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JONATHAN EDWARDS AND GREAT BRITAIN

by RALPH G. TURNBULL

THE last study of Jonathan Edwards to appear in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY was the paper "Jonathan Edwards and Scotland" which Professor G. D. Henderson contributed to our pages in January, 1944. The two hundredth anniversary of Jonathan Edwards' death has turned people's minds to him afresh. The Baker Book House of Grand Rapids has just published a volume entitled "Jonathan Edwards the Preacher", by Dr. Ralph G. Turnbull, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. We are grateful to Dr. Turnbull for permitting us to publish here a by-product of his studies in the career of Edwards. The Editor takes a personal pleasure in including this study in the present number of the QUARTERLY, as he recalls the days, nearly thirty years ago, when Dr. Turnbull and he were fellow-students in the Greek classroom at King's College, Aberdeen.

THE COMING bicentenary of the death of Jonathan Edwards (March 22, 1958), is an opportunity to recapture some of his contacts with Great Britain. Edwards' life covered the years 1703-1758 and during that period he was indebted to many writers of the old world. The Puritans of New England were the heirs of the godly men who lived and laboured in Scotland and England. The influence of the latter was felt in no small measure in the new world of missionary outreach. In hermeneutics, homiletics, style, and theology, we can trace the enduring quality of that contribution in Edwards. A look at the Puritan influence and a selection from some of the correspondence with friends in Scotland will suffice.

I. PURITAN INFLUENCE.

Edwards was profoundly influenced by those who were outstanding in English puritanism. The names of Ames, Sibbes, Preston, Perkins, Chappell, and Bernard come to mind. The tradition of puritan preaching stressed "the plain style". William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, 1638 (*Medulla Sacra*), was a standard work used at Harvard and Yale, and Edwards gleaned much from this text imported from abroad. In it the plain style

was defended. The form and technique of the sermon was determined in one literary type for the Puritan preacher.

There was also Richard Bernard, *The Faithful Shepherd*, first issued in 1607, revised in 1627, and widely read in many editions. It was a popular treatise on the whole duty of the preacher. In it is described the proper conduct of life, the learning required, as well as the method and style to be observed in the sermon, not forgetting eloquent insistence upon the glorious function of the pulpit.

Edwards was familiar with this work and its emphasis. The preacher was to teach with his life as well as with his voice. "We must speak soundly, and withall experimentally." "A gracious and zealous heart is the best rhetorican, the sweetest tuner of the voyce, and the most forcible perswader." "What Art of Science is there, which a Divine shall not stand in need of, if he is to unfold exactly and judiciously every word in Scripture? Grammar, Rhetorick, Logicke, Physicks, Mathematics, Metaphysicks, Ethicks, Politicks, Oeconomicks, History, and Military Discipline" all are useful to him.

Ames counselled economy of words in the interest of the plain style. This was not a dull style as the hearer must be pricked in conscience and feel what God is saying through the preacher. Alongside of Ames was Thomas Hooker, *The Soules Preparation*, 1632, saying that the ornate sermon style should be shunned, lest souls should fall asleep and perish under preaching.

For several decades before the settlement in New England, the Puritan preacher followed the teaching of William Chappell, *The Preacher* or *The Art and Method of Preaching*, 1656, on "the only legitimate order of the sermon". Aesthetic ideals were set forth and the one literary type enjoined upon all. Richard Sibbes also became an example of this method by his sermons which were widely read and known. In writing the Preface to a fellow-Puritan's book, *Introduction to The Creed*, by John Smith, he laid down the following:

This good man's aim was to convey himself by all manner of ways into the heart, which made him willingly heard of all sorts; for witty things only, as they are spoken to the brain, so they rest in the brain, and sink no deeper; but the heart (which vain and obnoxious men love not to be touched), that is the mark a faithful teacher aims to hit. But because the way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy, therefore this godly man studies by lively representations to help men's faith by the fancy. It was our Saviour Christ's manner of teaching to express heavenly things in an earthly manner;

and it was the study of the wise man, Solomon, becoming a preacher, to find out pleasant words, or words of delight, Eccles. 12: 10.

Of William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecyng*, 1618, no other exerted a greater influence upon Edwards as a literary model for the sermon. Perkins taught that he had "the sacred and only true manner and method of preaching". "Preaching ought to be adorned with variety and plenty of precepts." "The hiding of human wisdom must be concealed; whether it be in the manner of the sermon, or in the setting forth of the words: because the preaching of the word is the testimony of God, and the profession of the knowledge of Christ, and not of human skill; and, again, because of the hearers ought not to ascribe their faith to the gifts of men, but to the power of God's word." "If any man think that by this means barbarism should be brought into pulpits; he must understand that the minister may, yea and must privately use at his liberty the arts, philosophy, and variety of reading; whilst he is framing his sermon: but he ought in public to conceal all these from the people, and not to make the least ostentation." "It is also a point of Art to conceal Art."

From this background of reading and study, we trace the environment in which Edwards was moulded as a preacher. Not only was the sermon in the main stream of literary effort,¹ but the hermeneutic ideals were based upon well-defined literary models. How large a part culture played in the production of Edwards' sermons we cannot determine, but the background of preparation is obvious. He was a typical product of the Puritan school. His theology naturally influenced his reading and Calvinism was a strong bias in his thought and expression.

Edwards owed much to his Puritan heritage. His style was the plain style. The sermon was an attempt to extract from a text an axiom in theology and to expound this in order. In procedure the text was taken apart by the method of analysis into its constituent parts, and then set out again in a proposition. If Edwards shunned the oratorical and exaggerated word, it was in the interest of reaching people by the simple, unadorned, faithful word which would prick the conscience. It was straightforward and convincing speech, and in the sermons is the pleading attitude of a pastor who yearned after the salvation of his people.

If the Puritan was well-read he did not parade his knowledge from the pulpit. Edwards had an excellent library for one in his

¹ Cf. W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson*, 1932.

circumstances. The lists of books read and gathered in his *Catalogue* (see Yale Collection) indicate the sweep and ambit of a liberal mind ever questing for knowledge. Knowing the limitations of the eighteenth century in the production of books, the book-man was hard put to gather his all too rare items. The old world still had the monopoly of printing and distribution. From across the ocean the books came to assist the Puritans in their new settlement on the frontier. Printing was in its infancy in the new world. We can see how Edwards then was dependent upon friends abroad for help.

II. SCOTTISH FRIENDS.

Edwards wrote letters constantly and many have been preserved and copied. Writing to the Rev. John Erskine, Kirkintilloch, Scotland, from Northampton, August 31, 1748, he said:

I, this Summer, received your kind letter of Feb. 9, 1748, with your most acceptable present of Taylor on *Original Sin*¹ and his *Key to the Apostolic Writings*, with his *Paraphrase* on the Epistle to the Romans, together with your sermons . . . I am exceedingly glad for these two books of Taylor's. I had before borrowed and read Taylor on *Original Sin*; but am very glad to have one of my own. If you had not sent it, I intended to have sought opportunity to buy it. The other book his *Paraphrases* &c. I have not heard of; if I had, I should not have been easy till I had seen it, and been possessed of it. These books, if I live may probably be of great use to me. It might be of particular advantage to me here in this remote part of the world to be better informed what Books there are that are published on the other side of the Atlantick, and especially if there be anything that comes out that is very remarkable. I have seen many notable things that have been written in this century against the Truth, but nothing very notable on our side of the Controversies of the present day, at least of the Arminian Controversy. You would much oblige me, if you would inform me what are the best books that have lately been written in defence of Calvinism.²

These extracts are typical of the bookman, the man who searches for hidden treasure. The letter deals also with a book published in Great Britain by Gilbert West and Lord Lyttelton, who, turning from deism and unbelief wrote in defence of Christianity, being convinced by the truth of Paul's Conversion and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Edwards mentions that he has sent two books to his friend in Scotland and is desirous of maintaining this fellowship of interchange.

From the *Catalogue* (his book list in the Yale Collection) we can

¹ John Taylor, *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin*, 1738.

² Cf. *Works*, Vol. I.

trace the titles of books either read or listed to be bought when money is available. Edwards was not averse to borrowing when necessary. He had no pride which prevented him from "begging" for a book when it might save expense. This he did in a letter to a generous layman, Jacob Wendell in New Hampshire. Learning that Mr. Wendell had provided copies of *Chambers's Cyclopaedia* from Scotland to certain clergymen, Edwards boldly asked that he might also be included in a similar benefaction! We are not informed who supplied this set in Edinburgh, whether as donor or as publisher.

During the seven years at Stockbridge as missionary-pastor, Edwards kept up correspondence with his friend Erskine in Scotland. He wrote on April 15, 1755, and speaks of his

Little success and many discouragements, national affairs, domestic interests, and particularly discusses books. . . . The last year, in the Spring, I received, without a letter, a paquet, containing the following books. . . . In the beginning of last December, I received another paquet, without a letter: the wrapper superscribed with your own hand. In this were the following pamphlets . . .

Among the titles of books in his library are a few which obviously arrived from his friends in Scotland, including Hervey on *The Cross of Christ*; *State of Society in Scotland for propagating Christian Knowledge*; *Resolutions of the General Assembly*, May 22nd, 1736; Rutherford's *Power of Faith and Prayer*; Ebenezer Erskine's *Sermons*; David Hume's *Philosophy*; Robert Woodrow's *Sermons*; Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*; Thomas Boston's *The Fourfold State* and also *The Covenant of Grace*. The standard works of theology were familiar to Edwards, and Manton, Owen, Gill, Sibbes, Foxe, Charnock, Baxter, Flavel, Luther, Milton, Watts, Pascal, Newton, Wesley, Whitefield, Josephus, Augustine, Leighton, Doddridge, lie beside Bishop Butler, the philosophers, and the men of letters of that day.

Edwards wrote in his *Catalogue* an extract from the *Boston Gazette* of Dec. 27, 1748, as follows:

We learn the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow have presented the Rev. Mr. John Gill, an eminent dissenting minister of the Baptist Denomination with a Diploma of Doctor of Divinity of both these universities, who has lately wrote a learned and practical Exposition of the N.T. in three large folio volumes.

This is illuminating as it shows the bent of Edwards' mind. The news item leads primarily to the obvious desire to record the book item with a view no doubt of obtaining it some day

Correspondence with other Scottish friends lies scattered throughout the notes concerning Edwards' full life. John Erskine

was one who shared much of Edwards' confidence. He it was who edited Edwards' *History of the Work of Redemption*, a body of divinity, 1739, in the year 1774. After Edwards' decease, his son kept this manuscript until the later date when it was issued in Scotland. Erskine in Edwards' lifetime had assisted in the circulation of his works in Scotland where Edwards had many admirers and followers. It was the same Erskine who arranged for a Boston painter to paint a portrait of Edwards and this can be seen in the Jonathan Edwards College at Yale.

No final appraisal has yet been made of the life and influence of Jonathan Edwards. His voluminous writings and notes at Yale await final editing and publication. Among the most important influences shaping the standards and thought of our New England Puritan must be reckoned the ties with Puritan England and Calvinistic Scotland. From books and letters the traffic in ideas took place. Edwards was a tragic figure for a while when he was put out of the church at Northampton after twenty-four years' ministry. In the seclusion of the Stockbridge missionary outpost among the Indians he wrote his major works. He still had friends in Great Britain and some in Scotland urged him to accept a pastorate in Scotland.

Scottish leaders of that period acclaimed Edwards as one of the finest minds. Sir James Macintosh speaks of Edwards' power of argument as unmatched and unsurpassed. Dugald Stewart regarded him as equal to the best in Europe. Thomas Chalmers paid tribute to the influence of his philosophical works as having inspired him more than any other, and esteemed him as "the greatest of theologians, combining in a degree that is quite unexampled the profoundly intellectual with the devotedly spiritual and sacred, and realizing in his own person a most rare yet most beautiful harmony between the simplicity of the Christian pastor on the one hand, and on the other all the strength and prowess of a giant in philosophy."³

What would have been the ministry of Edwards if he had accepted the invitation to Scotland? What part would he have played in the old world? He never forgot the indebtedness he owed to Puritan England and Calvinistic Scotland. Any assessment of Edwards must note the combination of those qualities which made him the master of the approaches to the will, an insight of spiritual sagacity in soul surgery. Glowingly passionate, he exemplified Christianity at white heat, and his mighty advocacy

³ Chalmers, *Works*, I.

of Christ was attended by multitudes in the valley of decision. The result was the awakening of New England, and the permeation of that Anglo-Saxon stock which has led in the evangelization of the world. To Edwards was given the inestimable privilege of restoring the vision of God's majesty and the imperative demand of the Gospel in experimental Christianity. His power was in his secret of communicating his Christly experience.

This preacher saw the land of far distances, and pierced the veil of the unseen without losing the divine approval or contact with human need. In his spiritual odyssey the passionate pilgrim found sufficient to vindicate his beliefs and preaching.

Seattle, Washington.