

# CAPITAL COMMENTARY

December 15, 2003

## An American Covenant With God?

Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, was born 300 years ago. New books on Edwards and the history of American Christianity are receiving the attention they deserve. *U.S. News and World Report* (12/8/03), among other magazines and media, has taken notice, particularly by calling attention to the growing impact of Evangelicals—Edwards' heirs—on American society and politics today. Yet it is a long way from Edwards to contemporary America.

New England Puritans of the 17th and 18th centuries saw "their whole society as standing in covenant with God," as Mark Noll explains in *America's God*. The Puritans, however, never resolved the question of how, on biblical grounds, a politically organized community should be related to God when all of its citizens are no longer members of the church. For at the outset, New England covenantalism conditioned citizenship on church membership.

The answer that most Evangelicals adopted between 1776 and the Civil War is the one that shapes much of American politics to this day.

The first part of the answer—for eternal purposes—is to emphasize personal conversion and heartfelt piety. Individuals "getting right with God" is more important than the maturation of the church as the visible community of God's people. The First and Second Great Awakenings, on through the Billy Graham crusades and the development of seeker-friendly megacomplexes today, testify to the intensity of the evangelical quest to save souls for eternal life. Yet this emphasis tends to diminish, if not ignore altogether, the meaning of the church as the community of the new covenant in Christ, serving its Lord in all spheres of society, including the political community.

One reason why Evangelicals have taken this approach comes to light in the second part of their answer to the unresolved Puritan dilemma. Evangelicals, leading the way for many Americans, have transferred the seal of "God's covenant people" to the American nation as a whole. Or to say it another way,

Evangelicals retained the Puritan idea of the "city on a hill"—God's new Israel—as the designation of America rather than of the church. Yet, if most Americans are not Christians and stand in need of conversion, how can the nation—the political community—be God's chosen people?

The truth is that "saved souls" cannot function in a vacuum on earth, and the nation has been adopted as the primary public community through which heavenly oriented American souls find their connection to God's work in real history. Evangelicals continue to organize private means and agencies to save souls for eternity. Yet none of these addresses the need for public community. The covenanted nation does that.

One who has had an evangelical conversion experience regularly recalls that moment as the occasion when God broke in to change one's heart, to seal assurance of eternal life. In a similar way, the heirs of Edwards look back to the Puritan disembarkment in *new* England and to the Revolutionary War—now merged together in mythic memory—as the moment when God broke into history to make a new covenant with . . . with America and any who would become Americans or join America's cause.

For many if not most Evangelicals, America's covenant with God also now includes the obligation to protect the state of Israel at all costs, in fulfillment of prophecies to God's first covenant people. National politics becomes the means to ends known only by fathoming the hidden purposes of God. Meanwhile, the cause of public justice, domestically and internationally, and the health of the church, as a worldwide community of faith at work, both languish in America.

The Evangelical answer to the unresolved Puritan dilemma is, I fear, radically in error, owing more to the gnostic tradition than to biblical Christianity.

—James W. Skillen  
*President*

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