The New England Theology

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From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park

Douglas A. Sweeney
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To
Joseph Conforti,
colleague and friend,
who got this started

Contents

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Introduction

> We beg leave, therefore, first of all, to explain the term, New England Theology. It signifies the formal creed which a majority of the most eminent theologians in New England have explicitly or implicitly sanctioned, during and since the time of Edwards. It denotes the spirit and genius of the system openly avowed or logically involved, in their writings. It includes not the peculiarities in which Edwards differed, as he is known to have differed, from the larger part of his most eminent followers; nor the peculiarities in which any one of his followers differed, as some of them did, from the larger part of the others; but it comprehends the principles, with their logical sequences, which the greater number of our most celebrated divines have approved expressly or by implication.
>
> Edwards Amasa Park, *New England Theology* (1852)

In the spring of 1858, an Illinois newspaper editor looked around the landscape of America—which, among other things, included a major national financial depression, an upcoming senatorial contest, and the uproar over slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territories—and decided that the most important news was about religious revival. "There is no one topic . . . so frequently the subject of discussion as the religious awakening now agitating the land," wrote Charles Lanphier. This revival of religion was "a natural reaction from the materialism of the last twenty years." But the "reaction" took the form of religious revival, partly because that was how Americans dealt "at periodical intervals" with the contradictions and stresses of their culture and partly because revivals had "received the sanction on this side of the Atlantic of Jonathan Edwards, the great metaphysician of his century."[1]

1. Charles Lanphier, "Religious Revivals," *Illinois State Register,* March 26, 1858, 2.

Editor Lanphier seems not to have noticed that he was placing this laurel on the head of Edwards almost exactly one hundred years after Edwards's death at Princeton. But the coincidence was a telling one. Ezra Stiles, who had grown up knowing Edwards and disagreeing with most of Edwards's thinking, was sure at that time that "in another Generation" Edwards would "pass into as transient Notice perhaps scarce above Oblivion, as Willard or Twiss, or Norton" and be "looked upon as singular and whimsical."[2] Stiles was a stalwart of what became known as Old Calvinism—the established, parish-based system of Congregationalist Calvinism that had been in place since the Puritan founding of Massachusetts Bay in 1630. Edwards's complaint had been that Old Calvinism had gone stale, substituting a civil but uninspiring version of Calvinism for the passionate and living piety of the Puritan founders. Edwards's sympathies lay in the direction of the new Pietism, whose best-known English-speaking apostles were John Wesley and George Whitefield. When Whitefield arrived in New England in 1739, preaching revival and renewal, Edwards fell in alongside him and became the primary defender of what would soon become known simply as the Great Awakening.

Edwards hoped, in his devout heart of hearts, that the Great Awakening was the overture to the day of judgment and the millennium, when "religion shall in every respect be uppermost in the world."[3] But the Awakening burned through its own energies, and when Edwards tried to force the Northampton church to rewrite its understanding of church membership, based on the more demanding piety of the revival, the members resisted him and then in 1750 fired him. Instead of hailing the "dawning of a general revival of the Christian church," Edwards took up the day-to-day routine of superintending the mission station of the Massachusetts Commissioners for the Propagation of the Gospel at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he preached to two hundred Stockbridge Mahicans (in English, using a translator; he never tried to learn the Mahican language, although his six-year-old son picked it up effortlessly and wrote a study of it, *Observations on the Language of the Muhhekanew Indians*, in 1788) and an English congregation that was not entirely eager to have him as its pastor. Edwards's own attention soon strayed back to his early enchantment with philosophy, and, between 1750 and 1757, he

2. Cited in Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D.*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner, 1901), 275.

3. Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 65; see also Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *The Great Awakening, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 353.

composed three great treatises in moral philosophy—on *Original Sin, Freedom of the Will,* and *The Nature of True Virtue*—all the while praying for a new awakening until the trustees of the infant college at Princeton invited him to take up the presidency there in 1757. But the books did not sell well, and Edwards fell ill from the complications of a smallpox inoculation at Princeton. He died there on March 22, 1758, "without the least appearance of murmuring through the whole."[4]

Although Ezra Stiles expected that Edwards's reputation would disappear in the same uncomplaining fashion, the result over the next century was the exact opposite. His students, Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, took up in the 1750s and 1760s where Edwards left off, and the result, to Stiles's dismay, was the formulation of an Edwardsean "New Divinity," the first generation of a distinctively New England theology.[5]

Bellamy and Hopkins saw, as the Old Calvinists did not, how very directly Edwards's writings spoke to the central concerns of Americans as they descended into the storm of the Revolutionary decades. First, however much Edwards's dismissal from Northampton looked like New Englanders' repudiating revivalism as a device for stoking up the spiritual temperature of their churches, Bellamy and Hopkins were convinced that Edwards's fall only underscored the degree of New England's apostasy from true Calvinism and the need to redouble the effort to provoke revival. The weapon Edwards put into their hands was contained in the treatise *Freedom of the Will,* in which Edwards confected an ingenious reconciliation of absolute Calvinist predestination with a demand for immediate and utter surrender of a person's will to the demand for conversion and holiness.

When God decrees an act, Edwards wrote, that act becomes *necessary.* But acts can become necessary in one of two ways: God can physically compel someone, even while the person really wants to do something else. Or an act becomes necessary when a person already has a psychological inclination toward that act, and the more intense a person's inclination, the more likely it is that it will be acted on in a predictable fashion. Edwards called the necessity that involves force *natural necessity*. No one under the force of natural necessity can be held morally accountable for what he or she does. But the necessity that arises from

4. William Shippen to Sarah Edwards, March 22, 1758, cited in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 494.

5. We use "New England Theology" (as it was used in the nineteenth century) to refer to the Edwardsean tradition or school of thought: the tradition beginning with Edwards, running through the New Divinity from Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy to Nathanael Emmons, and extending to more ambiguous figures who nevertheless claimed a linkage to Edwards, from Nathaniel W. Taylor, Lyman Beecher, and Charles G. Finney to the last of the school's stalwarts, Andover's Edwards Amasa Park.

people's own inclinations is *moral necessity*. Since no one is actually using force in moral necessity, such people can be held responsible for their actions; in fact, the *greater* the force of an evil inclination on their actions, the *more* accountable they are, precisely because they have all the natural, physical power they need to do otherwise. In practical terms, this meant that people could not excuse themselves from the call to repentance and conversion on the grounds of *inability*. They had arms and legs and lips and a brain, and they could use them to bow the knee in repentance—and do it *now*, without waiting for some external, natural necessity to get them to do it. If we were to look at this as a modern psychologist might, we would say that Edwards was creating a moment of catharsis by telling them that, despite their sinful inclinations, they were fully responsible to repent and believe.

Second, Edwards also confronted the incapacity of conventional Calvinism to deal with the blandishments of the Enlightenment. The skeptical luminaries of the British Enlightenment, from Hobbes to Hume, had turned Calvinism on its head, not by denouncing predestination but by co-opting it and making material substances and forces the absolute determiners of all human actions. To save any place for the activity of human spirit, Calvinist divines in England and New England diluted Calvin's determinism with doses of free willism—Arminianism, after the seventeenth-century Dutch opponent of Calvinism—and once they began diluting, there was not much they did not dilute, including the Trinity. Edwards, on the other hand, made it clear that the best defense against atheistic determinism was an aggressive Calvinistic offense, and the formulas he developed in the treatises of the 1750s allowed Hopkins and Bellamy to combine the most *ultra* forms of Calvinism with the rhetoric of free choice and to do it with demands for revival and moral purism that made the Old Calvinists blanch.

Third, the Edwardseans had an important lesson in civics to teach, based on Edwards's distinction between force and necessity (although it is safe to say that the Edwardseans were not entirely self-aware of it). Just as Edwards had taught that God rules human conduct by affecting the inclination and not by force, so the Edwardseans transformed New England Calvinism by basing its support on an appeal to public inclination rather than to tax collections reinforced by civil statute. In so doing, they demonstrated that the exclusion of religion from formal public establishment by the American republic's Constitution need not mean the end of the churches' influence on American public life. Closed off from making policy, they made converts. Unable to legislate, they organized independent societies for Bible distribution, for alcoholism reform, for observance of the Sabbath, for suppressing vice and immorality, for the end of slavery. When the French liberal Alexis de Tocqueville took

his celebrated tour of the United States in the 1830s, he was amazed to find that while "in the United States religion" has no "influence on the laws or on the details of political opinions," nevertheless "it directs the mores" and through that "it works to regulate the state."[6]

But if Edwardsean-style revivalism was an important means for igniting public interest in religion, it was also a poor instrument for sustaining it. The demand for immediate repentance and "disinterested benevolence" was, at its most fundamental level, a reflection of the old Puritan weakness for separatism. The revivals called people to repentance, but they also called them out of society, out of their normal relations, out of their everyday moral lives to participate in an intensely demanding but very otherworldly version of Protestant Christianity. The very fact that a revival was judged necessary at all was a judgment on the failures of the regular churches and the impurities of conventional society, and its logical end was to turn people into come-outers of various sorts and to inflate a radical individualism.

Fearsome as the New Divinity became as preachers, they prided themselves just as much on the passion with which they wrote and studied. Nathanael Emmons stoically devoted himself for seventy-eight years to a regimen of ten to sixteen hours a day in his study and wore a gouge in the wainscoting where his feet were propped up. Hopkins met with two of his students to talk theology through the day, then at nightfall saw one of them out to the stable for his horse; they fell to talking some more, and eventually they noticed what they thought was the glow from a fire in the east. It was actually the sun coming up, the next day.[7]

Gradually, the contours of New England religion, during the Revolution and into the nineteenth century, sorted themselves out into three broad categories: the genteel congregations of upper-crust Boston, who eventually went the distance in their embrace of the Enlightenment and turned Unitarian; the Old Calvinists, who struggled to preserve some traditional sense of Calvinist orthodoxy within a state-established parish system in which baptism and communion defined church membership more than conversion; and the Edwardseans, who set the bar of church life as high as Edwardsean revival could put it. There is no "score" to say which of these persuasions eventually "won." But there is no question that the Unitarians became and remained a cultivated, Bostonian taste,

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 278.

7. Edwards Amasa Park, "Memoir of Nathanael Emmons," in *The Works of Nathanael Emmons, D.D.,* vol. 1, ed. Jacob Ide (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1861), 60, 66, 105; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 173; and Edwin Pond Parker, ed., *The Autobiography of the Rev. Enoch Pond* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, 1883), 24–27.

while the Old Calvinists eventually dissolved by the 1860s into the first wave of American theological liberalism. The Edwardseans, however, captured the western New England hill country, struck westward along the Erie Canal and turned Upstate New York into the "burned-over district," followed the arrows of New England migration farther west into the Western Reserve of Ohio, and then went into Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, founding churches, colleges, and moral reform movements and lighting up the sky with the glow of a Second Great Awakening—and then a third Awakening, the one Charles Lanphier described in 1858.

None of the New Divinity, however, cleared as wide a path for himself as Charles Grandison Finney. Born in western Connecticut, Finney moved to Upstate New York and trained as a lawyer. But in 1821, Finney was dramatically converted and embarked on a new career as a preacher of revivals. No one ever wielded the thunderbolts of immediate repentance and the requirement for perfect, "disinterested" benevolence more powerfully than Finney, and from 1824 to 1832, he ignited revivals all through the Mohawk River valley, advanced to the Chatham Street Chapel and the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, and eventually became one of the leading lights in founding Oberlin College. Although Finney has been routinely cast as a sort of religious Davy Crockett, preaching free will Arminianism to freely willing American democrats, Finney's memoirs are teeming with the distinctive Edwardsean vocabulary, and in the 1840s, he was still rejecting "what the Arminians call a *gracious* ability, which terms are a manifest absurdity."[8]

But while the historical figure of Edwards continued to wax, the figure of his disciples eventually waned. It is possible to take up almost any history of American ideas before the 1980s and find almost no mention whatsoever of the New England Theology or the New Divinity. Henry May, writing in 1976 in *The Enlightenment in America*, gave them all of three pages and concluded that "by 1796, they were winning the pulpits and losing the people" in New England. Sydney Ahlstrom, who wrote *A Religious History of the American People* in 1972, feared that "they degraded Puritan theology by turning it into a lifeless system of apologetics," and in this Ahlstrom was following the judgment of Joseph Haroutunian in *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (1932), who found Hopkins and Bellamy guilty of transforming Calvinism "into a vast, complicated, and colorless theological structure, bewildering to

8. Charles Grandison Finney, "Letters on Revivals—No. 4," *Oberlin Evangelist,* March 12, 1845, 44.

its enemies and ridiculous to its friends."[9] Ezra Stiles's prediction had at last come true—but it was about the Edwardseans, not Edwards.

Just how an intellectual and theological movement of such vitality and scope could disappear almost entirely from the attention of American historians and theologians is a curious question. It stems, first, from the almost-entire failure and disappearance of the Edwardseans after the passing of Edwards Amasa Park and the capture of the New England Theology's most important citadel, Andover Theological Seminary, by the Andover liberals in the 1880s. The fall of Andover was followed in short order by a similar collapse into liberalism at two secondary Edwardsean outposts, Union Theological Seminary and Oberlin College, under the aegis of two Edwardsean-cum-nineteenth-century liberals, Henry Boynton Smith and Henry Churchill King. Unlike the Old School Presbyterians, who found in J. Gresham Machen an intellect of sufficient stature to hand on the legacy of Charles Hodge and Archibald Alexander once Princeton Theological Seminary fell into the hands of liberalism in the 1920s, the New England Theology had no one to carry forward the weight of its tradition. By the time George Nye Boardman and Frank Hugh Foster were writing comprehensive histories of the New England Theology in *A History of the New England Theology* (1899) and *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (1907), they were also conscious that they were writing its obituary.

The Presbyterian conservatives of Machen's generation were certainly not inclined to spend much energy on preserving the memory of the New England Theology. Although Edwards ended his days as president of Princeton College, his eventual successor in 1768, the Scottish Presbyterian John Witherspoon, deliberately scoured out every aspect of Edwardseanism in Princeton he could find. Witherspoon was the Scottish equivalent of an Old Calvinist, and those who followed him at the college and later at Princeton Theological Seminary were wary of the theological peculiarities of the New Divinity, especially the suspicious way the New Divinity had played with the nature and extent of the atonement. The Princetonians, and those who succeeded them through Westminster Theological and Reformed Theological seminaries, could not avoid bowing in respect to the figure of Edwards, but it was an Edwards carefully sculpted to resemble Princeton Calvinism and an Edwards who had no heirs. When Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield wrote the entry on "Edwards and the New England Theology" for James Hastings's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* in 1912, he could not

9. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 61; Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 405; and Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), 71.

avoid hailing Edwards as "the one figure of real greatness in the intellectual life of colonial America." But he was equally unable to recognize the Edwardseans as Edwards's legitimate offspring. "It was Edwards' misfortune that he gave his name to a party," Warfield wrote, because the New England Theology was "in many respects the exact antipodes of Edwards."[10] Consequently, modern conservative Reformed theology knows much of Edwards but almost nothing of Edwardseanism.

The New England Theology remained lodged in the dustbin until the 1970s. Sidney Mead wrote a marvelous biography of Nathaniel W. Taylor in 1942, and Ann Douglas included a sharply written chapter on the New Divinity in *The Feminization of American Culture* in 1977. But otherwise, except for unpublished Ph.D. dissertations by Dick van Halsema (1956) and Hugh Knapp (1971), material on the New England Theology was almost impossible to be had. Even when the New Divinity were invited in for a brief appearance, as they were in Stephen Berk's *Calvinism versus Democracy: Timothy Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy* (1974), it was usually to repeat Haroutunian's contemptuous dismissal. Then in 1977, Joseph Conforti, a student of William McLoughlin at Brown University, wrote a remarkable and sympathetic dissertation on Samuel Hopkins (which he published in 1981 as *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement*), and in 1978, a Sydney Ahlstrom student at Yale, William Breitenbach, wrote an extraordinary (but still unpublished) dissertation titled "The New Divinity and the Era of Moral Accountability." These two Ph.D. dissertations finally restarted creative work on the New Divinity material, and their reassessment was taken up in a radical new synthesis of American intellectual history in 1985 by Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey.* The two most recent surveys of American theology, Mark Noll's *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2002) and E. Brooks Holifield's *American Theology: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (2003), devote multiple chapters to the New England Theology.

With them, the New England Theology has been stood back on its feet, although this is a revival conducted as an act of historical research rather than as a devotional pursuit of what the New England theologians liked to call "Consistent Calvinism." For that reason, this revival might not be significantly different in its novelty from other academic revivals of obscure personae and movements in the American past, nor significantly differing from their tedium. But the reemergence of the

10. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "Edwards and the New England Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics,* vol. 5, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 221, 226.

New England Theology as a major historical player in American intellectual and religious history does have a number of important claims to advance, suggesting that its staying power may be more than a little resilient. First, the claims of the New England Theology require students of American intellectual history to reconsider the once-prevailing consensus that the history of American ideas is largely a story about Boston, Unitarians, and Harvard—the great convention of American intellectual history, which implies that the whole business can be confined to a narrative that runs from Edwards to Emerson to William James—and to examine the extension of various Continental legacies and conversations into the provinces and into what Bruce Kuklick calls the tradition of "speculative thought."[11]

Second, recovering the ideas and texts of the New England Theology in general (and the New Divinity in particular) lays a foundation for understanding the strain of ethical absolutism that underlies nineteenth-century American reform movements. A great deal of this absolutism was owed to Kant and American readers of Kant, beginning with James Marsh and Ralph Waldo Emerson. But Romantic Kantian ethics of the Emersonian sort falls a great deal short of explaining the fiery urgency of William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown, and it is only when we have in hand the puzzle piece of the ethics of disinterested benevolence, which springs from the New Divinity, that we begin to understand what moved John Brown (who grew up under New Divinity preaching in Connecticut) or what makes the evangelical radicalism of the antislavery movement really comprehensible. By the same token, the recovery of the New England Theology makes it clear that the most distinctive form of that absolutism—moral perfectionism—was a Calvinist as much as a Methodist or Holiness innovation. At the end of the day, perhaps *nous sommes tous calvinistes*.

Third, the New England Theology compels us to revisit the history of Reformed theology in America and to broaden the scope of that history to include the multiple forms of evangelical Calvinism that dominated the American horizon in the nineteenth century, forms that could accommodate Charles G. Finney as much as Charles Hodge. Edwards commanded, and still commands, a healthy following among Calvinist Baptists. Isaac Backus, who is known for his writings on church-state separation, introduced Edwardsean views into Baptist thinking, and Jonathan Maxcy made a dent in the New Divinity doctrinal platform with his "Discourse

11. Bruce Kuklick, "The Place of Charles Hodge in the History of Ideas in America," in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John H. Stewart and James H. Moorhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 64.

Designed to Explain the Doctrine of Atonement" (1796).[12] Early Southern Baptist leaders also appropriated Edwards. William Bullein Johnson, a faithful protégé of Maxcy, along with William Brantly, Luther Rice, and Jesse Mercer, are only the best-known examples of Edwardsean church leaders who played important roles in shaping early Southern Baptist life—most importantly through the founding of the Triennial Convention (1814), predecessor to the Southern Baptist Convention (1845). Even today, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, publishes widely popular books on Edwards's thought and spirituality and heads a national center, named Desiring God Ministries, devoted in part to sharing Edwardsean views with others.[13] Within the Southern Baptist Convention, Edwardsean partisanship persists by means of the efforts of the Calvinistic Founders Movement.

The Princetonians, of course, disliked making any concession to the New Englanders and often disputed the New Englanders' title to Calvinism (as Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield did concerning the issue of Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism in a series of articles published posthumously in 1931 as *Studies in Perfectionism*). But however much the Princetonians criticized the New Englanders, it was still a family criticism. However much they might deplore Edwardseanism, from the time of the Great Awakening to the early twentieth century, Presbyterians north and south happily appealed to Edwards as a champion of Calvinist orthodoxy, despite the chronic fears of Old Schoolers regarding the dangers of infection from New England.[14] One modern heir of Princeton Calvinism, John Gerstner (a faculty member at Pittsburgh Seminary as well as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) plied hundreds of pastors, seminarians, and evangelical laity with Edwards, devoted his summers to poring over Edwards's manuscripts at Yale, and published several books on Edwards's theology.[15] He also made disciples, most importantly

12. Jonathan Maxcy's "Discourse" was anthologized by Edwards Amasa Park in what has become the standard New Divinity volume on the subject: Edwards A. Park, ed., *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859).

13. John Piper's Edwardsean publications include *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986); *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1991); *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998); and John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

14. For a lengthier discussion of Baptist and Presbyterian Edwardseanism, see Douglas A. Sweeney, "Evangelical Tradition in America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

15. John Gerstner's best-known publications include *Steps to Salvation: The Evangelistic Message of Jonathan Edwards* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959); *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*

R. C. Sproul, who established Ligonier Ministries in the early 1970s near Gerstner's home in western Pennsylvania. A deeply Edwardsean institution, Ligonier Ministries moved to Orlando, Florida, in 1984. Today it sponsors a radio show, a monthly magazine, a multimedia ministry, and numerous seminars. It also owns an Edwardsean firm named Soli Deo Gloria, which was founded by Don Kistler, another Edwards partisan.

Edwards, as befits a theologian who straddled at least one denominational fence (between New England Congregationalism and Middle Atlantic Presbyterianism), also managed to acquire a substantial theological following beyond conventional denomination circles. Iain Murray and his Banner of Truth Trust, based in Scotland, have prompted thousands of evangelicals to study Edwards's oeuvre.[16] Evangelical academics such as Paul Helm, George Marsden, Mark Noll, and Gerald McDermott have made the study of Edwards into a scholarly industry.[17] Even theologians within mainline churches, which otherwise seem to hold precious little of Edwards's ideas, have begun to "retrieve" Edwards for the work of constructive theology. Sang Hyun Lee is the best known. His tenure teaching at Princeton Seminary and his work on what he calls Edwards's "dispositional ontology" have contributed both to Edwards studies and to the field of theology.[18] Lee's student, the Japanese theologian Anri Morimoto, has adapted Lee's insights to the field of soteriology, recommending Edwards for use in Roman Catholic–Protestant dialogue.[19] Robert Jenson, though a Lutheran, has also recommended Edwards as

(Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987); and *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Orlando: Ligonier, 1991–93). For more on recent evangelical uses of Edwards's thought, see Sweeney, "Evangelical Tradition in America."

16. Iain Murray's best-known work is a study of Edwards's life, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987).

17. See, for example, Edwards's *Treatise on Grace, and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. with an introduction by Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971); George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 77–81; Gerald R. McDermott, *Seeing God: Twelve Reliable Signs of True Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); and Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000). Also see the essays in D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

18. See especially Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Sang Hyun Lee, editor's introduction to Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–106.

19. See especially Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

"America's theologian," one who can aid us in negotiating the forces of the Enlightenment.[20]

This leads ineluctably to the questions of whether there is an identifiable Edwardsean theological legacy today and whether the New England theologians who followed Edwards are worth rehabilitating as a living component of modern Reformed thinking. It is very much because of those questions, as well as the questions posed by the scholarly revival of interest in the New England Theology, that we have undertaken this collection of the New England Theology's primary texts. The New Englanders' commitment to improving on the past, to recontextualizing even the best of their doctrinal inheritance, and to calling no man master has left the larger world with a set of rich, Edwardsean resources that have rarely been controlled by those opposed to innovation. We hope this volume will help students navigate these vast resources. We also hope it will be used by many present-day theologians who will engage America's first indigenous theological movement.

Most of the readings in this volume were published by Edwards and his followers and are reproduced here in abridged form. One of the texts printed below is published here for the first time. Thanks to Roland Baumann and the Oberlin College Archives for permission to transcribe, edit, and publish "Oberlin Theology" by James Harris Fairchild (James Harris Fairchild Papers, Oberlin College Archives).[21]

The readings have been edited very lightly. Bible references have been regularized, as have the headings within entries. Selections are reproduced verbatim, except where the original punctuation and spelling would prove confusing to modern students and where obvious typographical errors were corrected. The only changes in punctuation that affect our original sources' prose pertain to modern standards for the use of commas (which we have followed). Ellipses mark the spots where material has been deleted. The original authors' footnotes have been deleted without notice.

20. Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

21. This manuscript was later revised and published as "Oberlin Theology," in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 7, ed. John McClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 277–78.

PART 1

Wellspring of the New England Theology

The Thought of Jonathan Edwards

Ever since the turgid paper wars of the antebellum clergy, scholars have struggled with the relationship between Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) and his followers. Most have pitted Edwards against the bulk of his (self-professed) disciples, using the sayings of the master to measure the distances they strayed. Others allow for variegation in any living, breathing tradition, expecting Edwardsean adaptations of the work of Edwards himself. But whether viewing the permutations of the New England theologians more as salutary adjustments or as departures from the truth, nearly all now grant that they were drawn—legitimately or not—from the deep and plentiful wells of Edwards's spiritual estate.

Edwards's writings have been reprinted hundreds of times, in multiple languages, from English, Welsh, and Gaelic to Dutch, German, French, Swedish, and Italian—not to mention Arabic, Choctaw, Spanish, Chinese, and, most influentially in recent years, Korean. But none of Edwards's titles nourished the growth of the New England Theology as much as those that treated the hallowed doctrine of the new birth, or the soul's regeneration from spiritual death to life in Christ. Indeed, the New England Theology might be said to be a lengthy dialogue—at times, a family feud—about the nature of the new birth and the conditions under which it was most likely to transpire. From Edwards himself to Edwards Amasa Park, New England's greatest Calvinist thinkers devoted their lives to the development of a theological program that would support their region's revivals and promote their people's conversions.

This should come as no surprise given Edwards's role in making sense of New England's Great Awakening. Beginning in 1734, when a revival

rocked Northampton and nearby Connecticut River towns—quickly reverberating throughout the entire Anglo-American world—Edwards found himself in the middle of an international struggle to renew the state churches of Great Britain and her colonies. Other ministers proved more important in preaching and organizing the work. George Whitefield (1715–70) outpreached Edwards. John Wesley (1703–91) did much more to channel the forces of renewal. Many others might be mentioned who traveled farther or spent more energy mustering troops to fight the good fight. But no one worked as hard to shape theological reflection on the phenomena of revival as Edwards. From his breathless *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737) to his final *Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue* (published posthumously in 1765), Edwards devoted himself to elucidating the ways and means by which to distinguish true, twice-born religion from its fatal counterfeits.

The selections that follow feature Edwards's most significant attempts to shape perceptions of the nature and the outcomes of conversion. During his thirty-five years of ministry, he drafted several thousand pages pointing the way to spiritual life. But none of his sermons, tracts, or treatises played as great a role as these in fueling the rise or in steering the course of the Edwardsean tradition. Based on Matthew 16:17, Edwards's sermon titled *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734) is a gem. It is not nearly as well known as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), but that is a shame, for it is the *locus classicus* of his conception of the experience of spiritual regeneration—as well as the celebrated doctrine of what he called "the sense of the heart." Edwards's treatise *Religious Affections* (1746) has long been seen as a spiritual classic. Extending the themes he published first in *A Divine and Supernatural Light,* it has played a greater role than any other book in Christian history in fleshing out what Edwards called "experimental piety" and in distinguishing true religion from hypocrisy. Edwards's *Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd* (1749) proved to be his most popular book—and Brainerd himself his most important, carefully crafted, spiritual model. Finally, *Freedom of the Will* (1754) has proven most interesting to scholars. Its famed distinction between a sinner's "natural ability" and "moral inability" to repent was grist for the mills of countless New Englanders to the time of the Civil War.

Jonathan Edwards

A Divine and Supernatural Light (1734)

"And Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven'" (Matt. 16:17). So began Edwards's greatest sermon on the reality of spiritual light. First preached at the First Church of Northampton in August 1733, it was published the following year and has since become one of the most beloved items in his oeuvre (a body of work that includes nearly 1,250 sermons).

Sermons on Matthew 16 have most often focused on what follows in verses 18 and 19: "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This text has stood for centuries as the basis of the Roman Catholic claim for Peter's supremacy as first among the apostles and of the papacy's power to bind and loose our sins on God's behalf (the power of the keys).

But this is not what captured Edwards's attention about this text. For him, the divine and supernatural *revelation* made to Peter proved more crucial for Christian practice than the donation of the keys. What mattered most to Edwards was that the Father had made himself known—supernaturally—to Peter, and the other apostles too, transforming their lives and giving them spiritual understanding. As he phrased the doctrine of this sermon: "There is such a thing, as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means." (Edwards's sermons,

like those of his Puritan forebears, were usually arranged in threefold fashion, with sections unpacking the text, propounding its doctrine, and detailing an application.) In other words, Peter's confession of Christ—like those of all with genuine faith—was enabled directly by God, who grants the gifts of spiritual light and spiritual sight.

For Edwards and his followers, this gift changed everything. Most importantly, it changed the way they perceived, or experienced, God. As Edwards explained in a passage pregnant with existential exigency, the divine and supernatural light that God has shined in the hearts of the saints is "a true *sense* of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a *conviction* of the truth and reality of them." Many have heard about these things and have understood them cognitively, but only the saints have sensed their beauty and come to know them personally. Indeed,

> there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man can't have the latter, unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind. . . . There is a wide difference between mere speculative, rational judging anything to be excellent, and having a sense of its sweetness and beauty. The former rests only in the head, speculation only is concerned in it; but the heart is concerned in the latter. When the heart is sensible of the beauty and amiableness of a thing, it necessarily feels pleasure in the apprehension.

The Edwardseans wanted desperately to see that pleasure in others, to extend the community of the saints, and to cultivate an awakened, truly spiritual sensibility in the hearts and minds of those to whom they ministered.

. . . What I would make the subject of my present discourse from these words, is this:

Doctrine

There is such a thing, as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means.

In what I say on this subject at this time, I would:

I. Show what this divine light is.

II. How it is given immediately by God, and not obtained by natural means.

III. Show the truth of the doctrine.

And then conclude with a brief improvement.

I. I would show what this spiritual and divine light is. And in order to it would show,

First, in a few things what it is not. And here,

1. Those convictions that natural men may have of their sin and misery is not this spiritual and divine light. Men in a natural condition may have convictions of the guilt that lies upon them, and of the anger of God, and their danger of divine vengeance. Such convictions are from light or sensibleness of truth: that some sinners have a greater conviction of their guilt and misery than others is because some have more light, or more of an apprehension of truth, than others. And this light and conviction may be from the Spirit of God; the Spirit convinces men of sin: but yet nature is much more concerned in it than in the communication of that spiritual and divine light, that is spoken of in the doctrine; 'tis from the Spirit of God only as assisting natural principles, and not as infusing any new principles. Common grace differs from special, in that it influences only by assisting of nature; and not by imparting grace, or bestowing anything above nature. The light that is obtained is wholly natural, or of no superior kind to what mere nature attains to; though more of that kind be obtained than would be obtained if men were left wholly to themselves. Or in other words, common grace only assists the faculties of the soul to do that more fully, which they do by nature; as natural conscience, or reason, will by mere nature make a man sensible of guilt, and will accuse and condemn him when he has done amiss. Conscience is a principle natural to men; and the work that it doth naturally, or of itself, is to give an apprehension of right and wrong; and to suggest to the mind the relation that there is between right and wrong, and a retribution. . . .

The Spirit of God acts in a very different manner in the one case, from what he doth in the other. He may indeed act upon the mind of a natural man; but he acts in the mind of a saint as an indwelling vital principle. He acts upon the mind of an unregenerate person as an extrinsic occasional agent; for in acting upon them he doth not unite himself to them; for notwithstanding all his influences that they may be the subjects of, they are still "sensual, having not the Spirit" (Jude 19). But he unites himself with the mind of a saint, takes him for his temple, actuates and influences him as a new, supernatural principle of life and action. There is this difference; that the Spirit of God, in acting

in the soul of a godly man, exerts and communicates himself there in his own proper nature. Holiness is the proper nature of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit operates in the minds of the godly, by uniting himself to them, and living in them, and exerting his own nature in the exercise of their faculties. . . .

2. This spiritual and divine light don't [doesn't] consist in any impression made upon the imagination. 'Tis no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes: 'tis no imagination or idea of an outward light or glory, or any beauty of form or countenance, or a visible luster or brightness of any object. . . . When the mind has a lively discovery of spiritual things, and is greatly affected with the power of divine light, it may, and probably very commonly doth, much affect the imagination: so that impressions of an outward beauty or brightness may accompany those spiritual discoveries. . . . And we can't determine but that the devil, who transforms himself into an angel of light, may cause imaginations of an outward beauty, or visible glory, and of sounds and speeches, and other such things; but these are things of a vastly inferior nature to spiritual light.

3. This spiritual light is not the suggesting of any new truths, or propositions not contained in the Word of God. This suggesting of new truths or doctrines to the mind, independent of any antecedent revelation of those propositions, either in word or writing, is inspiration; such as the prophets and apostles had, and such as some enthusiasts pretend to. But this spiritual light that I am speaking of is quite a different thing from inspiration: it reveals no new doctrine, it suggests no new proposition to the mind, it teaches no new thing of God, or Christ, or another world, not taught in the Bible; but only gives a due apprehension of those things that are taught in the Word of God.

4. 'Tis not every affecting view that men have of the things of religion that is this spiritual and divine light. Men by mere principles of nature are capable of being affected with things that have a special relation to religion, as well as other things. A person by mere nature, for instance, may be liable to be affected with the story of Jesus Christ, and the sufferings he underwent, as well as by any other tragical story: he may be the more affected with it from the interest he conceives mankind to have in it: yea, he may be affected with it without believing it; as well as a man may be affected with what he reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage play. He may be affected with a lively and eloquent description of many pleasant things that attend the state of the blessed in heaven; as well as his imagination be entertained by a romantic description of the pleasantness of fairy land, or the like. . . . We read in Scripture of many that were greatly affected with things of a religious nature, who yet are there represented as wholly graceless, and many of them very ill men. . . .

But I proceed to show, *second*, positively, what this spiritual and divine light is.

And it may be thus described: a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them, thence arising.

This spiritual light primarily consists in the former of these, viz., a real sense and apprehension of the divine excellency of things revealed in the Word of God. A spiritual and saving conviction of the truth and reality of these things arises from such a sight of their divine excellency and glory; so that this conviction of their truth is an effect and natural consequence of this sight of their divine glory. There is therefore in this spiritual light,

1. A true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion; a real sense of the excellency of God, and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel. There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature, than in other things; a glory greatly distinguishing them from all that is earthly and temporal. He that is spiritually enlightened truly apprehends and sees it, or has a sense of it. He don't [doesn't] merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing; but there is a sense of the loveliness of God's holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account; or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute.

There is a twofold understanding or knowledge of good that God has made the mind of man capable of. The first, that which is merely speculative or notional: as when a person only speculatively judges that anything is, which by the agreement of mankind, is called good or excellent, viz., that which is most to general advantage, and between which and a reward there is a suitableness; and the like. And the other is that which consists in the sense of the heart: as when there is a sense of the beauty, amiableness, or sweetness of a thing; so that the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. In the former is exercised merely the speculative faculty, or the understanding strictly so-called, or as spoken of in distinction from the will or disposition of the soul. In the latter the will, or inclination, or heart, are mainly concerned.

Thus there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A

man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man can't have the latter, unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind. . . . When the heart is sensible of the beauty and amiableness of a thing, it necessarily feels pleasure in the apprehension. It is implied in a person's being heartily sensible of the loveliness of a thing, that the idea of it is sweet and pleasant to his soul; which is a far different thing from having a rational opinion that it is excellent.

2. There arises from this sense of divine excellency of things contained in the Word of God, a conviction of the truth and reality of them: and that either indirectly, or directly.

(i) First, indirectly, and that two ways:

1. As the prejudices that are in the heart, against the truth of divine things, are hereby removed; so that the mind becomes susceptive of the due force of rational arguments for their truth. . . .

2. It not only removes the hindrances of reason, but positively helps reason. It makes even the speculative notions the more lively. It engages the attention of the mind, with the more fixedness and intenseness to that kind of objects; which causes it to have a clearer view of them, and enables it more clearly to see their mutual relations, and occasions it to take more notice of them. The ideas themselves that otherwise are dim, and obscure, are by this means impressed with the greater strength, and have a light cast upon them; so that the mind can better judge of them. As he that beholds the objects on the face of the earth, when the light of the sun is cast upon them, is under greater advantage to discern them in their true forms, and mutual relations, than he that sees them in a dim starlight or twilight. . . .

(ii) Second, a true sense of the divine excellency of the things of God's Word doth more directly and immediately convince of the truth of them; and that because the excellency of these things is so superlative. There is a beauty in them that is so divine and godlike, that is greatly and evidently distinguishing of them from things merely human, or that men are the inventors and authors of; a glory that is so high and great, that when clearly seen, commands assent to their divinity, and reality. . . . This evidence, that they, that are spiritually enlightened, have of the truth of the things of religion, is a kind of intuitive and immediate evidence. They believe the doctrines of God's Word to be divine, because they see divinity in them, i.e., they see a divine, and transcendent, and most evidently distinguishing glory in them; such a glory as, if clearly seen, don't [doesn't] leave room to doubt of their being of God, and not of men. . . .

II. I proceed now to the second thing proposed, viz., to show how this light is immediately given by God, and not obtained by natural means. And here,