

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

***Die huigelaar is hy of sy
wat die gáwes van God
méér liefhet
as God sélf.***

Jonathan Edwards

Edwards word allerweë beskou as een van die grootste teoloë en denkers in die kerkgeskiedenis. Daarbenewens was hy baie invloedryk in die Amerikaanse herlewing bekend as die "Great Awakening". En om alles te kroon was hy een van die voorlopers van die opwelling van Protestantse sendingwerk in die 19de eeu.

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10 Things You Should Know about Jonathan Edwards

[Jeremy M. Kimble](#)

1. *He came from a large family with a pastoral heritage.*

Born October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, Edwards grew up in a family dedicated to the purposes of God in an early American context. Edwards was raised, along with ten sisters (each of whom was at least six feet tall), by loving parents, Timothy and Esther. His father, Timothy Edwards, served as pastor of Second Church Windsor.

Edwards was raised in a setting that emphasized the reality of "awakenings." In the earliest correspondence we have from Edwards—a brief letter he wrote in 1716 at age twelve—he describes recent events in the church of Timothy Edwards, his father: *"Through the wonderful mercy and goodness of God there hath in this place been a very remarkable stirring and pouring out of the Spirit of God."*

While there was at time tension between Jonathan Edwards and his father (e.g., over the preparationist view of conversion), the younger Edwards had a deep and abiding desire to love and honor his parents that was demonstrated throughout his life.

2. *His own conversion and work of sanctification came through much struggle.*

As a youth, Edwards struggled with the Calvinistic understanding of the sovereignty of God. He once wrote: *"From my childhood up my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty. . . It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me."*

However, in 1721 he came to a "delightful conviction" as he was meditating on [1 Timothy 1:17](#). He remarked: *"As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before. . . I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven; and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever! I kept saying, and as it were*

singing over these words of scripture to myself; and went to prayer, to pray to God that I might enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection."

From that point on, Edwards delighted in the sovereignty of God, but still not without spiritual difficulty. In his diary entries and his Personal Narrative, Edwards regularly documents how he swung back and forth between spiritual bliss and despair over his sin on a regular basis. From his very first diary entry on December 18, 1722, Edwards referenced the fact that his conversion experience did not seem to fit the dominant "morphology of conversion," a specific ordering of steps leading to conversion, as held by New England Puritans. The years between 1722 and 1725 were marked by spiritual highs and lows in his life as recorded in his diary entries. It does appear that Edwards came to a more settled state of heart by the time he went to Northampton in 1726.

3. *He pastored his first church when he was 18 years old.*

As a recent graduate of Yale, Edwards ministered to a Presbyterian church in New York for eight months. It seems that Edwards enjoyed his time in this post. He wrote: *"I came away from New York in the month of April 1723, and had a most bitter parting with Madam Smith and her son. My heart seemed to sink within me, at leaving the family and city, where I had enjoyed so many sweet and pleasant days. I went from New York to Wethersfield by water. As I sailed away, I kept sight of the city as long as I could."*

It was not in any way a long pastorate, and we know that after this he went into the academic realm at Yale where he served as a tutor for two years. However, what one can see in words like this is that Edwards—though he can be thought of as intense, overly studious, and socially inept—had a deep and abiding love for the people of God under his care. This would be shown in numerous ways throughout his ministry.

4. *He thought highly of his wife, even at a young age.*

Jonathan and Sarah met in 1723 in New Haven, Connecticut, when Edwards was twenty years old, a graduate student and tutor at Yale. Sarah was then thirteen years old, and she was the daughter of James Pierrepont, the minister of the New Haven church. In a somewhat atypical love letter and reflection on a budding relationship, Edwards's God-centered theology shined through. In thinking of the girl who would become his wife in 1727, Edwards remarked: *"They say there is a young lady in New Haven who is beloved of that almighty Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him — that she expects after a while to be received up where he is, to be raised up out of the world and caught up into heaven; being assured that he loves her too well to let her remain at a distance from him always. "There she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love and delight forever. Therefore, if you present all the world before her, with the richest of its treasures, she disregards it and cares not for it, and is unmindful of any pain or affliction. She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her actions; and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful, if you would give her all the world, lest she should offend this great Being."*

She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind; especially after those seasons in which this great God has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her."

5. His longest tenure in ministry was serving as assistant and then pastor of the church in Northampton.

Edwards's maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, long served as pastor in Northampton. On August 29, 1726, he went to work with his grandfather as an assistant pastor in the church in Northampton. He was ordained on February 15, 1727. On February 11, 1729, Stoddard died and Edwards became pastor of the church.

To give some context, the church in 1735 had approximately 620 members. As such, Edwards would serve for over twenty years in a church that had a heritage of "awakening" under a well-known, influential pastor who preceded him. While spending a great deal of time in his study, he made himself available to his family, took counseling and visitation appointments, and also invested in future ministers, training them for pastoral work in the church.

6. He was a key player in the First Great Awakening.

Along with the John and Charles Wesley, as well as George Whitefield, Edwards stands as one of the most recognized participants and defenders of the First Great Awakening. Once Edwards took over for Stoddard in 1729, he pressed for repentance in Northampton.

Edwards began to see fruit from his efforts in late 1733, when he reported that the younger people of Northampton were showing "flexibleness" in responding to his exhortations about late-night carousing. All of this served as a precursor to the outbreak of revival in New England, which Edwards documented in detail in his work, *A Faithful Narrative*.

In New England from 1734-35, a religious stirring began as a return to seriousness over religious matters emerged. A number of people were converted and reports were given of individuals forsaking sin in the pursuit of godliness. Further awakening in New England is traced to George Whitefield's preaching in 1740, and Edwards's preaching ministry in 1741, particularly his sermon given at Enfield, Connecticut, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*." As divisions arose over the meaning of these awakenings, Edwards stood as a measured, biblical defender of their validity. Due to the meticulous nature of his works on the subject of revival, they became normative for many in his generation, and are still seen by many as standard for assessing revival today.

7. The church where he served the longest fired him.

On June 22, 1750, Edwards was voted out of his pastorate in Northampton. Several reasons are cited for his dismissal: his requests for an increase in salary (he and Sarah had eleven children); his response to "bundling" among the youth; his sermons on the "bad books" and public identification of the innocent (some young men had gained access to a midwives

manual that contained images of the female anatomy and used it to taunt young women in the town); and, perhaps most important, his opposition to the “Halfway Covenant,” and Stoddard’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper as a “converting ordinance.” Of the 230 men who voted, only 23 stood in his favor.

On this fateful June day, Edwards preached his final sermon as the church’s pastor (he preached intermittently over the next several months) from [2 Corinthians 1:14](#). He pleaded with them one last time, saying, *“To those who are professors of godliness amongst us. I would now call you to a serious consideration of that great day wherein you must meet him who has heretofore been your pastor, before the Judge, whose eyes are as a flame of fire. I have endeavored, according to my best ability, to search the Word of God, with regard to the distinguishing notes of true piety, those by which persons might best discover their state, and most surely and clearly judge of themselves.*

And these rules and marks I have from time to time applied to you, in the preaching of the word, to the utmost of my skill, and in the most plain and searching manner that I have been able; in order to the detecting the deceived hypocrite, and establishing the hopes and comforts of the sincere. And yet ‘tis to be feared, that after all that I have done, I now leave some of you in a deceived, deluded state; for ‘tis not to be supposed that among several hundred professors, none are deceived.

Henceforward, I am like to have no more opportunity to take the care and charge of your souls, to examine and search them. But still I entreat you to remember and consider the rules which I have often laid down to you, during my ministry, with a solemn regard to the future day when you and I must meet together before our Judge; when the uses of examination you have heard from me must be rehearsed again before you, and those rules of trial must be tried, and it will appear whether they have been good or not; and it will also appear whether you have impartially heard them and tried yourselves by them; and the Judge himself who is infallible will try both you and me: and after this none will be deceived concerning the state of their souls.”

Edwards, while certainly not a perfect pastor, loved his people to the end, and sought to guide them to a place of ever-increasing maturity, knowing they will one day stand before Christ as Judge.

8. He served as a missionary to the Indians and president of Princeton before his death.

In June of 1751, Edwards settled in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, as pastor and missionary to the Indians. While not as renowned of a town, lacking the heritage of his previous church, and facing difficulty in ministering to the Native Americans, Edwards found joy and contentment in this post. It also afforded him more time to write, and some of his most important works came out during this time like *Freedom of the Will* in 1754, *The Nature of True Virtue* in 1755, *Original Sin* in 1758, and *Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*, published posthumously in 1765.

On February 16, 1758, he was installed as President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). In his letter of October 19, 1757, Edwards responded to the invitation of the Trustees to take up this new position. He was reticent to do so, believing he simply did not have the constitution to hold such a post. He was, however, persuaded, and went on to serve in this capacity. Edwards was inoculated for smallpox on February 23rd of that same year. He contracted a fever from which he died on March 22. His final words were

written to his daughter, Lucy: *"Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all to seek a Father who will never fail you."*

9. *He wrote an astonishing number of books on a variety of subjects.*

If one were to go to Yale's online collection of Edwards's works they would find 73 volumes listed. While many of these volumes contain his sermons, the literary output Edwards produced is nothing short of astonishing. While there are many one could cite, perhaps the best known works of Edwards today include Religious Affections, A Personal Narrative, The Nature of True Virtue, and A History of the Work of Redemption. These works, covering the nature of true conversion, autobiographical details, ethics, and a theology of Scripture and all of history respectively, are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to all that Edwards wrote.

10. *His legacy of knowing and delighting in the glory of God resonates in the church today.*

Mark Noll once lamented: *"Edwards' piety continued on in the revivalist tradition, his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world view. . . The disappearance of Edwards's perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy."*

While this statement likely once held true, there has been a definite resurgence of interest in and application of Edwards's theology. In both the academic and pastoral realm, Edwards's God-centered worldview is recognized as biblical in nature, shaping hearts and minds toward the pursuit of God's glory in all things.

True, this is not a universal reality, but the worldview Edwards once taught has seemingly reverberated in our day through sermons, journal articles, blog posts, and books. Edwards maintained a vision wherein the revivals he experienced would affect people from every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth. May God see fit to use Edwards's writings to get us back into Scripture and give us a clear and passionate vision for all the nations participating in white-hot worship of King Jesus.

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Twee uitstekende biografieë

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