

Jonathan Edwards and the Spirit of America

Was America founded as a Christian nation? This, of course, is debatable and arguments for and against the claim can be made. Was America founded on Christian principles? Of this there is no doubt. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility...and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our prosperity do ordain and establish the Constitution for the United States of America” These statements, drawn from the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, respectively, are imbued with Christian principles. Both documents begin with the individual and work outwards toward the formation of government. Both adamantly defend the individual as an individual endowed with autonomy, sovereignty and responsibility. This is in contrast to other forms of government, which begin with the State and then view the individual at best as a part of the whole or under a tyrannical regime like Marxism as nothing more than a cog in the wheel of production. Now perhaps you are asking what does American Constitutionalism have to do with Jonathan Edwards, and I would answer quite a bit. The two are undeniably linked together. The fate of the latter rests on the fate of the former. For it is Edwards, and other Christian thinkers like him, who in the early to mid-1700s offered comprehensive theological arguments, which provided the Christian impetus for our country’s foundation in the latter part of the 1700’s.

I begin with the particulars of Edward’s life. Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut. From birth, he was something of a prodigy. Throughout his life, he was fascinated by natural science, philosophy and theology, and studied these disciplines extensively. He published his first scientific paper at the age of 11. Enrolled at Yale College at the age of 13. Graduated with a Master’s degree from that same institution at the age of 21. After graduation, a church in Northampton chose Edwards to be its pastor. He would spend the next 25 years at this parish before leaving to serve the Native Americans at Stockbridge. Towards the end of his life, he accepted a position to be the first president of what would become Princeton University. A year later, though, he died of complications from a smallpox inoculation on March 22, 1758. Edwards was only 55 years old. These are the facts of his life, and we can conclude from these facts that Edwards was determined, driven

and disciplined. This is certainly borne out in his progeny. Edwards has a most impressive family tree for from his biological line comes a U.S. Vice President (Aaron Burr if you were wondering...and yes the very same person who shot Alexander Hamilton for all you Broadway *Hamilton* fans!), multiple U.S. senators and governors and mayors; lawyers and doctors and college presidents. But surely there is more to his life than brilliant academic achievements or an impressive pedigree! What made him tick? What got him out of bed in the morning? In a word—*freedom*.

Edwards came of age in an exciting period of history. His generation was really the first generation who could claim this American land as *Terra Firma* seeing how the Mayflower had reached the New World only 80 years before in 1620. At the turn of the 18th century, New England was a region known for its strict observance to Calvinistic Puritanism. But times were changing. Calvinism with its strict insistence on Divine predetermination of all events, as well as its eternal election doctrine, which predestines some to heaven and others to hell by Divine fiat, was not well suited for American soil. Calvinistic doctrine struggled to acclimate itself to the American spirit of independence. As such, when Edwards took over as pastor in Northampton, religious zeal was at an all-time low. Many had left the church all together or attended only half-heartedly. It took the brilliance of Edwards to ignite the spark and fan the flame once more. Edwards became the leading voice in the spiritual renewal of New England, as well as the most popular face of the First Great Awakening. It was his writings and sermons, more than any other, which “awakened” the people to God’s work amongst them. Now, permit me a disclaimer. Edwards’s theology is not our theology. The doctrine he taught concerning Conversion is not the same as you will hear from this pulpit. In many respects, the First Great Awakening was a time of misguided spirituality. It was full of fire and brimstone preaching and emotionally charged conversions, which at times included frenzied bodily outbursts, holy rolling, wild gyrations, speaking in tongues, and many other types of eccentric behaviors. This Awakening lasted for years sweeping up and down the Eastern seaboard and, by in large, Lutherans stayed clear of it. And this was the right call. We cannot and should not condone such erratic behavior done in the name of God. But let us for a moment sue for peace and think about what we can learn from Edwards and his times.

Theologically, the premise behind the First Great Awakening is quite biblical. At the heart of the religious movement was the belief in the value of each individual as he/she existed before God. The Church was not meant to be a place that stifled human freedom, but rather encouraged it by grounding it in the full doctrine of the image of God. This is where I see Edwards' lasting contribution. He gave expression to the individual as an individual who freely stood in relationship to God and creation. The sovereignty of God, far from making humans mere puppets or agents on demand, supports the sovereignty of each and every human being. The individual does not lose his autonomy because of God but finds his autonomy precisely in God. Edwards explored this concept in many of his writings, whether he was writing on *Justification by faith* or *Freedom of the Will* or *Religious Affections*, it was part and parcel of his thought process. The Great Awakening was meant to awaken individuals to their responsibility before God, and unite Christians across denominational lines. Although we don't agree with all aspects of the Awakening, we can at least appreciate the movement, for as Lutherans, we know something about its motivation. It was the same cry of Luther who sought to awaken individual Christians from their dogmatic slumber and restore individual conscience to its rightful place over and against corrupt church councils and leaders. The idea that human beings are equal and equally precious is not an American ideology it's a biblical belief, which finds its way into the fabric of American existence. If we believe that freedom is better than despotism, that equality of persons is right, and legally established privileges which suggest otherwise are unjust, that the spirit of religious tolerance ought to be supported and oppressive fanaticism opposed we are not talking about strictly American values, but biblical principles that stem from the inherent worth of every individual. When you listen to the American founders you certainly hear the voices of John Locke, Adam Smith and Isaac Newton, but you also hear the voices of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and above all the voice of Christ. Edwards was certainly not alone in this cry for reform, but he did play a major role in articulating the Christian voice within America, and the revival spirit he helped to shape most certainly influenced the great thinkers who founded our nation. I end with an observation: As the Christian voice continues to be silenced in the public square, and as Christian virtues continue to erode in our country is it any wonder, then, that the doctrines of individual dignity, sovereignty and responsibility are quickly eroding too. Amen.