Samuel Hopkins Biography

Samuel Hopkins

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Biography

Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), New England clergyman and theologian, was a disciple of Jonathan Edwards, whose work he attempted to systematize.

Samuel Hopkins was born on Sept. 17, 1721, in Waterbury, Conn. After a religious upbringing, he took a bachelor of arts degree at Yale College in 1741. This was a year of revival excitement in New England, following in the wake of the visit to America by revivalist George Whitefield. A sermon by Jonathan Edwards made such an impression on Hopkins that he resolved, though an utter stranger, to go to Edwards's Northampton home to live and study under his tutelage.

Hopkins spent 8 months in the Edwards household, the first of many such visits. In this manner, he came to know Jonathan Edwards's daily life, habits of study, and personal values perhaps better than anyone else of this generation. Fortunately, Hopkins left a valuable, short sketch of the great theologian.

During his lifetime Hopkins held two pastorates. The first was at a frontier settlement at Great Barrington, Mass. In 1769, after 25 years there, he was dismissed because the membership was dissatisfied with his preaching, which was evidently too abstract.

Hopkins's next pastorate, which lasted until his death, was in Newport, R.I. There his record was distinctly different. Beginning in 1770, Hopkins made his pulpit a center of protest against slavery. He succeeded in stirring up not only his church membership (among whom were many slaveholders) but also the larger community. He won press support, wrote numerous letters and articles, and agitated for organized political action. He also devised a plan for extensive missionary work in Africa and for colonizing black Americans there. His 1776 *Dialogue concerning the Slavery of the Africans* was perhaps his most outstanding printed contribution to this cause.

Better known and more influential in later times was Hopkins's *System of Doctrines* (2 vols., 1793), setting forth the New Divinity or Hopkinsianism, based on the ideas of Edwards. What Hopkins made of Edwards's imagination, perception, genius, and power may be criticized for its lacks, but he gave Edwards's ideas a chance to be known for another two generations. Hopkins died in Newport on Dec. 20, 1803.