

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Christian Perspective

It may seem odd that I would choose to critique one of the most influential pieces of Christian literature to come from the Americas through a "Christian" viewpoint. However, I believe the very fact that it *is* so influential in how American Christians view their faith demands we try to understand it and how it has affected our outlook on life.

This monumental work was written by Jonathan Edwards, and was used by him at his church in Northampton, Massachusetts. His most famous performance, however, was by special request on July 8, 1741, in the town of Enfield, Massachusetts (now part of Connecticut). The speech is considered the catalyst of the First Great Awakening in what is now the United States.

The Great Awakening itself is a controversial period of Protestant history (generally considered to last from 1730 to 1770). It was the American portion of a larger movement to re-energize Protestant Christianity worldwide. It placed an emphasis on feelings and emotions over reason. I find it interesting that the atheistic movements began growing rapidly just before the Great Awakening (the 1720s). While I have not yet been able to find any outside source to confirm or deny the connection, I do suspect that much of the success the First Great Awakening had may have been because the common person turned to feelings in reaction to the scientific and mathematical arguments being brought up by atheistic philosophers. In any case, many Protestants were torn between the rational arguments the Fathers of Protestantism made against the Catholic Church, and the emotional appeal that characterized the Evangelical movement during this time. In the end, the sharp, rationalized distinctions that once existed between Protestant denominations, and which the fathers thought so critical to guarantee genuine Christian faith, were softened to a spirit of camaraderie that manifests itself in the non-denominational fellowship so prevalent today. While a far cry from true reunification of the Church, this was a major step towards Christian unity.

The First Great Awakening taught that the road to salvation would come in three stages. The first stage was to make the sinner realize just how bad the threat to his soul was. The second stage was conversion. The third was called consolidation, which was when one searched for and received assurance of salvation. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is the quintessential work of the first stage. The purpose of this work was to show that Hell was real, and that the only reason we are not in it now is by the grace of God. Of course, Edwards spoke extensively on the other two stages as well, but this is what he is most remembered for.

There has been much literary study done, as others have hoped to understand what it was about his work that stood out so much. One of the more notable elements was his contrast between the old cliché's and contemporary images. In doing so, he helped bridge the gap between the ancient writings and his audience. The many biblical passages he quoted (I count 21) were no longer merely old news, but a reality his listeners could connect with. He even went so far as to use concepts from Newtonian physics, which at the time was still new and exciting (even among the commoners).

There is a logical progression through the speech, with each new section building on the what had been said before. He begins by claiming that God may cast the wicked into Hell at any moment, and showing how the wicked truly deserve Hell, and how Satan and his demons are ready for more souls to torment. With the image of torment before the eyes of the congregation, Edwards proceeds to explain how useless any human effort is to avoid this fate. It was not uncommon for several people in the congregation to cry out loud and ask how to avoid this fate in the middle of his sermons. After

backing the audience into a corner, Edwards finally gives the near panicked crowd an out: Jesus. Edwards ends his speech with a glimmer of hope through repentance. This, of course, is what ties the first stage to the second.

As mentioned before, there was much controversy back then. But to make matters worse for today, the context in which this speech was given (first of a three-step process) is usually forgotten. I personally don't care for the "scared straight" tactics used here, but I do not live in the same culture as Edwards did. It must have been unsettling for the commoners to see so many intelligent and respected leaders minimizing the need for God, or to deny Him outright. If the faithful could not be called to God through reason, then I find no fault in appealing through emotion. But ever since the socialist movements that logically extended from atheistic governments proved just how bankrupt any sense of justice is in the absence of God, Christians as a whole seem to be more open to a rational understanding of the faith. Indeed, studies are showing that the mass exodus of young adults from Christianity during the last 50 years has been because church now seems to be "just another something to do," as opposed to a way to understand the truth about life. Eighty-five percent of those that leave a Christian church still retain a spiritual life, seeking answers they were not getting in their church. It is true that many of those who do become skeptics do so because of the lingering legacy that faith and reason are incompatible, but clearly the numbers (only 15% of those who leave Christianity) show that this is not the major problem for Christian retention. As a result, I don't think a future Great Awakening will work by appealing to emotions.

Furthermore, our society is very eager (perhaps too eager) to be outraged by any perceived slight. To attempt to cow today's young adults through fear will likely backfire. Even with the internal logic and the appeal to contemporary science, in the end it was the fear of Hell that drove people back then to repent. And at that time, this speech still assumed that the audience had at least some belief in God and Hell. The pantheistic spiritualism so many embrace today often brings doubts for these concepts (I personally consider this a greater threat to Christianity than skepticism). God and Hell are often relegated to merely one set of possibilities among many, so I believe this work would be looked at as a circular argument and forgotten by many young adults today.

But in its time, the message was singularly successful. And while it is hard to argue with success, I think it's too easy to look at the short-term success instead of the long-term consequences. One of the criticisms made against the Great Awakening even as it was happening was that the learned teachers of the faith would be replaced with anyone who could stir up a congregation with an emotional speech. While I think things have not turned out quite so dire, the fact is that there are over 20,000 independent and non-denominational churches in the U.S. alone today. Established doctrine is no longer considered a necessity for worship. That brings the danger of Christianity becoming what people want it to be, as opposed to what Jesus commanded it to be. We also have many on the lunatic fringe (who, unfortunately, tend to be the most vocal) claiming that faith is all one needs and that good deeds mean nothing. Faith was indeed emphasized by Saint Paul, but even he never pushed it to that extreme. Indeed, for him, good deeds were proof one had faith. And Jesus Himself claimed that faith and obedience (i.e., good deeds) were the same thing (John 3:36).

We also have the intense suffering suggested by the paper. While Edwards does not explicitly claim that souls in Hell are suffering in pain beyond imagination, he does claim that all the tortures of Earthly kings pale to what the devils can do. In all fairness to Edwards, this approach has existed long before this work. Jesus Himself compares Hell to the fires of Gehenna (a garbage burn pit outside Jerusalem so large it never stopped smoldering). It is difficult to imagine a pain more intense than being burned, so there is a foundation that suffering in Hell will be so great that one will be driven

beyond rational thought. But we also have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the one and only example in the Bible told from the perspective of Hell itself. And the rich man, while in great torment, was still capable of rational, lucid discussion. As anyone who has had tooth pain can testify, there are pain levels where rational, lucid discussions are not possible. On the other end of the spectrum, a tiny piece of stone in a shoe is relatively low on the pain scale, yet is one of the most unbearable torments one can experience. I do not offer any conclusive answers on what Hell is like, but I think the platitude of Hell simply being suffering so great one cannot think straight needs to be reconsidered.

Next, I want to address the verses Edwards quotes. With at least 21 biblical references in his work, only eight of them are used in the same context as presented in the Bible. For three other quotes, I feel the context is technically correct, yet presents a slightly more sinister interpretation than what was originally shown in the Bible. Of the remaining ten, I feel the original biblical meaning has been changed to suit the needs of the author. While I do recognize that scripture *can* have different, yet legitimate, interpretations, this does not mean *all* interpretations are legitimate. The danger of crossing this line is great when one is more interested in finding useful patterns of words instead of the narrative behind it. I won't discuss all ten here, but I will point out what really stood out for me.

The very first quote, Deuteronomy 32:28-35, is one. It is not a great misrepresentation, and had it not been the first quote I may very well not have discussed it at all. Here, Edwards claims that God will send vengeance on the "wicked, unbelieving Israelites." The problem is, God already forgave the Israelites in these verses, the curse was for those who led them astray. The passages leading up to it, I admit, are a bit vague, but the very next verse after Edward's quote makes it clear that the said vengeance was on those who tempted the Israelites. While this error does not affect his overall objective, I do get the feeling that he is more interested in what the Bible says than in what the Bible means. Nor is this the only time it happens. Shortly afterwards, he quotes a *part* of Luke 13:7 (The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree). Had the whole verse been quoted, we would have seen the gardener begging for just one more year. In the context of the paper, Edwards is comparing the fig tree with the "grapes of Sodom." I find the leap in logic a bit much here. And then we see a third example, with a quote from John 3:17 to demonstrate God's wrath, but not the following verse: "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." Yet again, it does not really challenge the overall goal of the paper, but the original scriptures make God a lot less vengeful than what Edwards is proclaiming.

Towards the end of the work, Proverbs 1:24-32 is quoted, with the claim that it is God saying we are doomed because we did not listen to Him. Actually, this is Wisdom speaking, not God (and this is rather obvious in the verses leading up to it). As such, God is still there to save us as His authority exceeds that of Wisdom. I find a similar concern with Isaiah 63:3. Most of the rest of my questionable quotes likewise fit with the theme, but are still used to paint a slightly different picture in their original context than what Edwards is trying to say. It is these subtle, but constant, misrepresentations that concern me. Sadly, I see many Christians today taking scripture out of the original context to pursue their own agendas. While Edwards himself doesn't stray too far off (I don't think he says anything overtly wrong, but rather grossly overstates his position), I believe he set a precedent for others to be liberal with what verses they pick for their works.

The last misquote I want to discuss, and perhaps the misquote that concerns me the most, is Romans 9:22. Unlike the others, this is truly taken out of context, to the point I cannot justify its use at all. In this passage, Saint Paul was showing just how patient God is with sinners. Far from painting a picture of a God ready to damn us on a whim, it shows just how hard God works to convince us to let

Him save us.

My biggest overall objection, however, is that, as a whole, this paper is quite contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps I am being too sensitive here, but Jesus beckoned others with love, friendship and an offer of peace, not threats. Jesus did indeed speak of the torments of Hell on occasion; therefore, we cannot simply ignore them. But they were generally given as either warnings to those who would persecute Him, or in contrast to the pleasures of Heaven He often spoke of. At a minimum, the methods of the First Great Awakening run counter to the examples of Jesus.

In the end, the influence of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" can hardly be overstated, although how much good or harm ultimately came out of it is controversial. No doubt, like most of man's accomplishments, both good and harm has resulted. It is a powerful tool to help us come closer to God, and, as with all tools of such power, should be used carefully. Most importantly, one should also keep an eye on how it overplays some biblical references to support its own purposes.

Raymond Mulholland
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https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm