

RODERICK O FORD, LITT.D., JD.

November 2, 2021

Whitefield Theological Seminary
ATTN: Rev. Dr. Kenneth Talbot, President
1605 E. Gary Road
Lakeland, FL. 33801

Dear Dr. Talbot:

I am writing to cite the life and works of **Rev. Jonathan Edwards, Jr.** (1745 – 1801) (“Edwards the Younger”) as an exemplification of a great Reformed Minister.



As you know, Edwards the Younger upheld the same theological views of his father, including maintaining orthodox Calvinism and opposition to the Half-Way Covenant. But unlike his father, Edwards the Younger was firmly opposed to both Slavery and the African slave trade.

Edwards the Younger’s theological views are, in my humble opinion, the purest expression of orthodox Calvinism. The following extract is taken from the Princeton University webpage:

SLAVERY AND THE BIBLE

In the 1770s and ‘80s, Edwards Jr. also took up his pen against slavery—another departure from his father. Though Jonathan Edwards

Sr. spoke against the cruelty of the Atlantic slave trade and considered enslaved people his spiritual equals (God “condescends to poor negroes” as well as white Christians, he'd preached), the Congregationalist minister owned at least four slaves during his life, including two he likely brought to serve him at the President’s House in Princeton.

His son, however, considered the practice of slavery to be in direct contradiction with Christianity. In 1773—while serving as pastor of the White Haven Church near Yale—Edwards Jr. published a series of antislavery articles in a local newspaper. He was 28 years old, a relatively new minister who had been ordained only four years prior; perhaps this was why he chose to write under a pseudonym. He chose “Antidoulios,” Greek for “against slavery.”

In his articles, Edwards Jr. challenged the biblical arguments often used to defend slavery. While he acknowledged that Old Testament patriarchs such as Abraham “*had servants born in his house and bought with his money,*” he questioned whether these servants were subject to the same form of “perpetual bondage” that enslaved people in his day suffered. But even if they were—Edwards continued—that didn’t mean the Father of Israel had been right to enslave them: *For, however good a man he was, he had not arrived at sinless perfection.*

On a broader level, Edwards Jr. applied the Gospel of Matthew’s golden rule to the practice of slavery. “Why,” he asked, “are the slaveholders exempt from attending to the golden rule of our Saviour? *‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them.’*”

Edwards Jr. expanded on these arguments in a powerful antislavery sermon he delivered nearly two decades later, in 1791. No longer writing anonymously, the 46-year-old minister condemned slavery from his pulpit in New Haven, beginning with the scripture that had long informed his antislavery thought: “Therefore all things whatsoever you would, that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

In his sermon, Edwards Jr. challenged his congregation to question their basic assumptions about morality and racial difference in 18th-century America. “Should we be willing, that the Africans or any other nation should purchase us, our wives and children, transport us into Africa and there sell us into perpetual and absolute slavery?” he asked. (The answer, of course, was no.) So then “why is it not as right for them to treat us in this manner, as it is for us to treat them in the same manner?” And if slavery was based on skin color, he continued, why shouldn’t any person with lighter skin enslave any other with darker? “The nations from Germany to Guinea have complexions of every shade,” he noted, so “where shall slavery begin? Or where shall it end?”

Finally, Edwards Jr. once again raised the specter of the patriarchs, biblical as well as contemporary. “Perhaps though this truth”—of the immorality of slavery—“be clearly demonstrable from both reason and revelation, you scarcely dare receive it, because it seems to bear hardly on the characters of our pious fathers, who held slaves,” he said. The son of a slave-owner himself, Edwards knew firsthand how difficult it might be for his congregants to criticize “our fathers and men now alive” for a practice that had long gone virtually unquestioned. “They did so ignorantly and in unbelief of the truth,” he conceded—or in other words, they were men of their times. Now, however, their time had passed.

“You therefore to whom the present blaze of light as to this subject has reached,” Edwards Jr. said, sweeping those famously piercing eyes across his audience, “cannot sin at so cheap a rate as our fathers.”

SLAVERY AND REVOLUTION

The late-18th century was a turning point in American political thought on slavery: an intermediate period between the colonial era, in which slaveholding had gone almost entirely unchallenged by Anglo-Americans, and the radical antislavery activism to come in the 1830s and after.

Part of this shift was driven by gradual emancipation laws inspired by patriotic rhetoric of liberty and equality that many northern state legislatures passed in the wake of the American Revolution.

Edwards Jr. applied Revolutionary ideals to the practice of slavery as early as 1773, when he published his series of antislavery articles in New Haven. As Antidoulios, Edwards paired the Bible's golden rule with the Revolution's: that all men are created equal. Writing mere months before "Sons of Liberty" tossed British tea into Boston Harbor, Edwards pointed out the hypocrisy of American colonists protesting the "Tyranny of the British Parliament" for imposing new taxes ("which amount to but a mere trifle for each individual") while at the same time "exercising a worse Tyranny over his Negro Slaves."

Edwards Jr. demanded consistency from patriots just as he did from Christians. The American revolutionaries "have ever laid this at the foundation of their arguings," he wrote, "that Mankind were possessed of some natural and unalienable Rights" that no government or society could take away.

Yet the same people demanding liberty for themselves denied it to enslaved Africans and African Americans. "The silence of others" had compelled Edwards Jr. to speak out, and when he did, he accepted no compromise:

I assert that every Man is born free. No Man is or can be born a Slave. This Maxim is what every free Government in the World is founded upon. This Maxim is what the British Government is founded upon. This and This only can support the glorious Revolution.

After the war was won and the British North American colonies reconstituted themselves into the United States, Edwards Jr. continued to use the language of revolution to oppose slavery. In his 1791 sermon—delivered three months before the Bill of Rights was ratified—Edwards once again appealed to the principle "that all men are born equally free." And "if this be true, the Africans are by nature equally entitled to freedom as we are."

Edwards Jr. witnessed an increase in antislavery sentiment in the last decades of the 18th century. Connecticut, where he served as a

minister until 1799, passed a gradual emancipation law in 1784, declaring that any child born to an enslaved woman after March 1st would be freed at the age of 25.

Since 1777, five other northern states had passed similar laws. When he delivered his antislavery sermon in 1791, Edwards had reason to hope that “the light of truth” about slavery’s evils would eventually lead to its abolition throughout the entire country.

“This light is still increasing,” he told his congregation, “and in time will effect a total revolution.”

Edwards the Younger’s interpretation of the *Declaration of Independence* and the *U.S. Constitution*, together with the Holy Bible, is what eventually became the predominant view in American theologians and constitutional lawyers. And this view is certainly the viewpoint of nearly every conservative African American church denomination—including Baptist, Congregationalist or Presbyterian—that I am aware of. It was certainly Rev. Henry Highland Garnett’s (Presbyterian), Frederick Douglass’ (Methodist), and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s (Baptist) view on American constitutional law and Christian theology.

Should Whitefield Theological Seminary create a new department or academic or professional program that is designed to appeal to *a broader spectrum of American clergymen and churches* who are concerned about **civil rights and human rights** from a Reformed perspective, or any new measure to appeal to African American clergymen who are concerned about the plight of oppressed Africans or African American communities everywhere, then utilizing “**Edwards the Younger**” as a namesake for such a program(s) would be a great idea.

Yours Faithfully,

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