



REVIEW

Calvinistic Doctrines Reflected in Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

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ABSTRACT

Preached on July 8, 1741, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" remains Jonathan Edwards's most famous written work and a classic of the Great Awakening of New England. The long-famed power of this sermon rests not only in his searing images of hellfire and the insecurity they elicit, but also in the Calvinistic thoughts Edwards imparts to his Enfield listeners. This paper mainly examines some basic doctrines of Calvinism Edward expresses in this sermon, such as God's absolute sovereignty, original sin, human depravity, and divine election, etc.

1. Introduction

A sermon preached on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" remains Jonathan Edwards's most famous written work and a classic of the Great Awakening of New England, "an extraordinary flood of religious excitement that surged across the colonies, which brought changes in the Puritan theology and made religious more popular and democratic by emphasizing the individual experience of conversion and stressing the emotional conviction" (Jin Li 29). During this religious revival, one church in Enfield had remained mainly uninfluenced, so the pastor of this church invited Edwards, the key figure in the Great Awakening, to preach to them. In his sermon, Edwards warned

those sinners who still refused Christ's call of their precarious situation by emphasizing the terrors of being lost, the dangers of sin as well as the horrors of hell. By use of imagery, Edwards aimed in his sermon to convey to his audience this message that Hell was a real place and if they still continue without Christ what was awaiting them was a horrific reality.

2. Calvinistic Doctrines Reflected in Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

"In traditional form, Edwards gives his text four implications of the text, and ten 'observations' upon his reading of it, before he passes on to its 'application' to his au-

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dience” (Cady 62). As a typical sermon delivered at the height of the Great Awakening, this “hell-fire and brimstone” preaching provides a glimpse into the theology of the Great Awakening of the 1740s. In this discourse, Edwards, the foremost American proponent of Calvinism, had brilliantly addressed the following issues: God’s absolute sovereignty, original sin, human depravity, and divine election, which in effect reflect the influences of Calvinism on Edwards.

First named by Lutherans, “Calvinism”, as a religious movement, was denoted by those people within the tradition as “Reformed”---a branch of Protestantism which is different from Lutheranism. Once divided into two schools of thought---Arminians and Calvinists which were opposed to each other---the Reformed now only refers to Calvinists, since the school of Armenians are rarely called Reformed these days. Stressing the sovereignty of God, Calvinism includes five doctrines of grace, which are known by the acronym T.U.L.I.P.---Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism>).

Upon close inspection, we can discern some Calvinistic doctrines revealed in Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. In this discourse, Edwards uses the expression “Their foot shall slide in due time” from Deuteronomy as the title of the first part, which implies that those wicked unconverted men, like people walking in slippery places, are faced with a dangerous situation and liable to meet with their sudden unexpected destruction at every moment (Edwards 30). According to Edwards, only the mere pleasure of God can save unconverted men from the fires of hell. Here, Edwards uses the mere pleasure of God to refer to His arbitrary will, His sovereign pleasure, hindered by no manner of difficulty, restrained by no obligation. The underlying point here is in fact the essential doctrine of Calvinism: the sovereignty of God. According to Calvinism, “God claims an absolute sovereignty over each human soul, which being thus entirely dependent on Him, is in itself insignificant and achieves value only in so far as it reflects his glory” (Schneider 107). Edwards holds the belief that a man is but an actor who cannot miraculously escape the universal structure of the drama to which he belongs. Hence, he has no freedom of the will and can only play the part that the Almighty God has assigned to him, even though he may harbor the illusion of escaping his fate in his romantic madness.

Edwards regards those unconverted men as “sinners” who are bound to go to hell after death because if a person doesn’t believe in God he is totally condemned. Edwards insists that no matter how moral and strict, wise and righ-

teous they may be, the natural (unconverted or unregenerate) men remain as “the children of the devil” (Edwards 43) who are wicked and guilty so long as they continue to reject Christ. That is to say, unregenerate human nature is depraved not in the sense that there is nothing of beauty in it, but in that it does not attain true virtue by converting to God because “ignoring God is the essence of sin and the source of damnation” (Schneider 145).

As a great literary artist, Edwards makes successful use of imagery to depict those sinners in the eyes of God:

“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath toward you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is ours” (Edwards 37).

Just as the love God shows to his creatures is a mode of manifesting His glory, his wrath toward those who do not consent to Him is equally a manifestation of His glory. In the meantime, by describing the hell as a place full of fires and comparing those sinners to spiders or some loathsome insects, Edwards aims to achieve his purpose of “stirring the heart, stimulating the soul, turning the whole man to a devoted search for the springs of grace within Him” (Cady 62).

Contrary to the sinners, those who “believe in Christ”, who acts as a Mediator between God and man, can be kept “from eternal destruction” (Edwards 35). These regenerate people are considered by Edwards as belonging to the chosen people, the God-designated elect of the Puritans. “Edwards’s elect receives the original gift of grace through no merit or predisposing substrate of their own” (Wilson 207). In Edwards’s viewpoint, only through the act of conversion can a person achieve the actual righteousness because “God remakes human nature entire” (Knight 118). That is to say, when one finds joy in its originally encompassing scope within God’s nature, he can have true virtue.

In the final section of the sermon, Edwards indirectly offers to those sinners who are currently out of Christ a sense of hope by telling his audience that the unconverted still “have an opportunity to obtain salvation” (Edwards 42) by entering the kingdom of God because the only salvation for man is to consent to God’s divine sovereignty. The sinners should grasp this extraordinary opportunity to rectify their sins and return to Christ. Only by conversion can they change from the children of the devil to the holy and happy children of God, thus escaping the miserable fate of destruction. Edwards ends the sermon with one

final appeal, “Therefore let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come” (Edwards 43). Edwards is deeply convinced that “the work of God in the conversion of one soul.....is a more glorious work than the creating of the whole material universe” (Carpenter 630).

3. Conclusion

Edwards’s theological work “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” continues to be a leading example of the Great Awakening sermon, in which he is rooted in Reformed theology and expresses some basic doctrines of Calvinism, such as God’s absolute sovereignty, original sin, human depravity, and divine election, etc. The long-famed power of this sermon rests not only in his searing images of hellfire and the insecurity they elicit, but also in the Calvinistic thoughts Edwards imparts to his Enfield listeners. As “colonial America’s greatest theologian and philosopher.....the towering figure of an age in which religion predominated” (Gallagher 202), Edwards succeeded in achieving his aim of kindling the hard-case congregation of Enfield by rendering his audience reach an unshakable conclusion: only the grace of God can save them from eternal destruction. In the meanwhile, the organic, artistic, and poetic way in which this sermon was written also testifies to its artistic value as a classic of early Amer-

ican literature as well as Jonathon Edwards’ right to the name of a great artist.

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