

A Biography of Jonathan Edwards

Please note that useful vocabulary words are defined only as they are used in context.

Jonathan Edwards was born into a Puritan evangelical household on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut. He was the fifth of eleven children (ten of whom were girls) born to the Rev. Timothy and Esther Edwards. During his childhood, Edwards and his ten sisters received a rigorous education from both their mother and father. This education included the study of the Bible and Christian theology, as well as philosophy, Latin, and Greek.

Undergraduate Years

Edwards began studying at Yale College (now Yale University) at age 13, which at the time was a normal age to begin college. During his six years of undergraduate and graduate education at Yale, Edwards devoted himself to the study of theology and philosophy. Edwards also took a personal interest in the natural sciences, which he kept abreast of by reading British scientific journals. Edwards' curiosity about the natural world abounded; in his mid-teens, Edwards sat in a field, flicking spiders off of sticks to try to figure out how they 'flew.' He submitted his findings to a prestigious scientific journal, but his article went unpublished.

At Yale, Edwards became curious about faiths that challenged his own Puritanism, and he did not shy away from exploring new ideas, which he sought out in scientific journals, philosophical writings, and theological texts. Edwards developed a personal philosophy that returned to the kind of idealism first explored by Plato. This philosophy was radical, compared to the **materialist**¹ convictions of many of his peers. In developing his personal theology and philosophy, Edwards explored the theoretical nature and importance of beauty. This led to a reverence for the natural world that was later mirrored in the work of the Transcendentalists (mid-1800's).

Becoming a Pastor

In 1726, Edwards succeeded his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as the pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, the largest and most influential church outside of Boston. This pastorate was an elected position which was accompanied by a great amount of power and a substantial payroll. A year after being installed as the Northampton pastor, Edwards married Sarah Pierpont, with whom he would later have eleven children.

The First Great Awakening

In 1734–1735, Edwards oversaw some of the initial stirrings of the First Great Awakening. He gained international fame as a revivalist and "theologian of the heart" after publishing descriptions of the awakenings in his parish. During the New England revivals of the 1730's and 1740's, Edwards became very well known as a writer and revivalist preacher who subscribed to an experiential interpretation of **Calvinism**² that emphasized the

¹ **Materialism** – the belief that Earthly reality is the only reality

² **Calvinism** – a school of Protestantism that arose from the teachings of French theologian John Calvin. Also known as the Reformed Movement.

sovereignty of God, the depravity of humankind, the reality of hell, and the necessity of conversion. Edwards defended revivalism and conversion against rampant skepticism.

"The first and greatest homegrown American philosopher"

Perry Miller, the first editor of Yale University's Works of Jonathan Edwards, described Edwards as the first and greatest homegrown American philosopher. Miller argued that anyone who closely studied Edwards "discovers an intelligence which, as much as Emerson's, Melville's, or Mark Twain's, is both an **index**³ of American society and a comment upon it." Although nineteenth-century editors of Edwards "improved" his style out of embarrassment for his unadorned language, Edwards is now recognized as a skilled stylist, a sophisticated **rhetorician**,⁴ and a master preacher. Edwards' use of rhetoric as a means of eliciting emotional responses is readily seen in the most famous sermon in American history, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741).

In addition to applying his knowledge of logic and philosophy to his faith, Edwards used his knowledge of history in a theological framework. In a series of sermons, Edwards attempted to describe God's work as a history, which was based on God's scriptural promises, or covenants, and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Scholars have suggested the importance of these works in American history, particularly their contribution to revolutionary **ideology**⁵.

In 1750, Edwards' church dismissed him from Northampton after he made it more difficult for new converts to receive the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, believing that lax standards admitted too many hypocrites and unbelievers into the church. Edwards' dismissal was more than an isolated incident; it marked the clear and final rejection of the old "New England Way" constructed by the Puritan settlers of New England.

A Mission Post

After leaving Northampton, Edwards became a missionary to the Native Americans in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he served from 1751 to 1757. Here he served as the pastor of a small English congregation, was a missionary to 150 Mahican and Mohawk families, and wrote many of his major works, including those that addressed the "**Arminian**⁶ controversy." Foremost among these was "Freedom of Will," in which he attempted to prove that the human will was driven by the presence of either sin or grace in the soul. This book, one of the most important works in modern western thought, laid out the foundations for what would become an intense philosophical debate as the western world continued to develop.

Though Stockbridge provided something of a haven for Edwards, he could not avoid the limelight. In late 1757, he accepted the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University). After only a few months in Princeton, he died on March 22, 1758, following complications from a smallpox inoculation. He is buried in the Princeton Cemetery.

³ **Index** – something that indicates or denotes

⁴ **Rhetoric** – persuasive, logical argumentation

⁵ **Ideology** – a system of belief

⁶ **Arminianism** – the anti-Calvinist belief that humans have a measure of control over whether they go to heaven or hell