



## **JONATHAN EDWARDS 1703-1758**

Jonathan Edwards stands as one of the dominant figures in 18th century American religion, a fiery revivalist preacher and a pioneer in the Reformed Church, which would eventually be merged into today's United Church of Christ. Many of the early Puritans and Pilgrims had arrived in America with a fervent faith and vision for establishing a godly nation. Within a century, however, the passion had cooled and the children of the original immigrants were more concerned with increasing wealth and comfortable living than advancing the Kingdom of God.

The only boy in a family of eleven children, Jonathan was born in 1703 in Connecticut. His intellectual brilliance was evident from an early age. He started at Yale before he was 13 years old and graduated as valedictorian. Three years later he received his master's degree. At age 23, Jonathan Edwards succeeded his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts. At the time, it was the richest and most influential church in the colony, outside of Boston.

Edwards was a key figure in the Great Awakening, a period of religious fervor in the middle of the 1700's. Not only did this movement bring people to the Christian faith, but it also influenced the framers of the Constitution, who ensured freedom of religion in the United States. Jonathan Edwards gained fame for preaching the sovereignty of God, justification by faith alone, the depravity of humans, the imminent danger of hell, and the need for a New Birth conversion. It was during this period that Edwards preached his most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741).

Despite his success, Edwards fell into disfavor with his church and area ministers in 1748. He called for stricter requirements on receiving communion than did Stoddard. Edwards believed too many hypocrites and unbelievers were being accepted into church membership and developed a rigid screening process. The controversy boiled over into Edwards' dismissal from the Northampton church in 1750. Scholars see the event as a turning point in American religious history. Many believe Edwards' ideas of reliance on God's grace instead of good works began a rejection of Puritan attitudes prevalent in New England up to that time.

He wrote many books including *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* – emphasizing that true religion must affect the heart; and, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* – speaking to what the evidences of a true revival and work of the Spirit would be.

In late 1757 he was called to be president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University). Unfortunately, his tenure lasted only a few months. On March 22, 1758, Jonathan Edwards died of fever following an experimental small pox inoculation. He was buried in Princeton cemetery. Edwards' printed works describing and analyzing the revival in Northampton were read throughout the American colonies and Britain. They stimulated ministers on both sides of the Atlantic to begin praying and looking for revival. All of this made him one of the key figures in the Great Awakening in America.