

UCC ROOTS

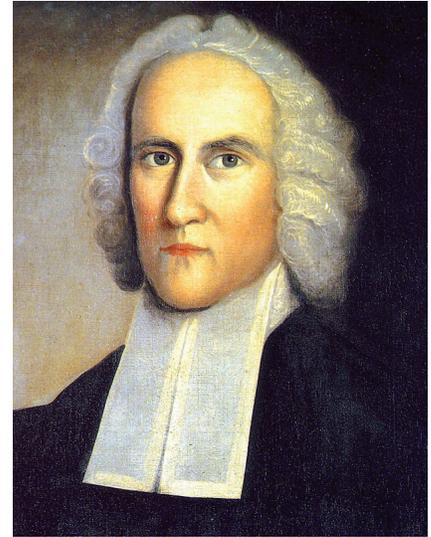
Remembering our History

January 2019

Jonathan Edwards: A Theological Grandparent

Congregational settlers in colonial New England fled Europe in the 1600s seeking religious freedom. Unfortunately, over time, religious concerns faded. Clergy were honored, but few people were church members and religious beliefs were thin. By the mid 1700s some preachers began holding revivals to rejuvenate Christianity. Their efforts paid off.

A key leader in this “Great Awakening” movement was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Edwards was born in East Windsor, CT; attended Yale College and served as a Congregational pastor in Northampton, MA (1726-50) and Stockbridge, MA. (1751-58). In 1741 he preached a famous sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”—comparing human beings to a spider suspended by God over the pit of hell. His message was sobering, but his preaching was electrifying. People became concerned about salvation.



Scholars consider Edwards one of the most brilliant theologians in American history. Not because of his dramatic sermon, but because Edwards realized that people were cut off from God. His preaching and writing expanded awareness, encouraging people to recognize human limitations (sin) and cultivate new relationships with God. Edwards insisted that life was predestined, and that salvation was a Divine gift. He wrote passionately about love and communion with God, encouraging people to leave egotism behind.

Religion, in its purity, is not so much a pursuit as a temper; or rather it is a temper, leading to the pursuit of all that is high and holy. Its foundation is faith; its action, works; its temper, holiness; its aim, obedience to God in improvement of self, and benevolence to men.

In his later years Edwards wrote treatises on the freedom of the will, original sin, true virtue and God’s purposes in the world. He preached among “Indians” in Stockbridge, MA. In 1758 he was invited to become president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton); unfortunately he died of small pox before he could take office.

Contributor: Barbara Brown Zikmund

Sign up at www.ucc.org/ucc_roots_sign_up