

Adult Sunday School Class: Religious Affections
Introduction & Biography of Jonathan Edwards
4 March 2001
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(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by Winston Churchill for his speech notes. The HTML version doesn't show indentation, but the PDF does.)

For those of you who don't know me,
I'm Michael Holloway.

For this quarter,
I'll be leading you in a study of
 A Treatise Concerning The Religious Affections
by Jonathan Edwards.

This book is often called simply, *Religious Affections*,
and that's what I'll call it most of the time, too.

Along the way,
I'll also introduce you to excerpts
 from some of Edwards' other writings,
 especially the *Miscellanies*.

I'm very excited about having the opportunity to lead this class.

Jonathan Edwards is one of my two big heroes.

I believe he is
 the greatest non-inspired theologian and thinker
 that has yet lived.

There's much that he can teach us,
 especially in *Religious Affections*.

Before we talk about Edwards,
 here's a little bit about how I'll conduct this class.

Because God did not see fit to give me
 a particularly interesting or inspiring voice,
 I'll do my best to stimulate discussion,
 and give you all
 plenty of opportunities to talk,
 especially in future classes.

From time to time,
 you may even have assignments to do during class,
 or during the week.

Of course,
 I have no enforcement mechanism to ensure
 you do these assignments,
 so whether you do them is entirely up to you.

I'll be asking you lots of questions,
but whenever you have a question of your own,
please raise your hand,
or do whatever else is necessary,
and consistent with Christian ethics,
to get my attention.

Because my goal is to stimulate your thinking,
and not to simply fill you with information,
I do not like giving out notes in advance.

But I know that a lot of you like to have notes from the teacher.

So I've decided on a compromise of sorts:
I'll hand out a sheet of notes,
but these notes will be basically worthless.

My full notes will be available on the web
a few days after each class at
<www.logicteacher.com/ra/>.

If you don't have access to the web,
but you'd like copies of the notes,
please let me know,
and I'll make copies for you.

I've also printed an outline of the plan for the quarter,
which has been passed out for you to have and read.
I'm not going to go over it though,
unless someone has some questions,
or we have some extra time at the end.

Does anyone have any questions so far?

For the rest of this morning,
we're going to talk about Jonathan Edwards himself.

Can someone tell me what
Edwards is probably most famous for today?

The sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".

How many of you have read or heard that sermon?

Here is a brief excerpt from it:

The bow of God's wrath is bent,
and the arrow made ready on the string,
and justice bends the arrow at your heart,
and strains the bow,
and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God,
and that of an angry God,
without any promise or obligation at all,

that keeps the arrow
one moment
from being made drunk with your blood. ...

It is to be ascribed to nothing else,
that you did not go to hell the last night,
that you were suffered to awake again in this world,
after you closed your eyes to sleep.
And there is no other reason to be given,
why you have not dropped into hell
since you arose in the morning,
but that God's hand has held you up. ...

That sermon is justly famous.

But if this sermon is all you know about Jonathan Edwards,
then your view of who he was
is grossly distorted,
as I'm sure you'll learn during our quarter together.

Let's look now at some basic facts about Edwards life.

He was born on October 5, 1703
in East Windsor, Connecticut

Very little is known about his childhood.

From 1716 to 1720,
he was an undergraduate student at Yale College,
although the college didn't officially have that name yet.

Now, if you took the time to subtract 1703 from 1716,
you might be thinking that he started college at a very young age.
But for the time,
he wasn't especially young.

There has been a bit of a debate for some time
about the degree of Edwards' early intellectual development.

We don't have time to enter
into that debate this morning.
If you're interested in it,
come talk to me later.

Jonathan went on to study for an M.A. at Yale from 1720 to 22.

It was during this time,
in about 1721,
that Edwards was,
according to his own writings,
convinced of his salvation.

After receiving his MA

he was Minister to a Presbyterian church in New York City.

It was during this time that
Mr Edwards began keeping notebooks
that became
 "Resolutions",
 "Diary",
 "The Mind",
 and "Miscellanies".

He continued writing in "The Mind" and "Miscellanies"
for the rest of his life.

The "Resolutions" is a remarkable collection,
as are the other writings, too.
If you've not read it, I strongly encourage you to do so.

Here's how it begins:

Being sensible that I am unable to do any thing without God's help,
I do humbly entreat him by his grace,
to enable me to keep these Resolutions,
so far as they are agreeable to his will,
for Christ's sake.

There are 70 resolutions. Here are 4 of them:

5. *Resolved*, Never to lose one moment of time,
but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.
8. *Resolved*, To act, in all respects,
both speaking and doing,
as if nobody had been so vile as I,
and as if I had committed the same sins,
or had the same infirmities or failings as others;
and that I will let the knowledge of their failings
promote nothing but shame in myself,
and prove only an occasion
of my confessing my own sins and misery to God.
11. *Resolved*, When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved,
immediately to do what I can towards solving it,
if circumstances do not hinder.
15. *Resolved*, Never to suffer the least motions of anger
towards irrational beings.

I especially like that last one,
although I suspect that I might be extending its application
beyond what Edwards intended.

There's little doubt that Edwards fulfilled many of these resolutions,
The influence of number 11 especially
can be seen in the way in which he attempted to answer

nearly every difficult question in theology.

It is in "The Mind" that he wrote
what I think is the best definition of truth ever written.

Does anyone know what that is?

Lightly edited for simplicity, it is:

"Truth is the consistency and agreement
of our ideas with the ideas of God."

Some of you might recall
that Byron used it a sermon a while ago.

In 1724 Edwards began a two-year tutorship at Yale College.

This association with Yale
is why Yale University is the sponsor and publisher
of the Works of Jonathan Edwards series,
which began in 1957,
and continues today.
The 18th volume was published recently.

In 1726 Edwards moved to Northhampton, Massachusetts,
as colleague of his grandfather,
Solomon Stoddard,
at a congregationalist church there.

About a year after moving to Northhampton,
Edwards married Sarah Pierpont,
with whom he eventually had 11 children.

In February of 1729,
he became full pastor of Northhampton
after the death of Stoddard,
where he remained until 1750.

During his time at Northhampton,
the Great Awakening took place,
and Edwards was a major participant in it.

He also began writing and publishing.

Works written during that time included:

God Glorified in the Work of Redemption

A Divine and Supernatural Light

A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and *Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God*

Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections

An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd

and *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God*

Has anyone read any of these writings?

In June 1750,
a council of churches voted to dismiss Edwards
as pastor of Northampton,
and he preached his Farewell Sermon on July 1.

Does anyone know why he was dismissed?

It was over the issue of who should be admitted to the Lord's Table.

The practice in place when Edwards came to Northampton
was basically that anyone
who neither denied orthodox beliefs,
nor lived in gross sin,
was admitted.

Edwards continued this practice for a while,
but he eventually,
in 1748,
began to insist
that applicants give credible profession of regeneration.

In 1751 he settled in Stockbridge, Massachusetts,
as local pastor and missionary to Indians.

He stayed in Stockbridge until 1758.

During this time, he continued to write.

Freedom of the Will was written during this time,
and published in 1754.

Its full title is *A careful and strict Enquiry into The modern prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is supposed to be essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*

Has anyone read this book?

Also written during the Stockbridge years,
but not published until 1765 were
Concerning the End for Which God Created the World
and *The Nature of True Virtue*.

John Piper has recently published

a book called, *God's Passion for His Glory*,
which includes the full text of
Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,
along with Piper's own commentary on the book,
and thoughts on the subject.

Has anyone read this book?

Also, during these years, Edward wrote and published
Original Sin,
whose full title is
*The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin defended;
Evidences of its Truth produced,
and Arguments to the Contrary answered.*

Has anyone read *Original Sin*?

In January 1758, Edward left Stockbridge
to assume office as president of the College of New Jersey

Anyone know what that institution now is called?

Princeton University

On March 22, he died of a smallpox inoculation,
which he took with the goal
of encouraging others
that the inoculation was safe.

In this goal,
he undoubtedly failed.

In the chronology I just gave,
I mentioned several of Edwards' published works.

Of them,
the 3 most widely known and praised are
Freedom of the Will,
Original Sin,
and *Religious Affections*.

None of these,
nor nearly any of Edwards other writings,
are easy to read.

Religious Affections may be the most difficult of them all to read.

Of it has been said:

"The work on the *Religious Affections*
is one of the most valuable works
on practical and experimental piety
ever published.

It is more defective in point of style, ... ,
than any other pieces put forth by Edwards himself.
This renders its perusal tedious,
and has perhaps detracted from its value
by deterring many from its pages altogether.

To those,
however,
whose robustness of mind
or whose strength of piety,
is not to be repelled by such defects,
and who are never disgusted with truth,
even when she comes forth divested of all her ornaments,
there is no work of the same kind in the English language
which will better repay a careful perusal."

What does this mean?

The book is difficult to read,
but if you're interested in truth,
you ought to read it,
because there's nothing else
that addresses the subject as well as it does.

Edwards is not always easy to read,
not only in *Religious Affections*, but in other works, too.
But those who read him carefully
will find amazing insight and practical applications
such as, I believe, can be found in
no other non-inspired theologian in history.

This opinion about Edwards insight and importance is not mine alone.
Listen to some of the things that
have been written about him over the years:

The famous politician Daniel Webster wrote:
"*The Freedom of the Will* by Mr. Edwards
is the greatest achievement of the human intellect."

About the same work, the London Quarterly Review wrote:
"His gigantic specimen of theological argument
is as near to perfection as we may expect
any human composition to approach.
He unites the sharpness of the scimeter [sic]
and the strength of the battle-axe."

A former President of Princeton said that Edwards was
"The greatest thinker that America has produced."

In Hollister's *History of Connecticut*,
the entry on Edwards includes this statement:
He was "The most gifted man of the eighteenth century,
perhaps the most profound thinker in the world."

And finally, here is a translation of the Latin words

on Edwards tombstone at Princeton:

"Would you know,
oh Traveller,
what manner of person he was whose mortal part lies here?"

A man indeed,
in body tall yet graceful,
attenuated through acidity and abstinence
and studies most intense;

in the acuteness of his intellect,
his sagacious judgment
and his prudence
second to none among mortals;

in his knowledge of sciences and the liberal arts remarkable,
in sacred criticism eminent,
and a theologian distinguished without equal;
an unconquered defender of the Christian Faith
and a preacher grave, solemn, discriminating;
and by the favor of God
most happy in the success
and issue of his life.

Illustrious in his piety,
sedate in manners,
but toward others friendly and [kind],
he lived to be loved and venerated,
and now, alas!
to be lamented in his death.

The bereaved college mourns for him,
and the church mourns,
but Heaven rejoices to receive him:
Go hence,
oh traveller,
and his pious footsteps follow."

Of course,
just because these folks,
and many others,
say that Edwards was a great man,
and his writing especially valuable,
doesn't mean that he is,
or they are.

But, I think that by the time our 3 months are up,
you'll come to agree
that studying Edwards works is very valuable.

I think that you'll see that not only does Edwards
give profound intellectual insight,
but that he is also deeply practical in his applications.

Now, the main topic of our study
will be the book, *The Religious Affections*.

It is not strictly necessary
that you read it yourself,
but I do recommend that you do so.

There are several different editions of it in print.

The best,
but also by far the most expensive,
is the Yale University Press edition,
which is Volume 2 in
The Works of Jonathan Edwards series.

The Banner of Truth Trust published
an inexpensive paperback edition,
which can be difficult to get from time to time.

You can get also get
a free electronic copy on the Internet
by visiting www.jonathanedwards.com

I strongly encourage you to use one of these 3 editions:
Yale,
Banner of Truth Trust,
Or the electronic copy at jonathanedwards.com.

Beware of other editions,
especially modern ones
claiming to have updated Edwards language
and made the book easier to read and understand.

All such things that I've seen
are horrendous mutilations of Edwards.

There is no evidence that the people creating these editions
had any understanding of Edwards meaning.

This reminds me of a fellow named Kenneth Davis
who wrote a book
a couple of years ago
titled "Don't Know Much about the Bible".

This book was not intended to be an autobiography,
but that's pretty much what it was.

The modern rewordings of *The Religious Affections*
show as little understanding of Edwards
as Davis showed of the Bible.

Next week,
we'll begin discussing the content of *The Religious Affections*.

In particular,
We'll look at Edwards Preface,
which explains why he wrote the book.

I will close this class,
as I plan to close each class,
by reading,
without comment,
a brief excerpt from the Miscellanies.

This is number 139 and is titled DIFFICULTIES IN RELIGION.

I am convinced
that there are many things in religion and the Scriptures
that are made difficult on purpose
to try men,
and to exercise their faith and scrutiny,
and to hinder the proud and self-sufficient;
by many of Christ's speeches upon earth,
which gave great offense
and were very much of a stumbling block,
which yet he could easily have explained.
Yea, he himself gives this account of the matter.

If you want to see one example of Jesus giving "this account of the matter", look at Matthew 13:10-13.