

# Jonathan Edwards, Slavery, and the Theology of African Americans

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## Topic Introduction

I've been asked to address the topic "Jonathan Edwards and American Racism: Can the Theology of a Slave Owner Be Trusted by Descendants of Slaves?"

In the less official version of emails, Dr. Sweeney asked if I would address the question of whether or not anyone should really be trying to learn from a slave owner like Jonathan Edwards. Putting the question in more ethnically specific terms, should African-American descendants of slaves believe and hold to the theology of slave owners like Edwards?

The question carries the freight of centuries of both Christian moral failure and racial oppression and tension. When we ask, "Can the theology of a slave owner be trusted?" we're not simply proffering opinions about historical curiosities from the safe distance of our social location. When we ask that question, we're asking a question about ourselves, about the Church's understanding of her mission in the world, and about the path to reconciliation.

Also implicit in the question are certain moral and political assumptions and perspectives—sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit. There are talking points, party lines—conservative and progressive, points of view, and taboos all around this subject.

I say all of this to say, "Thank you very much Dr. Sweeney for a very loaded question!" Is this how you treat all of your visitors to Trinity?

## Parsing the Question

But it's an important question. So, I want to treat it with as much care and thought as possible in the time that I have, and depend on Pastors Love and Dates to sharpen the discussion with their contributions and any corrections to my own thinking.

In order to treat the question well, it seems to me that we have to make *explicit* at least some of the *implicit* issues embedded in the question. To my way of thinking, we might do that by dividing the question into five possible variants.

### 1. *Questioning Edwards*

At first glance, the question "Should we learn from the theology of a slave owner?" appears to be an *ad hominem*. It appears to challenge the theology by questioning or attacking the man rather than the

theology. Now, we know *ad hominem*s are an illegitimate form of logic and debate, but we dare not overlook this form of the question because it teaches us much about ourselves.

To make this form of the question more acute we might put it this way: Why didn't America's greatest intellectual and theologian, who got so much correct about the nature of God and God's saving purposes in the world, who helped shape Reformed and Evangelical Christianity in his time and for generations that followed, who humanly speaking ushered in and oversaw a dramatic outpouring of God's Spirit in revival, fail to take the correct position against arguably the biggest evil in his historical and social era? Or in the vernacular: If Edwards is 'all that,' how did he miss all of this?!

### *2. Questioning Edwards' Theology Proper*

But a second way we might approach our topic is to ask, not what's wrong with Edwards, but "What's wrong with Jonathan Edwards' theology proper?" Is there a defect in Edwards' understanding of the nature and work of God in the world? Did Edwards get the Bible's teaching about God wrong?

### *3. Questioning Edwards' Theology of Slavery*

We may be satisfied that Edwards held an orthodox view of God's nature and work in the world. But we may suspect his reasoning about slavery itself. Did Edwards exegete applicable texts in an appropriate or sound manner?

### *4. Questioning Edwards' Ethics*

Fourth, we might ask the question—not about Edwards or about his theology proper—but about his ethics. When we ask, "Should we trust the theology of a slave owner?" it may be that the accent falls on "slave owner." In other words, we're concerned with the social behavior and ethical stance that slave-owning implies. We might be concerned—as some claim—that the theological system leads inexorably to ethical blindness, compromise, duplicity, and evil. Or we may put it this way: Does Edwards' view of God lead him to live falsely in the world?

### *5. Questioning Edwards' Hermeneutics*

Finally, our broad topic might be put in terms of biblical and cultural hermeneutics. Is it possible to hold Edwards' theology and ask questions pertinent to the African American and their experience? Or, does holding to Reformed theology—often thought to be a "white" theology—necessarily prevent one from raising "Black" questions? Can a person be "Reformed" and simultaneously interested in cares and concerns particular to ethnic peoples?

## Questioning Edwards the Man

Obviously, Jonathan Edwards was a man with clay feet. “The best of men are but men at best.” The 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian was no exception.

But after we’ve agreed that Edwards was human, and perhaps admitted that we too have blind spots, have we gone far enough? When we’re dealing with such wide-scale and diabolical social problems as slavery, can we let ourselves off the hook with a nodding, almost winking admission of frailty and imperfection?

We really must work harder, I think, to answer that nagging question which our topic begs: *Why didn’t America’s greatest intellectual and theologian, who got so much correct about the nature of God and God’s saving purposes in the world, who helped shape Reformed and Evangelical Christianity in his time and for generations that followed, who humanly speaking ushered in and oversaw a dramatic outpouring of God’s Spirit in revival, fail to take the correct position against arguably the biggest evil in his historical and social era?*

### Edwards the British Aristocrat

To answer that question, we really must understand Edwards in his own time and social location. George Marsden’s biography of Edwards helps us tremendously in this regard. Marsden points out that “the world into which Edwards was born will make a lot more sense if we think of it as British rather than American. . . . Edwards lived in a thoroughly pre-Revolutionary British Empire.”<sup>1</sup> His world was more Old World British than it was “America.” This matters immensely when it comes to Edwards’ thinking about slavery and theology. Marsden explains:

New England, having been shaped by seventeenth-century Puritanism, had its own . . . hierarchism. Edwards was an aristocrat by New England standards. Clergymen in New England wielded more authority and could expect more deference to their opinions than in most other parts of the British World. Further, Edwards belonged to an elite extended family that was part of the ruling class of clergy, magistrates, judges, military leaders, village squires, and merchants. The Stoddards and Williamses, along with a few other families with whom they intermarried, ruled the Connecticut River Valley, or western Massachusetts (Hampshire County) and parts of Connecticut.<sup>2</sup>

We have to think of Jonathan Edwards as a ruling elite. He wielded authority and expected deference. Much of his entire family network expected the same.

As an elite, the concerns of the non-ruling masses ranked a very distant second to the maintenance of authority and station. Again, Marsden draws out the implications for the question of how Edwards—great intellectual he was—missed the issue of slavery:

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<sup>1</sup> George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Eighteenth century Britons viewed their world as monarchical and controlled by hierarchies of relationships. On both these counts, their assumptions were almost opposite of those of most Westerners today, who tend to think of society as in principle egalitarian and in fact controlled by impersonal forces. Eighteenth-century British-American society depended on patriarchy. One's most significant relationships were likely to be vertical rather than horizontal. Fathers had authority over families and households, the cornerstones of good order. Women, children, hired servants, indentures and African slaves were all dependent on persons directly above them. Society was conceived of as an extended household. In this arrangement paternalism was a virtue, not a term of opprobrium. Although British people spoke much of "liberty," few had personal freedom in a modern sense. Gentlemen ruled largely through a hierarchical system of patronage extending from the king down. Good order, especially for the lower ranks of society, was enforced by strict surveillance and stern punishments.<sup>3</sup>

Monarchical rather than egalitarian. Hierarchical rather horizontal. Paternalistic at the top and dependent at the bottom. Patronage rather than liberty. Enforced order. This is not the social milieu that would ruling elites to fight against their privilege in order to champion the disenfranchised and marginal. We're not surprised, then, that most of our theological heroes from this period—without respect to their theology—remained silent on, justified, and even participated in African enslavement.

### **Edwards the Revivalist and British Patriot**

In addition to his station in life, another set of issues significantly impeded Edwards' apprehension of slavery's evil. To put it in brief terms, Edwards found himself focused on more pressing and visible issues.

You ask, "What could be more pressing?" For Jonathan Edwards and his family, two things demanded immediate and nearly-constant attention: the ongoing skirmishes and wars with the French and their Native American allies, and concern for the fostering and continuation of spiritual awakenings or revivals.

Historians have well documented the role Edwards played in the Awakenings of 1734-35 and 1740-42. Along with George Whitefield, Edwards was perhaps the principal figure in those spiritual revivals. The defense and confirmation of God's work in the revivals fell to him as the most astute theological mind among the proponents of revival. We might liken the criticisms and opposition to revival as an Old World referendum on Edwards' entire ministry and theological outlook. We can't be surprised, then, that he gave significant energy to this cause rather than to the cause of abolition, which hardly existed as a movement during most of Edwards' life.

We also can't judge Edwards too harshly for his omission when the larger physical threat to New England would have been warfare and negotiation with Native American and French combatants. Though there had been a slave uprising in New York in 1712 (Edwards was nine) and a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

supposed revolt in 1741, those conflicts would have been minor and relative infrequent compared to the list of wars on both sides of the Atlantic: Queen Anne's War (1702-13); Indian sacking of Deerfield, MA (1704); Jacobite Rebellion (1715-16); Father Rale's War (1724-25); King George's War (1744-48); Stuart invasion of Scotland and England (1745-46); and French and Indian War (1755-63).

To expect Edwards to oppose slavery amidst the conflicts with the French and Native Americans would be akin to expecting soldiers to contribute to cancer research during a world war. It would be a good thing to do, but it probably wouldn't rank among the most pressing concerns to the soldier. So it was with Edwards. Edwards the man was inescapably a man of his time—an aristocratic, revival focused, British patriot. Those were his blinders.

- Read things about us from outside us to be aware of our social and cultural location, and how that affects our social actions.

### **Questioning Edwards' Theology**

But some contend that the defect leading to Edwards' acceptance of slavery came not from the social mores of the time but more immediately from Edwards' theology itself. This criticism takes various forms, from generally rejecting Reformed theology and Calvinism to a specific rejection of the doctrine of predestination.

Edwards was nothing if he was not an ardent defender of the Reformed or Calvinistic orthodoxy that reigned in New England during his lifetime. That orthodoxy maintained that God was sovereign in all things. God's unfettered control might be seen as easily in the events of history as in the salvation of men. Where the salvation of men was concerned, Edwards promoted and defended the "doctrines of grace." The Synod of Dordt (1618-19) has given us the acrostic T.U.L.I.P. as a summary of the Reformed and Calvinistic doctrines of grace.

- Total Depravity
- Unconditional Election
- Limited Atonement
- Irresistible Grace
- Perseverance of the Saints

In what way could Edwards' theology be thought to lead to his status as slave owner? According to his critics, the doctrine of election or predestination deserves the blame. They contend that belief in God's predestination—especially in any historical or social sense—tended toward a support of slavery. We can understand why critics would think this given the "manifest destiny" styled abuse and misapplication of the doctrine to Black slavery. The Bible nowhere teaches that God predestined Africans to slavery, so the suggestion by pro-slavery Calvinists rightfully draws ire.

But as far as we know, Edwards never argued such a view. He cherished the doctrine of election because it undergirded the free grace and love God shows toward undeserving sinners who could never merit his grace. Already during the New England of Edwards' day, there were

defections to Arminian and free will theology. Arminians then, as do many Arminians today, assume or claim that their theological commitments represent a more egalitarian and freedom loving view. One simply needs to note the many Arminian theologians and pastors who held slaves to uncover the weakness of the claim. There is no causal relationship—or even descriptive correlation—between theology proper and 18<sup>th</sup> century slaveholding.

Two and a half centuries later, we find that Edwards' doctrine of God, of God's sovereignty and action in history, and man's opportunity to delight himself in the glory of God inspires, guides, and satisfies countless worshippers.

### Questioning Edwards' Doctrine of Slavery

The third way we might approach our topic is to ask: "*Should Edwards' doctrine of slavery and slaveholding be accepted by anyone today?*" This question moves the discussion from theology proper to a question of proper exegesis of certain biblical texts regarding slavery.

How did Edwards "theologize" about slavery? What doctrinal position did he take?

We have precious little regarding Edwards formal doctrine of slavery. What we do have comes from one source, a 1741 outline Edwards drafted in defense of a fellow pastor named Benjamin Doolittle. Doolittle's congregation denounced their pastor for a range of offenses, including slaveholding. The controversy was referred to the Hampshire Association of pastors for mediation. The Association apparently assigned Edwards to offer a defense of Doolittle. The case is filled with irony since the congregants accusing Doolittle were supporters of Edwards' view of the revivals while Doolittle himself was suspected of anti-Calvinist Arminian tendencies. The one time Edwards officially addresses slavery, he finds himself defending a slave owner who rejects his theology against a group of parishioners who support his theology.

Sherard Burns takes Edwards' defense of Doolittle as evidence of "theological compromise" and "socially ingrained and acceptable" attitudes toward "the oppressions of Africans in America." He continues: "The prime motivation behind Edwards's action was the reality that he himself owned slaves. It was not that he felt a great burden against the atrocities of slavery, if indeed he knew them at all, nor that there was great desire to see the institution abolished and men gain the freedom that he and others like him enjoyed as gifts from God." Burns views Edwards as "Driven by a dual reality—namely, that he owned slaves and knowing that a threat to the slaveholding of any one minister was a threat to the slaveholding of any minister—Edwards dismissed theological differences and defended Doolittle, the Arminian."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps there's another explanation for Edwards' defense of Doolittle. After all, everything else we know of Jonathan Edwards suggests to us a man of scrupulous integrity—theological and otherwise. It seems to me that Edwards' defense of Doolittle had little to do with slavery—in that regard, Burns is probably correct to suspect "socially ingrained" attitudes toward the institution. Rather, Edwards defended Doolittle because he saw threats to both the New Light revivalist cause

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<sup>4</sup> Sherard Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), pp. 147, 149.

and to the clergy-dominated aristocracy that ruled New England. If the parishioners could arraign and convict a pastor—of whatever theological stripe—that signaled a kind of anarchy that Puritan and aristocratic elites could not suffer.

But should we adopt Edwards' view of slavery? Was his exegesis correct? We might outline Edwards' position by highlighting some things he got wrong, from our perspective, and some things he got correct, making him ahead of his time in retrospect.<sup>5</sup>

Wrong:

- Argued that it was not in itself sinful to use one's "neighbor's work without wages".
- Defended slavery as not wrong in itself.

Correct:

- He condemned the Transatlantic slave trade, rejecting the idea that other nations had power or right to disenfranchise all the nations of Africa.
- He rejected the idea that Israel's history could serve as precedent and warrant for Colonial abuse of Africa.
- He held that under the gospel God would not "wink" at unjust manstealing, but called his people to love their neighbors (writ large) as themselves.
- He explicitly denied that Africans and Native Americans were inferior in God's eyes. He did not deny either their full humanity or the need to seek their spiritual good. He regarded them as equal to Christian nations (read, "White") in their rights and potential.
- He regarded Africans and Native Americans as spiritual equals. He was the first pastor in Northampton to allow full communicant membership to African people.
- In the 1740s, he argued that there could be no advance in "Gospellizing" Africans until the slave trade ended.

When you consider that apart from early Quaker writings there was no abolitionist movement to speak of during Edwards's day, it seems that Edwards was both a man *of* his time and *ahead* of his time. Still, it will not do for anyone today to take the ambivalent stance the Northampton pastor took. What Edwards got incorrect jeopardized millions of African Americans who lived in the wake of his life. Edwards attempted to thread a needle between ending the Transatlantic slave trade, on the one hand, and supporting the domestic servitude of Africans on the other. When he wrote the congregation in defense of Doolittle, he chided them for their hypocrisy, for condemning slavery but enjoying the fruits of slave economy. Perhaps it's fitting to simply state: It takes a hypocrite to know a hypocrite. Or, more charitably, Edwards saw the inconsistency of others more clearly than he saw his own in this case.

The only way to resist evil is to be consistently and completely against it. There can be no compromise with evil and injustice. Perhaps Edwards would have developed more completely had

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<sup>5</sup> See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 255-258; Kenneth P. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," *The Massachusetts Historical Review*, vol. 4 (2002): 23-59. Downloaded October 17, 2009.

he lived longer and reflected more. Again, we only have a fragment of his thoughts on this issue. But given what we do have, we have enough to say that exegetically there was more to say than Edwards said. And pastorally, there was more opportunity to say it than Edwards took advantage of. At this point, he failed to be prophetic, even if his fragmentary thoughts show evidence of being ahead of his time.

Again, our doctrine of slavery is no distant historical and sociological curiosity. Today, slavery ranks behind illegal drugs and arms trafficking as the third largest international crime industry. Modern day slavery is believed to generate profits of an estimated \$32 billion, according to a 2005 report from the International Labour Organization. Of that number, \$15.5 billion is made in industrialized countries. An estimated 14,000 to 18,000 persons are trafficked into the United States each year.<sup>6</sup>

### Questioning Edwards' Ethics

Some writers of African-American religious history assert that Black Christians rejected predestination and election as incompatible with their lived experience in slavery, their hope of freedom in this life, and their view of God as just and benevolent. For example, Eugene Genovese asserts that “predestinarian doctrine did not appear in Black religion” and “only rarely did Orthodox Calvinism come from the mouths of black preachers, and even in those cases its uses remain in doubt.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, some historians understand Calvinism to have provided the deepest structuring framework for African Americans during the 1700s. John Saillant writes:

Indeed, Calvinism seems to have corroborated the deepest structuring elements of the experiences of such men and women as they matured from children living in slavery or servitude into adults desiring freedom, literacy, and membership in a fair society. From Calvinism, this generation of black authors drew a vision of God at work providentially in the lives of black people, directing their sufferings yet promising the faithful among them a restoration to his favor and his presence. Not until around 1815 would African American authors, such as John Jea, explicitly declare themselves against Calvinism and for free-will religion.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the available evidence, I think Saillant presents the more compelling case. But the question we wish to ask is: Did the embrace of Calvinism lead African Americans and others to ethically compromised positions? Is it the case the either Edwards' theology proper or his doctrine of slavery leads inexorably to sub-Christian social ethics? Perhaps the best way to consider that question would

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<sup>6</sup> See The CNN Freedom Project: Ending Modern-Day slavery at <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/category/the-facts/>. Information downloaded January 9, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.



be to briefly make mention of the theological heirs, those Edwardseans, that followed in the wake of Edwards. Jonathan Edwards, Jr. and Samuel Hopkins are perhaps the two best-known heirs of Edwards' theology to take up the mantle of slavery's abolition. The important point is this: The seeds of their anti-slavery protest were planted deeply in Edwards' own thinking and writing.

Edwards' reflection on benevolence, true virtue, holy affections, or "Being in general" left his heirs with a view of godly love that for some necessitated the abolition of slavery. For that quarter of Edwards' followers, slavery ran "contrary to such selflessness" and would "certainly incur God's wrath." For them, "failure to resist the sin of slavery was as sinful as slaveholding itself." In terms of political ethics, these followers of Edwards the slaveholder became what we call today single-issue voters, saying, as Hopkins put it: "Be sure that you never give your Suffrage for the Election of one to any place of public trust that does enslave his fellow creature, certain it is that he that will Enslave an African would inslave an American if he could. He that will inslave one man would inslave all men if he had power."<sup>9</sup>

African Americans in the abolitionist cause drew heavily on Edwardsean themes in the 1700s into the early 1800s. Saillant identifies three aspects of Edwards' theology that attracted Black attention and lead to "a vigorous Calvinist-inspired abolitionism—one in which black people themselves were authors." The three aspects of Edwards' theology fueling this protest were: benevolence, providence, and the will.<sup>10</sup> This tradition of Black writers took the Calvinism they learned from men like Edwards and improved upon it by working out the implications of Edwards' thought for their social condition.

Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806), a contemporary of Edwards, offered an eloquent Address to the Negroes of the State of New York represented an eloquent early example of Calvinistic abolitionist activity among African Americans. In the generation following Edwards, Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833), a New Light Edwardsean, offered the most theologically penetrating and exacting jeremiads against slavery.

Does Reformed theology lead inexorably to complicity and complacency in social concerns? No, it doesn't. To be sure, the heirs to Edwards fell across a range of positions on slavery as Minkema and Stout demonstrate. Those "New Divinity Immediatists" born between 1725 and 1750, like Hopkins and Edwards, Jr., sought the immediate end of slavery. However, those post-Revolutionary War Edwardseans were predominantly pro-slavery conservatives and gradualists born between 1775-1800. Then there were the "Neo-Edwardsean Immediatists" born around 1800 who resumed the call to an immediate end to slave trafficking and slaveholding.<sup>11</sup>

Edwards' legacy is mixed. But two things should be deduced from that very mixture:

- The ethical failures are not owing to either Edwards or Reformed theology, and
- The existence of those Calvinists who "got it right" argues that what matters is following the theological principles to their logical social and political end. Reformed theology consistently applied—because it is biblical truth—leads to correct social action.

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout, "The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740-1865," *The Journal of American History* (June 2005): 54, 55, 56.

<sup>10</sup> John Saillant, "African American Engagements with Edwards in the Era of the Slave Trade," pp. 141, 145-146.

<sup>11</sup> Minkema and Stout, "The Edwardsean Tradition," 61-72.

Here's how Minkema and Stout conclude their survey: "In Samuel Hopkins and Lemuel Haynes we have encountered prophetic voices who represent the apotheosis of the Edwardsean tradition. Indeed, on the subject of race and equality, it was Hopkins and Haynes—not Edwards—who were so far ahead of their times that our own is barely catching up."<sup>12</sup>

### Questioning Edwards' Hermeneutics

Our final question goes something like this: *Is it possible to hold Edwards' theology and ask questions pertinent to the African American and their experience? Or, does holding to Reformed theology—often thought to be a "white" theology—necessarily prevent one from raising "Black" questions? Can a person be "Reformed" and simultaneously interested in cares and concerns particular to ethnic peoples?*

I won't belabor these questions, since their answers should be evident by this point. Not only is it possible to hold Edwards' theology and raise questions pertinent to the African American (or any ethnic group's) experience, we have ample historical evidence of Black and Whites doing just that. Moreover, we must not limit ourselves to the *possibility* of contextualizing or approaching the biblical text with a hermeneutic approach cognizant of various social, cultural and ethnic presuppositions and needs. We must, in fact, do the contextualizing and give far more generous attention to the various questions and needs begging investigation from the biblical text. The best examples of Reformed, Calvinistic, and Edwardsean theology do precisely this without compromising the integrity of the Scriptures themselves or leaving the Scriptures for other sources for doing theology. In other words, the best of the Reformed tradition teaches us that the Bible is sufficient for all of life and faith. Even if our theological forbears didn't mine that sufficiency sufficiently, we're in no way absolved of the responsibility of doing better than they did. Let us go farther than our heritage.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 72.