

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD:
AN HISTORICAL LOOK AND ITS PREACHABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

Background

Oh unbelieving sinner, “there is nothing that keeps [you] wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.”¹ Jonathan Edwards was known, albeit perhaps a stereotype, as a fire-and-brimstone preacher and *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* gives definition to the term “fire-and-brimstone”.² Edwards lived in the pre-revolution British colonies and preaching on the damnation of hell in the mid-18th century was not all that unusual, in fact it was a “routine part of covering the full range of Gospel topics” especially for an “awakening sermon”³

As the revivals of the Great Awakening started moving throughout the region, Edwards, on Sunday, July 5, 1741, as an invited guest preacher, went to nearby Suffield on the Massachusetts-Connecticut border to present his message prepared from Deuteronomy 32:35. It was at this service where about “ninety-seven people were admitted as communicant members”, where *Sinners* was first preached.⁴ The very next day Edwards would take this very sermon to a packed ‘private meeting’ at a house where people were moved to whaling so loud that it could be heard “from a quarter-mile

¹ The text of the sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Deuteronomy 32:35 (1741) can be found in many editions. The text here and all subsequent quotations from *Sinners* are from: Jonathan Edwards, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 50.

² John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards and The End For Which God Created the World*, 1st Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 83.

³ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 221.

⁴ George M. Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 65-66.

away.”⁵ It was not until July 8th, three days after the sermon in Suffield, when Edwards joined a group of visiting revivalist pastors in Enfield that he presented his most famous sermon in front of a group of people that were described as “thoughtless and vain, [and] hardly conducting themselves with common decency.”⁶

A Sinners Message Preached Today

This sermon preached that day, now considered to be one of the “most famous sermons in American history”⁷ (certainly Edwards’ most famous sermon), provides timeless instruction to God’s sinful people on how the guilty, those born into the guilt of original sin, are destined for hell if not for the saving grace of God through our trust in His son.⁸ The sermon is timeless in the fact that Edwards speaks in a theology and doctrine that remains true to the scriptures even today. While it may be true that the sermon and it’s ultimate message is timeless, the culture and society has changed dramatically since it was first preached in 1741. By the time of the turn of the millennium, about 250 years later, the message of condemnation and hell’s torment would be far from the common preaching presented to the 21st century church. How would the sermon need to be changed for a 20th or 21st century church to hear and respond to the message, as did the hearers in 1741, or would it be even possible in the post-modern church?

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, September 28, 1741: 3.

⁷ D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas and Stephen J. Nichols, , *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 44.

⁸ John Piper and Justin Taylor, , *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 42.

If the typical congregant from the 21st century evangelical church examined *Sinners* as it was presented in 1741 they might first react with disgust, horror, and maybe outright rejection of the message and its doctrine. If that were indeed the case it might be that an examination of the heart of the 21st century congregant is more appropriate than a dismissal of *Sinners* as a thing of the past, a message not relevant for today.

As *Sinners* moves into “its most infamous passage” about the peril we face if we ignore the present dangers of hell, a section that Billy Graham in 1949 left out completely, the church body, and our post-modern culture, needs to examine this sermon, not as a piece of literature taught in schools, but as the coming of God’s wrath.⁹ When Edwards prepared for *Sinners* in 1741, he probably could not have imagined a culture in which heaven and hell was not a given. The 21st century is now a pluralistic society, which does not necessarily accept the dualistic existence of heaven and hell. Without a general acceptance of hell, there could not be any conviction to accept a “God that holds you over the pit of hell,” nor a desire for the “opportunity to obtain salvation.”¹⁰

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God was a powerful and convicting sermon in 1741. In 1949 *Sinners* was still able to be preached and convict the minds of its hearers, but by the 21st century, changes in the world and in the church have made the presentation of *Sinners* very challenging to anyone considering to preach its full message. The analysis below examines the difference between *Sinners* as presented in 1741 by Edwards, in 1949 by Graham, and the possibility of presenting it to a post-modern 21st century audience.

⁹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 223.

¹⁰ Edwards, *A Reader*, 57-58.

Sinners Preached in History and Beyond

Sinners in Enfield in 1741

As Edwards' preached *Sinners* on July 8th, what was the effect on the congregation who listened to the presentation of hell and damnation? In Enfield his listeners were so moved that he was ultimately unable to finish the content of the sermon, and the results, unlike many other revival sermons of the day, "were extraordinary."¹¹ During the colonial 18th century, death was always on the minds of the citizens. Death often struck suddenly, without warning, and preaching a sermon like *Sinners* "was a loving thing to do" in preparing the lost for what was sure to come quickly, if not today, then probably tomorrow, according to Edwards.¹² The result was that the people were so moved by the Spirit (some no doubt were involved in the excesses of the day as well) that the "tumult became too great as the audience was overcome by screaming, moanings, and [cried] out 'What shall I do to be saved' that Edwards had to stop preaching."¹³ With the lament of his audience at hand, Edwards did not even get to read the section pertaining to God's grace.

But here you are in the land of the living, and in the house of God, and have an opportunity to obtain salvation. What would not those poor damned, hopeless souls give for one day's such opportunity as you now enjoy!

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners.¹⁴

¹¹ D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas and Stephen J. Nichols, , *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 43.

¹² Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, 66.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, Vol. IV (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 246.

¹⁴ Edwards, *A Reader*, 64.

The other visiting pastors that came with Edwards that day had to comfort and minister to the parishioners on the spot and accept how God had moved their hearts upon the reading of *Sinners*.

In more modern times people might have attributed that kind of response to that of a great public speaker, but in Edwards' day, it was attributed to that of the work of the Holy Spirit, especially when one examines Edwards the orator. Edwards was not an exciting speaker by modern standards or even by the standards of his day when compared to others like the evangelist Whitefield. He was nearsighted, read most of his manuscript sermons word for word, (though he memorized much of what he wrote) up close to his face, spoke in a "weak voice, used few gestures, and [he] made little eye contact."¹⁵ As is noted in many different studies of Edwards and of *Sinners*, what makes this sermon so effective is not necessarily the greatness of the doctrine Edwards presents but the "sustained imagery Edwards employs to pierce the hearts of the hearers" while never stopping to examine or reflect upon what has been said.¹⁶

As a result to the responses of these first readings of *Sinners*, Edwards would go on to preach the same sermon to many different audiences. This is something he did not often do while preaching at his home church in Northampton, but he would have similar results, some genuine and some excessive, through the summer of 1741 during the height of the Awakening. Although Edwards is known today mostly as a fire-and-brimstone preacher who spoke only on hell, he probably knew as much about heaven as he did hell, but the message of *Sinners* was clear to all who listened. During the revival in the

¹⁵ Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, 66.

¹⁶ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 222.

summer of 1741 *Sinners* was a convicting, effectual, and menacing sermon that brought many to understand the reality of their sinful lives.

Sinners in Los Angeles in 1949

Almost two hundred years later, on November 13th, 1949, another famous preacher would present *Sinners* to a completely different audience in Los Angeles during a big-tent revival dubbed the “Canvas Cathedral Crusade”. In this 20th century version of *Sinners*, Billy Graham would deliver a much more charismatic performance while still basically reading the sermon as Edwards did 200 years earlier. After preaching 65 sermons in 72 days, Graham was probably exhausted from such a feat, and was said to have run out of sermons when he decided to preach *Sinners*.¹⁷ As Graham began to speak, the audience probably not knowing the significance of the message they were about to hear, he prefaced *Sinners* with a lengthy monologue telling the audience what he was about to do with overtones as to the length of the sermon, and then called on the Holy Spirit to move in the same way it did back in 1741.

It’s a very brief sermon, it’s not too long. I’m going to read it, and extemporize part of it, but I want you to feel the grip, I want you to feel the language. I’m asking tonight the same blessed Holy Ghost that moved in that day to move again tonight in 1949 and shake us out of our lethargy as Christians and convict sinners that we might come to repentance.¹⁸

Calling *Sinners* brief by modern standards would be almost comical when a typical Sunday morning sermon can run approximately 15-20 minutes, but Graham’s presentation of *Sinners* lasted about the same length of time that it did when Edwards preached in 1741 (about 45 minutes). Although both presentations were just under an

¹⁷ William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 118.

¹⁸ Billy Graham and Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," *The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University*, November 13, 1949, <http://edwards.yale.edu/files/graham-transcript.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2009).

hour in length, neither finished the sermon. Where Edwards did not make it to the saving grace section of *Sinners*, Graham made it only about half way through, stopping just before the most ominous section filled with the greatest imagery of hell, and ending the evening with a lengthy altar call typical of the revivalist evangelicals of the day.

Graham was preaching in a time of revival in America, as was Edwards, and his choice to use *Sinners* may have shown his willingness and hope to see the Holy Spirit at work among God's people just as Edwards hoped for. When Graham was finished, he did not end up significantly altering Edwards' original message or doctrine to meet his modern day audience, with a few exceptions. Graham used a "softening of Edwards' strict Calvinism" and a greater and more frequent use of "Jesus Christ" throughout.¹⁹ Where Edwards didn't even use the term "Jesus", Graham used it 16 times starting in the first sentence of the preface, and where Edwards didn't use the term "Christ" until the ninth point in the "doctrine section", well into the sermon, Graham used the term continually. These changes did not materially alter Edwards' message or doctrine and Graham seemed to flow through *Sinners* as if translating from one language to another, as he went, making the changes he deemed necessary to meet his 20th century audience.

Where Graham did change the details of the message more significantly is where he addressed specific sins his hearers would readily recognize in 1949 like the "Sunset Strip, and to the people in the gambling dens of iniquity in Los Angeles."²⁰ Here he was most likely addressing the issues of sex, alcohol, and gambling, common throughout the

¹⁹ Dr. Andrew Finstuen, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' Reprised: Billy Graham and the Los Angeles Crusade of 1949," *The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University*, Spring 2007, <http://edwards.yale.edu/files/finstuen-graham.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2009).

²⁰ Graham and Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".

southern California area and in Las Vegas. This departure from Edwards was closer to what Graham customarily preached about during his revival sermons and would be commonly understood by his audience. There was not a large gambling industry in Las Vegas during the time of Edwards of course but he certainly dealt with the lustful hearts of the young people in Northampton and even their parents in much the same way.

The effect of Graham's version of *Sinners* was certainly not exactly the same as Edwards with the documented excesses and moanings of private meetings, but as the message ended in 1949 Graham called those sinners hearing God's word to repent by coming forward and receiving the peace of Christ, and thousands "[wept] forgiveness for their sins."²¹ Graham's ending would also be very recognizable to present day 21st century churchgoers, when he said:

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to walk out with peace in your heart? Nobody leaving, nobody moving... Every head bowed. Every eye closed. While our heads are bowed, our eyes are closed, nobody's looking... All over this place—outside, nobody moving—all over this place, lift your hand tonight and say, "I want to be sure."

The large number of people in the audience was far more than Edwards' could have ever hoped for, largely due to the press Graham received in Los Angeles and a break in the colder weather, but it would be difficult to make direct comparisons to the exact number of people convicted by the Holy Spirit those two nights. There was a significant difference in the total number of people Edwards was able to reach and Graham was able to reach just by the difference in population between 1741 and 1949. In 1741 the colonized population at that time was approximately 1.5 million people, and by 1949 it had reached almost 150 million with Los Angeles having almost 2 million

²¹ Mel Larson, "Tasting Revival at Los Angeles," *Revival in our Time*, 1950: 13, 17.

people alone.²² Records show that during Graham's revival week he was able to preach to approximately 250,000 people using the "largest revival tent in history" that held 6,280 people with "nearly every prominent minister in Los Angeles" in attendance.²³

Even with Graham's larger audience his message still fell slightly short of the full power of Edwards' when he left out the most famous passage on the fiery pit of hell, probably due to something as simple as the time constraint of having already preached for almost an hour. When the evangelical church looks back at the message preached by Billy Graham in 1949 they should note that Graham preached a specific message in *Sinners* at a time of revival in America that time that no other popular evangelical preacher had done in almost 200 years, and none have achieved since. As Graham took on the great challenge of preaching *Sinners*, some would still argue that the "disappearance of Edwards's perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy" and there have been "no successors to [Edwards'] God-entranced world view" since.²⁴

Sinners in the 21st Century Church

As time and the church has moved from the mid-20th century into the 21st century, it has certainly gone through many significant changes. If an objective view of the post-modern 21st century society could be accurately taken today, it might show that the 200 years between Edwards' preaching and Graham's preaching was a time of great changes

²² "Historical National Population Estimates," *U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division*, June 28, 2000, <http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1990s/popclockest.txt> (accessed December 12, 2009).

²³ *Time Magazine*, "Sickle for the Harvest," November 14, 1949: 46.

²⁴ Mark Noll, "Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought," *Reformed Journal*, February 1983: 26.

in the country and in the world, but perhaps not even as significant as the changes seen from Graham's start to today.

As the 21st century arrived, the speed at which the world changed had become so accelerated, through technology, a global economy, and the ease of worldwide travel, that Christianity today, other than its core message, hardly resembles the church of Edwards, and in some respects even Graham as well. Edwards understood the small (by today's standards) meetinghouse gatherings, private house meetings, and traditional pastor-church relationships of his day.²⁵ Graham's later 20th century church advancements brought revival evangelism to television, many times with grave consequences.

The 21st century church has, since Graham's day, seen the rise of the mega-church, known sermon messages and full services produced specially for the Internet to be commonplace, a church planting boom through the leasing of movie theaters, international missions advancing through the use of technology, and the multi-site church campus and pastor. LifeChurch.tv in Edmond, Oklahoma, which was started as a church plant by a 28-year-old Methodist pastor, now ministers to more than 25,000 over 13 different campuses, including live Internet broadcasts, something Edwards or Graham could not have even understood to be possible.²⁶ Even though the church throughout history has gone through significant changes, God has promised that he will continue to build His church and not even the "gates of Hades will not overpower it." (Matthew 16:18 NASB) and this has certainly continued into the 21st century as well.

²⁵ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 184-195.

²⁶ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Multi-Site Churches: A New Variety of Religious Experience," *USA Today*, December 16, 2009.

With the significant changes in culture and society that have occurred in the last 60 years, the question surely arises as to whether the church could preach a sermon like *Sinners* today, and if so, how would it need to be changed? Is the state and nature of individuals who would be likely to hear *Sinners* at a point where they are even willing to listen to a message on condemnation and hell anymore? The revivals happening in the 1740's, which existed in a slightly different form in the 1940's and 50's, have become almost non-existent today. A "revival" today has a completely different connotation associated with it than those of the awakenings, or the revivals of Graham's ministry. They are often now "scheduled" revivals, organized, and orchestrated to the point that God has no need to be involved. The people to be revived (mostly those already in receipt of God's grace anyway) do not need to do much more than "consume" a few hours of entertainment and fellowship resulting in little more than an extra Sunday morning service.

Preaching in the 21st century has lost much of the (in today's standards, extreme) imagery Edwards uses in *Sinners*, which convicted so many hearts. Today our preaching rarely uses imagery that conjures up the wrath of God and "evangelism in America is basking in the sunlight of ominously hollow success."²⁷ Instead, a softer approach is preferred, and "we do just the opposite, we grope for circumlocutions of hell and create images as far from the horror of the biblical phrases as we can" and instead try to make "heaven look [as] attractive" as we can to make the Gospel appealing to as many people

²⁷ John Piper, "A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: Why We Need Jonathan Edwards 300 Years Later," in *2003 Desiring God National Conference: The Unrivaled Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Desiring God, 2003).

as possible.²⁸ To preach *Sinners* in the language of today's Gospel it would have to be significantly changed to even soften upon Graham's use of Edwards' Calvinism, probably to a point where the meaning, doctrine, and application would have little resemblance to the *Sinners* Edwards preached in 1741.

This is the challenge that Edwards presents to the modern day church. Is it possible, or should the church even try to “find images and analogies that come anywhere near creating the profound feelings we ought to have when we consider realities like hell and heaven?”²⁹ Edwards himself put the challenge back on himself saying “I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can,” something the 21st century church should still be striving for today.³⁰ The message contained in *Sinners* may not be one that the 21st century church wants to preach, but to stay true to the word of God and His message, a message of hell must be presented along with the softer more acceptable message of heaven.

Conclusion

The Work of Edwards and Graham

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God in the summer of 1741 may very well be the greatest sermon ever preached to a congregation willing to listen to the convicting message of the Gospel. Where *Sinners* was not the only type message that Edwards commonly preached throughout his career, it provides an excellent example and

²⁸ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 91.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. C. Goen, Vol. IV (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 387.

challenge to the 21st century church today. As Billy Graham took the evangelical reigns of revival in 1949, so the church of the 21st century needs to rise up to the challenge of presenting a message like *Sinners* to its congregation in a way that is able to be received while holding true to its doctrine and message.

A Method of Presentation

The more traditional gathering of the revival was a necessary outlet for the Holy Spirit to move and call His people to repentance in the time of Edwards and Graham. The church today may not have the means of the traditional revival, but they have been given an untold number of post-modern tools that were never available to Edwards or Graham. With these newer tools of technology it is not always necessary for the church to try to force revivals similar to those that occurred during the ministry of Edwards and Graham to occur today. Throughout history God has been building his church and although each century presents new challenges, God has always had His hand in history, using the most effective tools of the time through an unchanging scripture. *Sinners* is deeply rooted in that unchanging scripture and, as such, should still be able to be presented today in a revival, small group meeting, or traditional Sunday morning service.

The 21st Century Church and Sinners

As the roots of the post-modern church become stronger, *Sinners* is never more needed, and never less likely to be heard and accepted than perhaps any other time in modern church history. As the technologically advanced, contemporary, consumerism, audience moves in and the evangelistic revival ministries move out, *Sinners* and a message of repentance and hell, is less and less likely to be an “acceptable” method of preaching. Even so it is “doubtless [that] some have seen and known those that never

deserved hell more and yet still have an opportunity to obtain salvation” through this great message.³¹

Through this promise of salvation, the church has continued to stand the test of time, but the 21st century has certainly changed the way it looks. Those people, who most need to hear the words of Edwards today, often respond to the church with contempt and mistrust. They are “constantly searching for fresh experiences, they want to try things out themselves, disdaining self-proclaimed experts and ‘talking head’ presentations.”³² A more liberal theology which has been commonly accepted in the 21st century, and a much more pluralistic society in general, questions accepting even the premise of hell, heaven, sin, Satan, evil, and the historicity of Christ, which were almost never questioned in Edwards’ day by the common parishioner. Great thinkers, academics, and theologians throughout history have always asked those questions, but neither Edwards nor Graham had to first convince his listeners of the existence of hell as one might have to today. Presenting *Sinners* today, to those living outside God’s will, would present some great challenges, and very well could become almost impossible to effectively stir the listener to repentance. More likely it would simply offend the listener to the point of non-effectiveness, and the church needs to continue to look for and find effective ways to preach the entire Gospel message of heaven and hell.

³¹ Edwards, *A Reader*, 63.

³² David Kinnaman, *UnChristian, What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why It Matters*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 23.

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