravatedly sinful and ungrateful in me, because I was not only under the common obligations of each individual of the society to him, as a most able, diligent and faithful pastor; but I had also received man instances of his tenderness, goodness and generosity to me as a young kinsman, whom he was disposed to treat in a most friendly manner."¹⁰

(c) Doctrinal differences. This was no doubt at the heart of the controversy. Until 1744 Edwards admitted to the table baptized members who could not testify of a personal conversion. "That is to say, provided that a baptized member of the church possessed an adequate knowledge of the Christian Faith, and that there were no open inconsistencies in his conduct, nothing further was necessary to qualify for admission to the Lord's Table" (Murray).¹¹ This practice was originated by Stoddard and practiced by other churches. While Edwards was uncomfortable with the practice from the beginning, he openly disagreed with it by the mid-1740s. He refused communion to an unconverted member in 1748, and the controversy began. Edwards wrote to John Erskine 1749: "A very great difficulty has arisen between my people, relating to qualifications for communion at the Lord's Table. My honored grandfather Stoddard, my predecessor in the ministry over this church, strenuously maintained the Lord's Supper to be a converting ordinance, and urged all to come who were not of scandalous life, though they knew themselves to be unconverted. I formerly conformed to his practice but I have had difficulties with respect to it, which have been long increasing, till I dared no longer to proceed in the former way, which has occasioned great uneasiness among my people, and has filled all the country with noise."¹²

⁸ Samuel Hopkins, as quoted by Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 183

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, as quoted by Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 341-342

¹⁰ Joseph Hawley, as quoted by Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 348

¹¹ Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 348

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1: cxviii

In 1749, Edwards wrote a formal defense of his view entitled, *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God Concerning the Qualifications Necessary to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*. Few read the book. He then gave five Thursday lectures that "were thinly attended by his own people: but great numbers of strangers from the neighboring towns attended."¹³ Thus, on June 22, 1750, Edwards was voted out of his congregation. Of the 230 male voting members, only 23 voted to retain him.

I am now separated from the people between whom and me there was once the greatest union. Remarkable is the providence of God in this matter. In this event we have a striking instance of the instability and uncertainty of all things here below. The dispensation is indeed awful in many respects, calling for serious reflection and deep humiliation in me and my people. The enemy, far and near, will now triumph; but God can overrule all for His own glory. I have now nothing visible to depend upon for my future usefulness, or the subsistence of my numerous family. But I hope we have an all-sufficient, faithful, covenant God, to depend upon. I desire that I may ever submit to Him, walk humbly before Him, and put my trust wholly in Him.¹⁴

(2) Stockbridge (MA). While receiving several invitations from churches as far way as Scotland, Edwards finally agreed on a church plant in an Indian settlement west of Northampton. The church consisted of only a dozen white settlers with the Indians meeting separately in the afternoon. There were nearly fifty communicate Indian members when Edwards arrived in August of 1751. In 1758, Edwards accepted a call to serve as president of NJ College (Princeton). Edwards, along with his two daughters Esther (widowed with 2 young children) and Lucy, relocated to NJ in January of 1758. When smallpox broke out, Edwards was injected with a vaccine that proved fatal. He died on March 22, 1758 at 54yrs of age. Esther (26) and his wife Sarah (48), died later in the same year.

3. *Writings and theology*. In addition to his many printed sermons, Edwards also wrote numerous theological works (some of which were punished after his death). Among these were: *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England, and the Way in which it Ought to be Acknowledged and Promoted* (1742), *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will* (1754), *A Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World* (1765), *A Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue* (1765), *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758), and *A Treatise on Religious Affections* (1746). (1) God's majesty. Among other things, Edward's sermons are God-centered. He spoke often of God's justice and wrath, as well as His mercy and love. For Edwards, "God's chief end in creating the world, was the outward display of His glory, in the manifestation of all His divine perfections."¹⁵ This will be true for all eternity in heaven and hell. "As heaven is prepared on purpose to be a place of the manifestation of God's love, so hell is prepared for the inflictions of God's wrath" (Edwards).¹⁶ In a sermon on Hebrews 12:29, entitled, *God is a Consuming Fire*, Edwards answered the question, "What attributes of God do especially render Him thus a consuming fire?" "First, His Omniscience. Fire is of a searching nature. God sees all the wickedness men are guilty of. As a fierce fire will penetrate, search, and distinguish, will try gold and silver, and will distinguish what is pure from what is counterfeit, so does God's all-seeing eye." "Second, His holiness. As He is a being of an omniscient eye, so He is of a pure eye. As fire is of a pure and purifying nature, so such is the holy nature of God that He will and cannot endure spiritual filthiness." "Third, His jealousy, whereby He is jealous for His own honor, and His wrath is excited by those that contemn

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1: cxvii

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1: cxxii

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:94-121

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Torments of Hell: Jonathan Edwards on Eternal Damnation*, 232

Him, or give to any other that respect and honor that is due to Him alone." "Fourth, His justice. God is an infinitely just God, and as He is the Judge of the world, will surely execute deserved vengeance on all ungodliness. He will by no means clear the guilty." "Lastly, His power. The expression of a consuming fire denotes a fire of a very powerful heat, and that none can resist or stand before. The power of God executes what the holiness, and jealousy, and justice of God calls for. And His power is equal to those other attributes. God is infinite in power, whereby He is able to fulfill the purposes of His wrath, and utterly to destroy and consume all His enemies."¹⁷

In 1738, Edwards preached a series of sermons entitled *Charity and Its Fruits* (1Corinthians 13). His final sermon was called, *Heaven a World of Love*. The first reason heaven is a world of love is because of "the cause and fountain of love in heaven." "Here I remark that the God of love Himself dwells in heaven. Heaven is the palace or presence-chamber of the high and holy One, whose name is love, and who is both the cause and source of all holy love. God, considered with respect to His essence, is everywhere—He fills both heaven and earth. But yet He is said, in some respects, to be more especially in some places than in other. . . . But heaven is His dwelling-place above all other places in the universe; and all those places in which He was said to dwell of old, were but types of this. Heaven is a part of creation that God has built for this end, to be the place of His glorious presence, and it is His abode forever; and here will He dwell, and gloriously manifest Himself to all eternity. And this renders heaven a world of love; for God is the fountain of love, as the sun is the fountain of light."¹⁸

There, even in heaven, dwells the God from whom every stream of holy love, yea, every drop that is, or ever was, proceeds. There dwells God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, united as one, in infinitely dear, and incomprehensible, and mutual, and eternal love. There dwells God the Father, who is the father of mercies, and so the father of love, who so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son to die for it. There dwells Christ, the Lamb of God, the prince of peace and of love, who so loved the world that He shed His blood, and poured out His soul unto death for men. . . . And there dwells the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of divine love, in whom the very essence of God, as it were, flows out, and is breathed forth in love, and by whose immediate influence all holy love is shed abroad in the hearts of all the saints on earth and in heaven. There, in heaven, this infinite fountain of love—this eternal Three in One—is set open without any obstacle to hinder access to it, as it flows forever. There this glorious God is manifested, and shines forth, in full glory, in beams of love. And there this glorious fountain forever flows forth in streams, yea, in rivers of love and delight, and these rivers swell, as it were, to an ocean of love, in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment, and their hearts, as it were, be overrun with love!¹⁹

(2) Man's inability. While affirming the Biblical doctrine of total depravity, Edwards stressed the moral nature of this inability. That is, man's inability is moral and not physical. Man, by nature, possesses the natural faculties to believe, but he refuses to do so. Man is not a rock nor a beast. He has a mind, heart, and will. But these are natively opposed to believing. As Edwards' disciple Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) said: "Our impotency, in one word, is not natural (physical), but moral, and, therefore, instead of justifying, does magnify and enhances our fault."²⁰ In a sermon entitled, *Persons Ought to Do What They Can for Their Salvation*, Edwards began with a clarification: "There are some things that are beyond the capacity of man's nature, that human faculties are not capable of. Thus, 'tis above the

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The True Gospel: Jonathan Edwards on Eternal Salvation*, 66-67

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, 326-327

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, 327-327

²⁰ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 100

capacity of man's nature to comprehend God, or to create anything, or to raise the dead, to stop the sun in his course." For Edwards, it would be unjust for God to expect man to do such things. "Tis impossible that man should be under obligation to do anything that is above the capacity of his nature because his incapacity for it is from God. God never gave man faculties that should him to do it. God never requires anything of man but what is commensurate to the faculties that He has given him. He never commands him to do anything above the capacity of the human nature" (Edwards).²¹ Thus, while native man is unable to believe without new principles (through the enlightenment of the Spirit), he needs no new faculties. "Man in his fallen state is not able to know or love God without new principles, but he does not need any new faculties" (Edwards).²² This for Edwards, lays the blame totally at man's feet. "Man in his present state may be said to be wholly impotent as to these things (knowing and loving God). He is dead to them and can't perform them while he remains in a natural state, any more than a dead man can perform vital acts. But a man may be obliged to do those things that, in this sense, he is impotent to. Such an impotency as this does not excuse him" (Edwards).²³

He then provided two reasons: "One is because his impotency is from himself and not from God. He brought it upon himself by his own sinful action that he committed when he was not impotent. God did not make man at first with this impotency. He gave him faculties that are naturally capable of those things, and not only so, but He furnished him with principles whereby he might perform them, but he lost those principles by a fault that he committed when he was free and not impotent." "And another reason is the corruption that renders man impotent is in the inclination and will itself. Its not only in the understanding, but in the will. And 'tis by the will's being concerned in it that it became faulty. There is nothing that will excuse a man for a perverse will. For instance, his not loving God, but hating him, is a thing seated in the will itself. What is willful is inexcusable."²⁴ Thus, Edwards exhorted sinners to do certain things within their power. "A person can attend to the Scriptures, that he read and search it and pry into it and apply it to himself with great diligence, He can with very great diligence attend to the word preached and labor with great diligence to keep his mind from wandering in times of divine worship. He can use great diligence in watching against sin and temptations and striving against his corruption He can use great diligence in prayer to God. All these things and others that might be mentioned, persons can do. They are properly in their power as much as 'tis in a man's power to work or attend his secular business. For all these things do consist in natural actions as much as those things that are wholly terminated in worldly things."²⁵ "Directions for seeking are found in almost every sermon Edwards ever preached. No theme was so much on his heart and lips as this. This was the point of contact between sinners and the gospel, and he was constantly urging it on them. Men were not able to believe, but they were able to seek, and so Edwards always was exhorting them to do so and telling them how to do it" (Gerstner).²⁶

Though can can't convert themselves, yet you are directed and advised by God to seek conversion, and are told in what way you should seek it, and you are directed to do those things in order to it that are in your power, and you haven't done those things. Here all excuse is wholly cut off and you are left inexcusable. What can you have to answer when it shall be demanded why you haven't done these and those things that God commanded you to do for your salvation, that you had as much in your power as these and those things that you have done for your worldly profit or advancement or pleasure?

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 371-372

²² Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 372

²³ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 372

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 373

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 378-379

²⁶ John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: Evangelist*, 78

You are like the slothful servant mentioned in Matthew 25:24-25...So whether Christ had given you power to convert yourself or no, yet doubles you are altogether inexcusable for not doing that for your conversion that is in your power to do. Here is sufficient in this one consideration forever to stop the mouths of all unconverted persons and show that God might justly forever deny them mercy. Where is one natural person that can say that he has done what he could for his salvation? Where is one who can't accuse himself of woeful negligence of his precious soul?²⁷

(3) Christian experience. Edwards often distinguished between true and false religion. For example, in a sermon entitled, *True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils*, he maintained a man can know much of religion and be no better than a devil. "Its manifest that no degree of speculative knowledge of things of religion, is any certain sign of true piety."²⁸ In 1735, Edwards preached a series of sermons from 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith," entitled, *Persons Ought Not to Rest Ignorant and Unresolved About Their Own State Whether They Be Real Christians or No*. He provided five reasons: "1. 'Tis not a thing impossible for a person to come to the knowledge of his own state. Not only conversion is a thing attainable, but also the knowledge of it." "2. Persons, as long as they remain unresolved about their condition, in many instances, can't know what is proper for them to do, or what work they have before them." "3. A state of uncertainty and doubting is a very uncomfortable state." "4. A confirmed uncertainty and unresolvedness in this matter tends many ways to the prejudice of the soul. If persons are unconverted, to remain ignorant of it may be to their everlasting ruin, because it may prevent their ever obtaining conversion. He that is ignorant of his disease is not very likely to obtain a cure." "5. For persons to have the knowledge of themselves in this respect tends greatly to their soul's benefit. If they are in a natural condition, then to know it tends to awaken them and put them upon self-examination, and to humble them, and convinces them of their lost and helpless condition. If they are converted, it ordinarily tends greatly to their benefit to know it, because it tends greatly to enliven their graces, and draw forth their exercises. A true hope exceedingly cherishes grace. It tends to draw forth love to God. It tends to cause exercises of humility, and repentance, and thankfulness, tends to give a humble and admiring sense of the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ."²⁹

And it strengthens and enlivens faith. The past experience of God's truth and faithfulness, manifested in pardoning and saving them, helps the more confidently still to trust God's faithfulness. The thought of God's love to them, who were so unworthy, tends to make them more sensible of the sufficiency of God's mercy and the love of Christ. Christ's having been sufficient for them, they can testify by their experience to His sufficiency to save sinners, and that there is enough in Him to save those that are exceeding vile and unworthy. A true hope abundantly tends to give persons courage and resolution in their Christian course. It engages their hearts in God's service and helps them to overcome the difficulties that are in their way. While a saint is under great doubts about his condition, his soul oftentimes is like the face of the earth in the winter. Things seem be dead like the trees; though they have life in them, it lies dormant. But when such a should comes to see the happy circumstances it is in, and to have a lively hope, it often is like the warm sunbeams in the spring. It causes those things that seemed to be dead to spring and put forth and appear lively and bountiful. Faith is strengthened, and love drawn forth, and humble thankfulness and praise is excited.³⁰

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 393-394

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards' Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 384

²⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 236-239

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 239-240