Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney (eds)


While many would recognize Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) as a theologian of the greatest stature, there has been considerable disagreement about the nature of his legacy and the extent of his influence. One of the problems has been the perception of the relationship between Edwards and his New England successors. For many years the dominant narrative has been one of decline and fall, of those successors forsaking the unclouded vision of Edwards for the dead end of moralism. This is a subject requiring a revisionist approach similar to that which has been applied so fruitfully in the area of post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism. The essays collected in this volume are a confident step in that direction, revealing continuities between Edwards and his disciples in their concern for a Reformed theology and for vital religion in the churches. The proponents of the New England Theology were ‘a closely knit community of scholar-pastors whose principal aim was to fashion a viable strain of Reformed theology for North America’ (p. 5). They neither abandoned Edwards nor simply repristinated his ideas, but instead creatively adapted those ideas within the context of changing philosophical paradigms and new social challenges.

The first group of essays focuses on the early transmission of Edwards’ ideas. Mark Valeri explains how Edwards passed on the baton to his successors not so much in the form of a set of propositions as of a theological method. They sought to shape a ‘cosmopolitan Calvinism’, intelligible and philosophically defensible within the transatlantic intellectual discourse of the day, and to present it in a manner befitting the culture of gentility. Kenneth Minkema describes their educational strategies, especially the apprenticeships and household seminaries which proved so formative in the training of pastors.

Further essays map out some important contours of Edwards’ theology, beginning with the imputation of Adam’s sin, the effects of sin on the human will, and the consequent distinction between natural ability and moral ability. Edwards’ successors related this distinction to regeneration and the nature of benevolence and true virtue, practically applying these ideas in their use of disinterested benevolence as an argument against slavery.

Oliver Crisp sheds light on the puzzling question of why Edwards, who conceived of the atonement in terms of penal substitution, could write so enthusiastic a preface for Joseph Bellamy’s *True Religion Delineated* in which one finds a moral government model of the atonement. Crisp argues that there
were notes of moral governance in Edwards' thought with which Bellamy's teaching would have resonated, and even though Bellamy proposed a different mechanism for atonement the end result was the same, insofar as it was effectual only for the elect. Edwards and his protégé could thus continue to make common cause against Arminianism. Paul Helm brings this first section to a close, comparing Edwards' thought to older forms of Reformed theology. Edwards was, he concludes, a modern man working in a different philosophical context to his predecessors. Edwards 'was certainly a Calvinist, though one of a rather different kind' (p. 103). Helm's evaluation of continuities and discontinuities between Edwards and the preceding tradition is undoubtedly worthwhile but it does seem a little lost in a volume entitled After Jonathan Edwards.

The second part of the book traces out some of the trajectories of the New England Theology with essays foregrounding individuals who transmitted but also transformed what they had received: Samuel Hopkins; the eccentric Nathaniel Emmons; Edward Dorr Griffin and Asahel Nettleton, revival preachers and opponents of Charles Grandison Finney's 'new measures'; Nathaniel Taylor, whose New Haven Theology led to the breakaway of Bennet Tyler and his followers; and Edwards Amasa Park. Charles Phillip's essay is especially helpful in clarifying Park's views, arguing that Park's affective language drew from Edwards, not from Friedrich Schleiermacher or Horace Bushnell as alleged by Charles Hodge and more recent critics. He also points out that Park's long tenure at Andover Seminary into the 1880s meant that hundreds of pastors, educators, and missionaries trained within an Edwardsian culture were active in the early years of the twentieth century, suggesting vitality in the movement long after the point at which historians have traditionally pronounced life extinct.

The final section of the book takes a wider view and begins with essays considering the Edwardsian influence among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Mark Noll contrasts the generally appreciative reception of Edwards by Scottish Presbyterians with the more cautious respect shown by their American cousins. Presbyterians in the United States were uneasy with Edwards' philosophical idealism and positively alarmed by the theological innovations of his successors, and it was from this quarter that the first decline and fall narratives emerged. Michael Haykin also takes a transatlantic perspective in assessing Edwards' influence on the Baptists and shows that the Englishman Andrew Fuller was the principal conduit by which nineteenth-century American Baptists came to receive the ideas of Edwards and his early successors.

Michael McClymond surveys the reception of Edwards in Britain, France, and Germany up to 1957. This is a superb contribution to the volume. McClymond...