

Jonathan Edwards and the New England Theology

I. Jonathan Edwards

A. Theological heritage

1. Puritan heritage (“last of the Puritans”)
2. Staunch Calvinism, and an ardent defender of it with many of his works being written in conscious opposition to “Arminianism”
3. Influenced by contemporary philosophy
 - a. John Locke and Empiricism
 - b. George Berkeley and idealism
4. A “God-intoxicated man”

B. A theology of the glory of God

1. Profound conversion experience
2. Virtue is right affections toward “Being in general” (God), a benevolence (free of selfishness) toward God
3. Continuous creation, that all creation every moment is “re-created” by God (virtual opposite of the Deists’ clockmaker God)

C. Sin and salvation

1. Realism and the headship of Adam
 - a. Taught original sin as corruption and guilt inherited from Adam but differed in the means from Augustine or Federal theology
 - b. All humanity is in Adam and is a continuity w/ Adam (hearkening back to the idea of continuous creation); as the root (Adam) is affected, so are the branches
2. Freedom of the Will
 - a. Taught a bondage of the human will by sin apart from God’s grace but differed in the nature of this inability from traditional Calvinism
 - b. Denied natural inability, that any faculty of human nature is incapable of following God’s commands
 - c. Asserted moral inability, that there is a problem with the will and the motives that move it (God works through motives): “He can if he will”
 - d. Natural/Moral distinction key to New England Theology
 - e. Stress on immediate repentance—another key concept
3. Atonement
 - a. Taught a substitutionary satisfaction by Christ
 - b. Also taught a “moral government”
 - 1) Usual interpretation: God upheld His moral government by displaying His hatred of sin
 - 2) Edwards, however, discussed the concept more as an aspect of providence

D. Theology of revival

1. Seat of religion is the “affections,” dispositions of the will or soul
 - a. Moving of affections determines one’s religious life; one is disposed either to love God or to love self
 - b. Since emotions were tied to affections, one could appeal to emotion or experience emotion—but emotion could not dominate
2. Believed in regular outpourings of the Spirit throughout history
3. Stressed testing the spirits to determine a true revival (e.g., what one’s experience caused one to think of Christ)

4. Led to insistence on church reform
 - a. Rejected of Halfway Covenant and returned to a regenerate church membership
 - b. Desired to “fence” the Lord’s Supper
 - E. Postmillennialism
 1. Difference between amillennialism & classic postmillennialism is often the degree of optimism
 2. Edwards was one of the great popularizers of postmillennialism, believing that the kingdom of God could be ushered in to the earth in glory
 3. Seen in development of moral crusades (anti-slavery, prohibition, etc.)
 - F. Philosophy of history (already discussed)
 - G. Conscious counterpoint to the Enlightenment
 1. Not sole sufficiency of reason but perception of whole man for knowledge
 2. Constant divine intervention in nature instead of natural law (cf. Deism)
 3. Centrality of God’s moral government
 4. Human depravity instead of innate moral sense & human goodness
 5. Ultimately divine, not natural, causation
 6. Place of “affections”
 - a. Enlightenment: Tied to passions and must be restrained
 - b. Edwards: Tied to the will and needed for true perception & action
- II. Later New England Theology
- A. New Divinity School
 1. a.k.a. Hopkinsianism; “Consistent Calvinism”
 2. Leaders: Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, Jonathan Edwards Jr.
 3. Supralapsarian and utilitarian
 - a. God created the world knowing that the fall would result in the greatest benefit for humanity
 - b. The “fortunate fall”
 4. Stress on passivity in regeneration (e.g., that an awakened sinner is more sinful than an unawakened one)
 5. Moral Government View of the Atonement
 - a. Not that God’s wrath is satisfied (which would be selfish) but that His moral government be upheld (which would benefit all)
 - b. Differences w/ penal substitutionary view
 - 1) Sin offends God’s moral law, not God personally
 - 2) Atonement not person-specific
 - 3) “Pardon” (satisfaction) vs. “Amnesty” (governmental)
 6. Disinterested benevolence
 - a. God acts out of selfless benevolence, not self-interest
 - b. Therefore all true virtue should be selfless
 - c. Sought “unconditional submission” or “resignation”
 - d. Ultimate piety: to wish to be damned for the glory of God so as to be utterly selfless
 7. Sin
 - a. Eliminated inherited guilt; sin is in the sinning
 - b. Still held to inherited corruption
 - B. New Haven Theology
 1. a.k.a. Taylorism

2. Leaders: Timothy Dwight, Nathaniel W. Taylor
 3. Character
 - a. Abandoned high Calvinism of New Divinity but kept its innovations (moral government, etc.)
 - b. Wanted a system to answer Unitarianism
 4. Sin (most distinctive point)
 - a. Man is a sinner because he sins
 - b. All sin is voluntary
 - c. There is no imputation of sin
 - d. The soul is not corrupted by the fall
 5. Granted greater freedom of the will
 - a. “Power of contrary choice”
 - b. “Certainty not necessity”
 6. Regeneration becomes the reversal of the will, with human involvement
- C. Oberlin theology
1. Leader: Charles G. Finney
 2. Really the popularizing of Taylor’s views
 3. God works by motives, not forces
 - a. Regeneration is a change of purpose and can be affected by the Spirit, the evangelist, or the sinner
 - b. Famous sermon: “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts”
 - c. Finney’s New Measures in revival (e.g., anxious bench, public prayer for particular individuals) were attempts to press motives on the will
 4. Sin
 - a. Denied imputation—Adam’s or Christ’s
 - b. Pelagian view of human nature (same as Adam’s)
 - c. Moral government view of the atonement
 - d. “Jacksonian democracy” applied to theology?
 5. Perfectionism
 - a. One is either perfectly holy or perfectly sinful, depending on the direction of the will
 - b. So Christian perfection is possible and mandatory
 - c. Responsibility is commensurate with ability
- D. Final Evaluation
1. Heritage
 - a. A theology for social reform (abolition, “Christian Reconstruction”)
 - b. New School Presbyterianism [discussed in Conservative Theology lecture] was influenced by the New England Theology (e.g., Albert Barnes)
 - c. Edwards Amasa Park
 - 1) Last of the leaders of the New England Theology
 - 2) Retirement in 1881 from Andover marked the end
 - d. In 1865 the New England Theology dominated Congregationalist seminaries and even many Presbyterian ones; by 1900 it had vanished
 2. Cautions
 - a. Attempted to tie theology too closely to contemporary philosophy
 - b. Let a desire for revival shape their theology
 3. Edwards has a lasting heritage—New England Theology doesn’t