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ARTICLE

# Jonathan Edwards' Complex Views on Race



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JULY 1ST 2020

People from history are strangely and frustratingly complex. Few are as wicked as the devils; none as pure as the angels. This gives us good reason to be equally careful in erecting statues to honor them as in tearing them down. Jonathan Edwards was such a complex individual. His theological genius is hardly challenged today, especially in conservative Protestant and Reformed quarters. But his legacy on race, slavery, and prejudice is mixed at best and grievous at worst. In this brief article, I am going to make a cursory review of his legacy as it pertains to this continually relevant subject. To do

so, I will look at Edwards in the classic Eastwoodian rubric of the “Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.” Let’s take those in reverse order.

### The Ugly

The ugly truth is that Jonathan Edwards was a slave owner.[1] I hate typing those words, since much of my professional and academic life has been spent studying this man’s best thoughts and writings. I am also slightly concerned that some readers of this article might run to the nearest Edwards-related plaque or historical marker and deface it with spray paint or tear it down entirely. In my view, neither idolizing Edwards nor eliminating his legacy from the annals of history is appropriate. But we can start with this fact in bold print: Edwards owned slaves. Several. We know this because he actually wrote down some of the purchase records, including credits and debits in his famous Blank Bible, as well as his “Last Will and Testament,” where he recorded financial matters from time to time in lieu of a digital Excel Spreadsheet.[2] We also know at least three of the Edwards family slaves’ names, Venus (a fourteen year old girl), Leah (converted during the revivals) and Titus (an African boy).[3]

Edwards, like most Colonial Christians in his day, thought of slavery as a necessary, if sometimes malevolent, institution. These institutions, though corrupt, were believed to be part of the warp and woof of an organized and sophisticated society, holding the fabric of human community together. Far from advancing the radically egalitarian position of most modern people today in the West, Colonial-era Christians accepted the existence of hierarchical institutions as a part of life in a post-Fall world. We recall that pre-revolutionary Americans were part of the British Empire, and so rank, royalty, and privilege — even that some were born to be kings and other paupers — was an accepted part of the composition of their worldview. Though abuses of slavery and the slave trade were recognized, the heirarchical establishment by God of kings, magistrates, clergymen, commoners, paupers, and slaves was not then challenged as later Critical Theories would do. Today, Critical Theory operates on foundational assumptions of malevolent and coercive power structures, working toward the deconstruction of the oppressed. But to expect Colonials to apply modern deconstructionist views to their own society at that time is of course, hopelessly anachronistic.

On one particular occasion, Edwards wrote in defense of slavery, albeit tangentially. Edwards was actually writing in defense of another clergyman named Benjamin Doolittle whose character and credentials as a Gospel Minister were being challenged. [4] Ironically, Doolittle leaned Arminian, and would have typically been Edwards' opponent. One of the charges against this pastor was that he was a slave owner. Edwards dutifully defended his fellow pulpiteer, much as we might expect a modern union worker to do. Edwards tried to defend his character, including a defense of his holding slaves, by appealing to the divinely ordained layering of social hierarchies. Edwards saw evil in the international slave trade as a whole, but suggested that benefiting secondarily from slavery's overall financial benefits while simultaneously decrying it would be a form of hypocrisy. Though he acknowledged that slavery had "disturbing implications," he did not seek to dismantle it. Perhaps this was as much to defend his own practice and honor as anything else. He wasn't willing to find fault in another pastor's character for something he himself was doing.

#### The Bad

If silence on the issue of slavery is consent to the injustice of the institution, then we can charge this against Edwards as well. Though there are thousands of extant sermon manuscripts, it seems that Edwards never once preached against slavery as a form of social evil. Though he often spoke against all kinds of ungodliness — everything from drunkenness to youths staying out too late at night in the streets of Northampton — it never once occurred him to preach against the horrors of slavery. Though most conscientious Christians educated their slaves, taught them to read, and in some cases loved them like family members, history plenteously records the morbid and terrible abuses of slavery too; and Edwards never once (that we know of) thought to incorporate this kind of malevolence into the "Uses" or "Application" sections of his sermons.

In relationship to the Native Americans, Edwards too was the product of his time, absorbing many prejudices into his thinking.[5] He saw First Nations peoples as savages, demon afflicted, and inferior in nearly every conceivable way to the culture and technology of the European establishment societies. Many Colonialists lived in constant fear and xenophobia of the Native Americans, often both dreading and

describing in blood-curdling detail the various raids and violent encounters with Native Americans, perpetuating such dehumanizing stereotypes.

If the above information was all we had about Edwards in relationship to race and slavery, then perhaps we should tear down his plaques and monuments in New England. But history is often far more nuanced and complex, and so we now turn to the good that Edwards left us in this regard.

### The Good

Positively, Edwards and his congregation at Northampton were on the leading edge of thinking through these issues in at least one specific way — Edwards' congregation received blacks into full membership of the church, giving them all the privileges of membership, including access to Baptism and the Lord's Supper.[6] By one count, the Northampton Church included nine blacks and two Indians in full communicant membership.[7] We must recall that this would be the ultimate statement of recognition of their humanity and brotherhood in Christ. Church membership, perhaps even over against citizenship or suffrage, was the highest statement of acceptance of another's status in Christ as a cherished and beloved brother. At least one of Edwards' own slaves was received into membership, Leah — saved during the Great Awakening — and this likely indicates that the Edwards family treated their slaves with kindness and some semblance of human to human equity.

Not only that, but Edwards extolled David Brainerd as the prototypical missionary in his edited volume on Brainerd's *Diary*. Here in this work, Edwards goes well out of his way to lift up Brainerd, who himself loved the Native American peoples, being willing to subject himself to abject personal suffering in order to share the Gospel with them. Edwards frames Brainerd in this work as one who truly exhibited the love of Christ by suffering for a people in order to redeem them through God's grace. Not only that, but Edwards himself would later become a missionary to the Mahican Indians in Stockbridge after his 1750 dismissal from the Northampton church in the Communion Controversy. Though he arrived with great apprehensions, xenophobia and all, the written records seem to indicate that Edwards treated the Mahicans with great compassion, educating them through literacy, researching some of the oppressive

regional trade agreements in order to better advocate for their property rights, and even later calling them “my people.”[8] It seems fair to say that Edwards’ view of the Mahicans greatly improved as he came to know and love them, and he even became in some ways “their champion and defender against Anglo-American exploitation.”[9]

Probably Edwards best contribution to the issue of human rights comes through his treatise, *The Nature of True Virtue*, written during the Stockbridge Mission years. Here, Edwards argues for love as the central defining human virtue, beginning with the love of God, and pouring outward to all whom God has made. In his foundational concept which Edwards calls “benevolence to being in general,” the Colonial Preacher lays a framework for graciously loving and accepting all fellow human beings that would later be picked up by his disciples and applied directly to slavery and human rights.

Indeed, his own son Jonathan Edwards Jr., and his students Joseph Bellamy, and especially Samuel Hopkins would take his ideas one step further, and apply Edwards’ concept of “benevolence to being” directly to slavery issues. His disciples then, utilizing his principles and applying them to a contemporary issue, became determined abolitionists. These students of Edwards would together comprise what is called the “New Divinity,” slightly modifying the verbiage to “disinterested benevolence,” meaning an utter and unconditional kindness to fellow men, without regard for recompense, recognition, or reward. Of these students, all were particularly aggressive in moving towards a full position of total abolition, with Hopkins even preaching this message directly to the Continental Congress. So, it is fair to say that Edwards’ own disciples applied his message to slavery as such in ways that Edwards may have been either unaware of, or afraid to do. They were then, more consistently “Edwardsean” than Edwards himself.

### Conclusion

With all that being said, we can see fairly clearly that Jonathan Edwards leaves us a very complex and nuanced legacy. And perhaps this is a reason not to apply “cancel culture” directly to Edwards and remove his works from our library shelves. Neither should we tear down the few monuments that remain in his honor. To do so would be to restrict our own view from seeing history unfolding before our very eyes as dramatic steps

were taken within just a few years to recognize, repent of, and repel slavery as an unacceptable and malevolent institution.

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[1] In what follows, I will briefly summarize some of the observations from John T. Lowe's excellent article "Destruction and Benevolence: The New Divinity and Origins of Abolitionism in Edwardsean Tradition," in Jonathan Edwards within the Enlightenment: Controversy, Experience, and Thought, 87-110.

[2] Kennedy P. Minkema, "Personal Writings," *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, 55.

[3] See Alan G. Hedberg, "Slavery" in *The Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia*, 535.

[4] See Sherard Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner" in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 146-150.

[5] See John Howard Smith, "God Has Made Us to Differ: Jonathan Edwards, the Enlightenment, and the American Indians," in Jonathan Edwards within the Enlightenment: Controversy, Experience, and Thought, 43-60.

[6] Hedberg, "Slavery," 536.

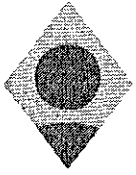
[7] Sherard Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 159.

[8] John Howard Smith, "God Has Made Us to Differ," 59.

[9] *Ibid.*, 59.

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Matthew Everhard

DATE Wednesday, July 1st 2020

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