

# JONATHAN EDWARDS ON CONVICTION OF SIN

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The church was in trouble at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Religious zeal and knowledge had receded into the background of church life. Expectations of imminent human progress were raised to a high level, crippling Christian piety. The heartless and indifferent hand of Enlightenment thought was promising leaping advances in human learning but leading Christian thinkers wondered whether growing human self-sufficiency would threaten the glories of faith. Men such as George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers and others saw the church as incapable of revitalizing the religion of its membership and recognized a need for rebirth. Bishop Butler of Bristol was heard to remark concerning the low level of interest in church matters, "In the present turn of the age one may observe a wonderful frugality in everything which has respect to religion, and extravagance in everything else."<sup>1</sup> In America Jonathan Edwards observed a laxity in moral living, a coldness in religious piety, and the encroachments of liberal theologies that threatened to undo the consensus of the congregations there. The religious devotion and holiness promoted by an earlier Puritanism had lost its vitality among the population and a restored faith was needed, a faith that would give religion authority in the mysterious depths of the heart.

A few men, called of God, rose to the occasion. The needs of the time and the gifts of the men who met them converged. In both the social and the religious realm people were ready to listen to the likes of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys. They came with the assurance that God's forgiveness was accessible to all who felt their need of it. The power of a new life in Christ could be theirs simply for the asking. They perceived a richness and a freeness in the Christian message of hope and forgiveness for a world that was lost. Ministers preached tirelessly and with a new ecclesiological flexibility. The open air became the venue for huge assemblies to gather for the sermon when church buildings would not contain them or when they were not welcomed. Superb gifts of oratory and intellect combined to impact profoundly upon thousands with gospel preaching. Popular religion revived.

The purpose of these preachers was to restore the gospel of grace to their generation, a teaching that had lain in some measure of doubt for several decades. They found their own religious experience reflected on the pages of Scripture and were convinced of the Biblical accuracy of the doctrines of grace.<sup>2</sup> They believed themselves to be distinctly called of God to disseminate the truth of the Biblical Christ and his remedy for that generation and thus see sinners brought to repentance and faith.

This paper has to do with one aspect of their theology with primary focus on Jonathan Edwards. More specifically, it will be seen that they and he invariably held conviction of sin to be a necessary element of conversion. First, the theological context will be discussed as it pertains to the emphasis on conviction. Secondly, Edwards' own beliefs concerning the nature and the necessity of conviction of sin will be considered. And thirdly, we will look at his observations of this conviction in the hearts of his own people.

It was believed by ministers of the Calvinistic school that personal recognition of sin and an

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gerald R. Cragg [The Church in the Age of Reason 1648-1789](#) Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970; p.133

<sup>2</sup> When saying this however, one must allow for the modifications of the Wesleyan school.

awareness of its offensive nature with respect to God was a distinguishing characteristic of one whom the Holy Spirit is changing from darkness to light. They had noted that the Bible corroborated their experience, and then preached often as requisite to saving faith. Conviction of sin was a cornerstone in the revival theology of the mid-eighteenth century. But it was more than that. It was preeminently a doctrine that received homiletical emphasis which, during that particular time, found a response of astonishing dimensions among the population. There lies its historical importance.

Jonathan Edwards is typical in many respects where eighteenth century revivalism is concerned. He is representative also here. But, there is an extent to which the idea of the necessity of conviction was not new for Edwards and the other revivalists of the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, their forefathers had preached on topics directly or indirectly related to sin too. It was an important part of Puritan preaching to put occasional emphasis on the doctrine of sin, both in its original and actual dimensions. This has not gone unnoticed by historians.

Edmund Morgan, in his book on Puritan domestic affairs, begins his first chapter with an intriguing paragraph. "There was a type of man," he says, "whom the Puritans never tired of denouncing. He was a good citizen, a man who obeyed laws, carried out his social obligations, never injured others." This 'civil man', this example of social virtue, "was on his way to hell and preachers continually reminded him of it."<sup>3</sup> Simplified as this may be, Morgan nevertheless highlights one of the salient features of the Puritan view of man. The Puritans were concerned to repeat to their congregations that true religion is not only being "civil" or moral. Good behaviour in society did not mean righteousness before God. Respectability was not synonymous with piety. What this "civil" man lacked was the realization that he sheltered a nest of concupiscence deep in his heart and that he was morally polluted.

Man was not only a sinner by his very nature, an inherited malady. It was also a part of that nature to disguise its odious character. Hence man was deluded into thinking that all was well with his soul, that he was on his way to heaven, when in fact he was in an unregenerate state. The Puritan preacher therefore believed it his unmistakable duty to uncover to his people their reprehensible disposition, always in relation to the righteousness of Almighty God. For, human sinfulness could not be dealt with unless the disease of moral corruption was personally admitted and confessed.

As the following examples show the doctrine of sin received thorough and practical treatment by the Puritan pulpit and it was the intention of the pastor to utilize it chiefly for conviction. Richard Sibbes (1577-1665) of Cambridge was of a spiritually sensitive mind and gracious temperament. In Sibbes's writings the doctrine of the Holy Spirit with respect to His work of conviction in the soul is presented with a minimum of concern for the rigidity of strict dogma. Yet Sibbes was emphatic that it was through granting a sense of sin that the Spirit encouraged an eager reception of the Biblical gospel. In his famous The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax he represented a considerable portion of mainstream Puritanism when he made clear that by bruising a person's heart before conversion, "the Spirit may make way for itself into the heart by levelling all proud, high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature." The heart would take on a posture of surrender to God and to the salvation that is by grace alone. Sibbes itemizes several other advantages of a sense of sin. For one thing, the gospel is appreciated for the first time and the discovery is made that the "fig-leaves of morality will do us no good." This bruising "maketh us set a high price upon Christ" as the only refuge from God's just wrath. Moreover, it produces thankfulness and thankfulness engenders fruits of grace. The lack of conviction of sin at the outset of conversion was, for Sibbes, often the reason for "relapses and apostasies" later on. Therefore, this part of the

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund S. Morgan The Puritan Family New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966, p. 1

Spirit's work is "necessary before conversion." <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Sibbes "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax" **Works** Vol. 1 Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973; reprint of the 1862 edition, pp. 43, 44.

Not all Puritans supposed a stage of conviction of sin to be chronologically prior to conversion, however. John Howe (1630-1705), for example, sometime chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and leader of the Dissenters after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in outlining the requisite elements of a true conversion acknowledged that "God's method may vary, or not in every respect be the same, with everyone he savingly works upon." Nevertheless, the absence of a sense of sin signified for Howe a heart unchanged. The process of reconciliation between God and man must be seen to include "a thorough conviction, with deep and inward sense, wrought into your hearts, of your former enmity." This was in fact one of the great hindrances to conversion. Men by nature "feel not an enmity boiling in their hearts against God, therefore they will not yield there is any such thing."<sup>5</sup> While Howe was not concerned with chronology in the process of conversion conviction of sin nevertheless played a vital part.

Thomas Shepard (1605-1649), an influential New England divine, affirmed the great advantage of a thorough persuasion of depravity. Sinners never "come to be affected or awakened... because men consider not of God's wrath daily, nor the horrible nature of sin." Conviction of sin was a means to gaining the happiness that accompanies salvation. "Awaken therefore," he exclaims, "all you secure creatures; feel your misery, that so you may get out of it" for then "...the Lord may pity thee." Shepard believed conviction preceded regeneration. Saving faith grew only on the soil of felt transgression. Without it a sinner would go lost: "thou must mourn here or in hell."<sup>6</sup>

The Puritan pastor operated under one of two assumptions. On the one hand conviction of sin was an indispensable first stage in the conversion experience, a stage that must be undergone before the application of God's saving grace. On the other hand, as John Howe would have it, and he seems to have been in the majority on this point, conviction is but one of several strands running concurrently through the conversion experience itself. In either case however, conversion displays a turning from sin to God, from disobedience to surrender. And, for the Puritan no such surrender could take place without the person being convinced that he is a sinner.

In the eighteenth century the Puritan era was dead and gone. But mid-century saw a renewed interest in many of the tenets held by the Puritans. With respect to the doctrine of sin the evangelists of the Evangelical Revival stood on the heritage passed from their Puritan forebears and the preaching of Jonathan Edwards was but one case in point. It can be argued with respect to Edwards and others that this doctrine received heavier emphasis during the Revival than it had during the previous century when Puritanism was at its most influential. Indeed, fostering conviction of sin became one of the hallmarks of eighteenth century revival preaching.

The doctrine of the new birth was central in the theology of the evangelicals and the congregational pastor or itinerant evangelist stood up to preach assuming some or many auditors to be in an unregenerate state. And while the seventeenth century Puritan sermonic diet was periodically sprinkled with references to the need for conviction of sin, the focus of the eighteenth century evangelist was much sharper. Often used as a homiletic device to foster a spiritual need for salvation it had a profound effect on slumbering congregations. "Law preaching," as it was called, usually received its due before Christ was offered in the gospel. Itinerant preachers were known to enter an area to hold services for several successive days. Two or three of the first sermons preached would invariably contain a weighty emphasis on the guilt and corruption of the audience.

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<sup>5</sup> John Howe "Of Reconciliation Between God and Man" Works of English Puritan Divines: Howe London: Thomas Nelson 1846, pp. 244, 245.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Shepard "The Sincere Convert" The Works of Thomas Shepard Vol. 1, New York: AMS Press Inc., p.93. Reprint of Boston: Doctrinal Tract & Book Society, 1853.

Only subsequently did the invitation to come to Christ find place in the sermon. This method, by varying degrees, became prevalent in the British Isles, on the Continent among earlier pietists, as well as in New England.

That the leaders of the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century incorporated conviction of sin into their theology of revival comes into view with remarkable regularity. Divergent as Calvinists, Wesleyans and Moravians were on several major points of dogma, on the doctrine of the new birth their minds converged. Accordingly the sort of piety learned by the man in the pew in Scotland was not dissimilar from the German or New England variety. Soteriology took on a strong experiential character, as it had amongst Puritans and the Reformers before them. Religion was not considered real unless it was of the personal sort. To the leaders of the movement, such as Edwards, grace was not merely a presumed reality for all who were church-going. Rather it was a known, definable work of the Spirit of God. Sin, on the other hand, was not merely a part of the creed one needed to be aware of in order to explain the disappointments and trials of life. Rather it was a condition of heart to which men were blind by nature and with which they needed to become acquainted would they be saved. Sermons often focused on one or two aspects of the new birth and concluded with urgent exhortations to flee the coming storm and to examine oneself for sensible evidences of grace. And, often the preacher's homiletical purpose was to foster a sense of sin.

In Scotland the Erskine brothers were typical. Ebenezer (1680-1754) maintained in a sermon entitled *God's Regard to Worthless Man* that the "hammer of the law must be applied, in order to break the rocky heart in pieces; the fallow ground must be plowed up, to prepare it for the reception of the incorruptible seed of gospel truth." The obstinacy of the will must be "bended by the almighty power of God, and he persuaded and enabled to embrace Christ and salvation through him, as he is freely offered in the gospel."<sup>7</sup>

John Wesley (1703-1791), lightyears away from agreement with contemporaries on several points, acquiesced here. Preaching on the topic The Way to the Kingdom he not only delineated the conversion process but made urgent appeals to his audience: "awake, then, thou that sleepest. Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know that corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou art very far gone from original righteousness... Know that thou art corrupted in every faculty of thy soul."<sup>8</sup>

Wesley's Calvinistic friend George Whitefield (1714-1770) wrote, "before ye can speak peace to your hearts, ye must be made to see, made to feel, made to weep over, made to bewail your actual transgressions against the law of God."<sup>9</sup>

On the Continent pietist Philipp Spener (1635-1705) had advised ministers to strive to convince their hearers of moral failure: "...A minister not only instructs his Hearers what they must do, and how they ought to act, but he labours fully to apprise and to convince them, by the Evidence

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7 Ebenezer Erskine The Whole Works of the Late Ebenezer Erskine Consisting of Sermons and Discourses Vol. 3 Edinburgh: Ogle & Murray; Wm. Oliphant & Co., Oliver & Boyd, 1871, p. 137.

8 John Wesley The Works of John Wesley Vol. 1 Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 225.

9 George Whitefield "The Method of Grace" in John Gillies ed. Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield Middletown: Hunt & Noyes, 1837, p. 456.

of Scripture, of their own native Weakness and Impotency for all that is Spiritually good." <sup>10</sup> Fellow leader August Francke (1663-1727), himself a "miserable worm," staunch advocate of "Buskampf" (German for penitential struggle) prior to conversion, exhorted preachers to demand of their people whether they had experienced "a lively Sense of the Corruption of their own Hearts, and of the Misery of the Natural State." <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Dale Brown Understanding Pietism Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1978, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 117

In America the preaching of Samuel Davies (1724-1761), a contemporary of Jonathan Edwards and successor to him as president of Princeton after Edwards died, embraced similar themes. Challenging his congregation on one occasion to take note of the incomparable nature of Christ in His saving work he drives home the point that none will look to Jesus except they possess a felt need of Him: "When a guilty creature is effectually alarmed with just apprehensions of his danger; when he sees his numberless transgressions in all their horrid aggravations..., with what importunate cries will he betake himself to Him for relief!"<sup>12</sup> Grandson of Edwards, Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), president of Yale for several years, wrote extensively on the new birth and assigned to conviction of sin the place of antecedent of regeneration. In his distress the sinner searches for means of deliverance, turns finally to the gospel and discovers peace in the atoning work of Christ. He "entirely needs thus to understand and feel his condition; his guilt, his danger, his hopelessness, and his absolute necessity of being renewed by the Spirit of grace." Conviction, promoted by the preaching of the law, is therefore a "natural and necessary prerequisite to conversion."<sup>13</sup>

While there was continuity between the Puritans and the later Evangelicals with respect to this particular emphasis, there was also change. The direct and determined appeal to the emotions was something new. Seventeenth century Puritanism was largely didactic in its preaching, and pastors generally subordinated the emotions to the intellect. The appeal went to the mind. People came away from the sermon heads brimful, with a variety of theological constructs crowding the cerebral landscape. But during the period before and during the Evangelical Revival preaching was usually a sustained discourse on a single theme and the homiletical purpose was as much to create an impression as it was to teach. Influenced by the English philosophical empiricist, John Locke and his sensational psychology preachers came to believe that emotions could not be separated from intellect. A dimension was therefore added to preaching. Pulpit language took on a greater note of urgency. Sermons built to a climax. The minister consciously sought to approximate the horrors of the damned, the glories of heaven, the offensive character of sin, the love and compassion of Christ, using literary devices such as the metaphor. It was now thought that one becomes persuaded to take leave of evil through the clearest perception of its odious nature. And, one would embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ only if the beauty of His Person and the blessedness of His saving work was perceived most clearly. Preaching became a quest for the favourable response of the listener's affections. Pulpit language was simple and precise and was calculated to impress.

## II

In considering the question of conviction of sin in the history of the Evangelical Revival we turn to Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most lucid exponent of revival theology of the period. Fostering an awareness of innate depravity was one of the more conspicuous strands in his preaching. For him, and he was fairly typical in this respect, it was simply being true to Scripture and true to what he knew to be genuine religious experience. Edwards was not merely following blindly in the footsteps of earlier preachers. He provided for himself and for his contemporaries both in America and the British Isles a theoretical base. It has been called the theology of revival. And one of the first principles of this theology with respect to preaching was the promotion of a sense of sin.

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12 Samuel Davies "Looking to Christ Opened and Explained" Sermons on Important Subjects Vol. 2 New York: Dayton and Saxton, 1841, p. 259

13 Timothy Dwight Theology Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons Vol. III London: Thomas Allman, n.d., pp. 384-394.

To Jonathan Edwards the heart of the unregenerate was hard and incorrigible. He was "dumb and stupid," full of self-love, glorifying the creature rather than God, thinking himself to have arrived morally and spiritually.<sup>14</sup> Not only was this man still in an unregenerate state, but his sorry predicament was compounded by blindness to it. The only "sense" he had was of the natural realm. His heart was dead to the spiritual. And, if there was any recognition of divine things it was only with the intellect, not with the heart.

This was the crux of the problem. Man, in his natural state, cannot "see" spiritual realities. His understanding is darkened through the great Fall in Adam so that his only hope of gaining spiritual perception is by a divine work of grace. Men are "blind," Edwards says, "ignorant of God, and ignorant of Christ, ignorant of the way of salvation, ignorant of their own happiness, blind in the midst of the brightest and clearest light, ignorant under all manner of instruction."<sup>15</sup>

Because man is hopelessly oblivious to his plight he lives on, uncaring and heedless of danger. Indeed, Edwards had discerned that though the natural man is in "such a dreadful condition" he still goes about "easy and quiet" with no apparent concern, as if he had already secured his salvation. In his "senselessness" he believes it is not "worth his while to make any considerable effort to escape..." If he was "in the exercise of his reason," one might expect to see him trembling and quaking on account of his misery, "...regardless of all else, spending his days and nights in tears, and groans, and lamentations, crying for help and pity, crying with an exceedingly loud and bitter cry, crying to everyone to pity him, and pray for him."<sup>16</sup> But this was not happening. It was not happening because of blindness to the reality of sin and blindness to the resultant estrangement from God.

Not only could man not "see". He was also very unwilling to "see". Edwards saw that there was an effect on the will too. Nothing would move a man away from the inclination towards sin except he be given supernatural help by the Spirit of God. He will "cleave to sin, and go on in sin, let what will be done with him".<sup>17</sup> This condition reaches such climactic proportions that man will never come to Christ in a trusting and surrendering frame of mind. He has no felt need of the Christ who is presented in the gospel. Edwards says, "they would fain divide him" there being some things in Christ which appeal to them while others do not. For instance, they would be very willing to have Christ keep them from everlasting punishment, yet they would not receive him as Lord, for in so doing, "They must of necessity part with their sins." They must "sell the world, and part with their own righteousness."<sup>18</sup>

But, they would, rather than leave their darling sins, "run the venture of going to hell!"<sup>19</sup>

What is the reason for this blindness and this obstinacy of will in man? Not, says Edwards, through any deficiency in the faculties for man was given faculties, "truly noble and excellent."<sup>20</sup> Nor was there a lack of opportunity to learn about the sinner's awful predicament, for the preaching of the Word, when done faithfully, brings the natural condition of man to light. The cause lies rather in the presence in man of a crippling virus that successfully resists the light:

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14 "The Hypocrite Deficient in the Duty of Prayer" Works Vol. 2 p.73. References are to the Edwards Hickman edition of The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a "Memoir" by Sereno E. Dwight in two volumes, 1834. A reprint of this edition was done by the Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1974.

15 "Sermon on Acts 16: 29, 30" Ibid p. 817.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid p. 819

18 "Men Naturally God's Enemies" Works Vol. 2 p. 138.

19 Ibid

20 "Man's Natural Blindness in the Things of Religion" Works Vol. 2 p. 247

There is a principle in his heart, of such a blinding and besetting nature, that it hinders the exercises of his faculties about the things of religion; exercises for which God has made him quite capable, and for which he gives him abundant opportunity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> **Ibid**

That being the case, what must a man do? Must he continue in blindness until such time as the Spirit of God chooses to convert him? This in fact was the opinion of the few Hyper-Calvinists amongst New England clergy to be sure. They lay emphasis on man's inability and seemed to downplay his unwillingness. Since salvation is of the Lord man need not begin a hopeless attempt to procure grace. Ministers advised he remain passive and await the Lord's effectual call from darkness to light. But this was not the inclination of Edwards and other leaders of the Evangelical Revival. It was his conviction that all people needed the forgiveness that Christ had purchased desperately, immediately, and could receive Him as their saviour. From the perspective of God nothing stood in the way of the salvation of sinners. The great, debilitating dilemma however, was an absence of native attraction to Christ in their minds and will. They were blind and refractory. Hence there was an urgent necessity of awakening men to this desperate impasse. They must be stirred up to a sense of sin. "Until the sinner is convinced of his sin and misery," explains Edwards, "he is not prepared to receive the redeeming mercy and grace of God, as through a Mediator; because he does not see his need of a Mediator till he sees his sin and misery." He therefore exhorted his people to "seek those convictions."<sup>22</sup>

God is compassionate. He determined to come to the aid of heedless sinners and has a prescribed way of bringing them into the light of His mercy. He first brings a man to reflect upon himself and be "sensible" of his sin. It is "God's manner to make men sensible of their misery and unworthiness, before he appears in his mercy and love to them."<sup>23</sup>

To Edwards this was of the Holy Spirit. In the sermon on Hosea 5:15 he discusses what effect the Spirit of God intends to have on the heart of man when He works a sense of sin. The first purpose of this conviction is to foster humility. God, by His Spirit, leads sinners into the wilderness before he speaks "comfortably" to them, "for the same cause that he led the children of Israel into the wilderness before he brought them into Canaan, which we are told was to humble them." In this way God intends to bring sinners to realize the "insufficiency of their wisdom" and to a discovery that all human effort falls with respect to "their relief." In other words, men are given a teachable spirit. Secondly, the purpose of a sense of sin is to "have the heart turned from, and turned against it, in hatred," so that what was loved is then hated and what was despised is then the great desire of the "renovated nature." Let men pretend what they will, their hearts are not turned from sin "if they do not forsake it," and he is not really and truly "...converted, who is not really come to a disposition utterly to forsake all ways of sin."

The humbling of the soul, the final futility of human effort, and the departure from sin imply a disposition of heart that "embraces Christ and trusts in him as the Saviour from sin." For, a sinner thus humbled feels that he has been living at a distance from God and can no longer endure without His favour. He misses the Creator and needs the Redeemer. He begins to look to Christ in faith. And, says Edwards, "when sin is thus slain then God is wont to open a door of hope, a door through which there flashes a sweet light out of heaven upon the soul. Then comfort arises, and then is there a new song in the mouth, even praise unto God." This person has been brought to see that salvation is by grace alone, through Christ alone and simply adores the fact that God can be pleased with him because Christ stands in his place as substitute and has suffered the wrath of God in his stead. The peace of God then floods the soul.<sup>24</sup>

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22 "Sermon on Hosea 5:15" Works Vol. 2, p. 836

23 "Men are Naturally God's Enemies" Works Vol. 2, p. 138.

24 "Sermon on Hosea 2:15" Works Vol. 2 p. 840

In a most helpful statement Edwards sheds light on a psychological aspect employed in this process: "We see in temporal things, that the worth and value of any enjoyment is learned by the want of it." He who is sick values health the more. People at war value peace. He who is a captive or in a state of forced subjection learns to prize freedom. In the spiritual realm it is no different:

A sense of pardon of sin, and the favour of God, and a hope of eternal life, do not afford comfort and joy to the soul any farther than they are valued and prized. So that the trouble and darkness which go before comfort, serve to render the joy and comfort the greater when obtained, and so are in mercy to those for whom God intends comfort.<sup>25</sup>

There was more involved however, than simply recognizing the spiritual-psychological method whereby God draws a sinner to Christ. Edwards also saw that it was one of simple logic. He argues:

...they who are not sensible of their misery cannot truly look to God for mercy, for it is the very notion of divine mercy, that it is the goodness and grace of God to the miserable. Without misery in the object there can be no exercise of mercy. To suppose mercy without supposing misery, or pity without calamity is a contradiction: therefore men cannot look upon themselves as proper objects of mercy unless they first know themselves to be miserable.<sup>26</sup>

We must remember that to Edwards misery was not only an objective reality. On that level he would say that all unregenerate people are truly miserable. However, when the term is applied to the issue of conversion then the word refers primarily to the affective domain. It was necessary to feel miserable without Christ. It was highly desirable to possess a sense of sin.

Edwards is speaking here of what he referred to as the "sense of the heart". Whenever Edwards dealt with subjects related to experiential religion he used language derived from the root word "sense". He writes of a "sense of sin", a "sense" of love, of misery, of sweetness. In one paragraph, in which he outlines the various elements of misery he uses the word "sensible" five times.<sup>27</sup> It becomes clear that Edwards makes a distinction between what is purely cognitive and what affects the feelings, the heart. Hardly could it be otherwise for one for whom religion had become first person experience.

Edwards' analyses of experiential religion are contained in such works as "The Religious Affections" and "Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God". In his interpretation of religious experience he was particularly encouraged by reading John Locke's Essay of Human Understanding. He read the work at the age of fourteen and it was done with a greater pleasure "than the most greedy miser finds, when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold, from newly discovered treasure."<sup>28</sup>

Locke's quest had been to discover where the "materials" of reason and knowledge come from. He

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid p. 845

<sup>26</sup> "Great Guilt No Obstacle to the Returning Sinner" Works Vol. 2, p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Sereno E. Dwight "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards" Works Vol. 1 p. xvii.

had found the solution to the question: "to this I answer in one word, from EXPERIENCE." One can see readily why Edwards exulted upon reading Locke's analysis. Ideas in the mind are inseparable, according to Locke, from feeling or sensing. Locke went further and asserted that the channel whereby knowledge enters our understanding is sensory perception. It depends "wholly upon our senses," and this, "derived by them to our understanding, I call SENSATION."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Locke "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" **Works of John Locke in Ten Volumes** Vol. 1, Book II, chapter 1, section 2 and section 3; London: 1823 edition. Reprint 1963.

Now, Edwards did not follow Locke's sensational psychology in every respect. Edwards taught, for example, that there is a kind of knowing which does not affect the senses. This is "mere cogitation (cognition) without any proper apprehension of the things thought of."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, in distinction from Locke, Edwards believed there were two kinds of "knowing". And, only one of them produces a Lockean sensation. The first was a mere "mental reading" by which we see only the signs of things and therefore the "things themselves are before our eyes only indirectly." But there is also a more direct, more intimate way of knowing "wherein the mind has a direct, ideal view, or contemplation of the thing thought of."<sup>31</sup>

The one can be termed "head knowledge", the other "heart knowledge", or, as Edwards would have it, "the sense of the heart", whereby things are "pleasant or displeasing, including all agreeableness and disagreeableness, all beauty and deformity, all pleasure and pain, and all those sensations, exercises and passions of the mind that arise from either of those." An ideal apprehension or "view" of these concepts can rightly be called "a Sense".

Locke's psychological sensationalism, when applied to religious knowledge, signified that a person could not really know the glory and the love of God unless he had experienced it as a power acting upon his mind. And, he could know the misery of human sin and the loneliness of estrangement from his Creator only when convicted of it in the heart. One could read of it in a book or hear the subject expounded on Sunday morning and yet remain unmoved. It was a mere mental reading, cognition. Heart knowledge, however, was derived from the sermon impacting on the heart as religious experience. And it was only when the "sense of the heart" was thus quickened that it could be counted truly spiritual for this was of the Spirit of God. The blind could now see with the eyes of the heart. The will, predisposed to evil, would now turn to the good.

It would seem, based upon the foregoing, that Edwards was a full-blown empiricist. And, certainly the Lockean notion that real knowledge is derived simply from what one experiences was extremely attractive to a man like him who believed that true, biblical religion is experiential, known by a change in the affections, a new disposition, a "new sense". Edwards found support in Lockean epistemology at this point.

But Edwards does not fit into the empiricism of his age. Reading Locke was such a delight to him simply because he found in him a method of categorizing Christian experience. Locke reinforced his concern that teaching a congregation the multiple strands fundamental to experiential divinity must be done with great simplicity and clarity, an aspiration he already possessed. Edwards wished to get at people's emotions, their heart, to create impressions, to move them to conviction. And Locke had provided him with a theoretical framework, a point of departure. Nothing more.<sup>32</sup> In most of his larger theological works Edwards revealed his rationalism, constructing arguments on the basis of logic and reason rather than on observable, verifiable data.<sup>33</sup>

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30 "Ideas, Sense of the Heart, Spiritual Knowledge or Conviction, Faith" edited by Perry Miller Harvard Theological Review April, 1948, p.135.

31 Ibid

32 Perry Miller, the famous American scholar, and others have characterized Edwards philosophical position as that of an empiricist so far ahead of his time that the twentieth century is barely catching up and they credit Edwards' reading of John Locke as the decisive event in his intellectual life. Miller did a great deal toward bringing Edwardsean scholarship to a new level of respectability from which it has not returned. However, the modern consensus among historians is that he was fundamentally wrong in laying aside Edwards' religious thought and highlighting his philosophical empiricism. But, in what is probably an overreaction to Miller's school, scholars are unwilling to allow that Edwards had any sympathy with or made use of English empiricism at all, and instead threw himself in with Continental rationalists. See for example, Norman Fiering "The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics" Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout eds., Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 73-101.

33 There are exceptions. For example, in his posthumous defense of the doctrine of original sin he collected a considerable mass of empirical evidence,

Conviction of sin, according to Edwards, does not result from the Spirit infusing special grace. Rather, it consists "only in assisting natural principles..." in order that the sinner can clearly see his state by nature. In a key sermon on this point Edwards states that "common grace differs from special in that it influences only by assisting of nature; and not by imparting grace, or bestowing anything above nature."<sup>34</sup>

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taken from history, that in human nature lies a universal and pervasive propensity to sin. A view of all history, ".... shows that wickedness has ever been exceeding prevalent, and has had vastly the superiority in the world", attempts to the contrary by God-fearing people notwithstanding. See "The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended: Evidences of its Truth Produced, and Arguments to the Contrary Answered" **Works** Vol. pp. 159-167.

34 "A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God Shown to be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine" **Works** Vol. 2. p. 13.

In Edwards' view however more is needed than conviction of sin. Indeed, one might sink into despair unless conviction issues into the peace of believing. In a sermon in which he distinguishes between convictions that result in saving faith and convictions which are experienced by the very devils he says that a sense of sin "is no certain sign that persons have true faith..." even though it is a necessary element of Christian experience.<sup>35</sup>

If a sense of sin is insufficient to salvation why then is it so crucial? Simply, it plays the role of preparing "the mind for a sense of spiritual excellency." Thus a sense of "the excellency of God's mercy in forgiving sin depends on a sense of the great guilt of sin." Edwards summarizes his argument as follows:

Men, by being made sensible of the great guilt of sin, or the connection or natural agreeableness there is between that and a dreadful, punishment, and how that the greatness and majesty of God seems to require and demand such a punishment, are brought to see the great need of a satisfaction, or something to intervene to make it honourable to that majesty to show them favour; and being for a while blind to the suitability of Christ's satisfaction in order to this, and then afterwards have a sense given them of Christ's divine excellency, and what he did and suffered for sinners; hereby their eyes are as it were opened to see the perfect fitness there is in this to satisfy for sin, or to render their being received into favour consistent with the honer of God's offended majesty.<sup>36</sup>

The convicted sinner begins to "sense" the ineffable excellency of Christ, who would intervene on his behalf. And, to understand with the sense of the heart that this way of salvation is consistent with the "honor of God's offended majesty" due to the perceived suitability of Christ's work, is to awaken to a whole new reality. The person thus enlightened had been told these truths countless times, but was hardly impressed. However, when the Spirit of God impacts the heart with them the senses lodged there are quickened. When "at last it is seen," says Edwards, "man is convinced that it was beyond the invention of men to discover it; for by experience they found themselves all their lifetime wholly blind to it."<sup>37</sup>

This is the key. What had always been restricted to the cognitive area, had penetrated the affective domain. It was then fully apprehended with the shock of new discovery and with all joy and relief the sinner experienced the application of gospel truth to his soul.

And so, a conscience thus awakened could find rest in Christ. When one is smitten with a sense of sin he has "no peace of mind...his mind is tossed with tempest, and not comforted, and courage is ready to fail; for how can a poor worm bear the wrath of the great God?" When such fears exist in the human heart they "greatly enfeeble" it and bring it into a "trembling posture." But, for such as these there is a "fountain abundant for peace and safety in Jesus Christ." One who has a sense of sin may find "abundant satisfaction" that he is safe and that God will be at peace with him "in Christ." When an acute sense of guilt brings one to the feet of Christ and when he finds acceptance with the Lord, then the great end and purpose of this whole process has been achieved.

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35 "True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils" Works Vol. 2 p. 45.

36 "Ideas, Sense of the Heart...." Op Cit p. 144.; also "A Divine and Supernatural Light ...." Op Cit p. 14.

37 "Ideas, Sense of the Heart...." Op Cit p. 144

<sup>38</sup> The marvellous consolation for Edwards was that when the sinner comes to Christ the guilt is "at once taken away, the soul is left free, it is lighted of its burden, it is delivered of its bondage, and it is like the bird escaped from the fowler." <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Sermon on Isaiah 32:2" **Works** Vol. 2 p. 930.

<sup>39</sup> **Ibid** p. 934

A sense of sin was necessary for the unbeliever. But it has implications for the mature Christian as well. In the first place, the Christian grace of humility was one of the crowning graces and one which all believers must possess to some degree. Edwards himself wished to humble himself before God, even to be "emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust" and to be filled with Christ alone.<sup>40</sup> For the Christian humble acknowledgment of one's own evil inclinations in the daily walk of life was for Edwards one of the fruits of grace. Humility was a pleasing temper of mind. Times of greatest humility often came together with times of greatest joy. Humility emptied one of self-confidence and brought the soul to a posture of renewed dependency upon grace. To Edwards the "pleasures of humility are really the most refined, inward and exquisite delights in the world." He was "exceedingly sensible" of discovering "how much more lovely is a humble than a proud disposition."<sup>41</sup>

Edwards delineated Christian humility further. "All gracious affections...filling the soul of a Christian with a heavenly sweetness and fragrancy, are brokenhearted affections." Love, in order to be truly Christian in character, "is an humble, brokenhearted love." The desires of the godly, however earnest and sincere, are "humble desires." Their hope, however emphatic and certain, is a "humble hope," and their joy, "even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is an humble, brokenhearted joy, leaving the Christian more poor in spirit, more like a little child, and more disposed to an universal lowliness of behaviour."<sup>42</sup> To Edwards, the grace of evangelical humility, so greatly to be sought after by the Christian, was reinforced by the blessing of an ongoing sense of sin.

Mature believers desired not only to be humble. Their greatest need was to be in close fellowship with God, in Christ. Often however, the temptations of the flesh, the world and the devil would divert the mind and drop a heavy mist upon the soul through which the Redeemer could hardly be seen. "Sin is doubtless the cause of their darkness in one way or another," says Edwards, "...and therefore if you would have the comfortable presence of God again, the first thing which you do must be to search and find out the troubler." Believers were thus taught to search their own hearts as to why spirituality was so unsteady and why the tender feeling of God's favour was obscure. This too was often the plight of Edwards as he affectingly conveys in his personal writings. But self-examination would result in discovery of some unknown sin that had crippled spiritual life. Once discovered, it could be renounced with the same detestation as one would administer to "a vile serpent that has secretly lain under your head for a long time, and infected you with his poisons when you were asleep, made you sick and filled you with pain, and you knew it not." The backsliding believer would again stand humbly before his God, in a posture of repentance and faith. Edwards encouraged his congregation to seek earnestly evangelical humiliation: "To that end you should labour to be convinced of sin."<sup>43</sup> He advised a young lady from Connecticut, recently converted, to be "always greatly abased for your remaining sins, and never think that you lie low enough for it; but yet be not discouraged or disheartened by it; for, though we are exceeding sinful,

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40 "Personal Narrative" **Works** Vol. 1, p.xlvii

41 "Diary" **Works** Vol. 1 p. xxvii.

42 "A Treatise on the Religious Affections" **Works** Vol. 1, p.302.

43 "Sermon on Hosea 5:15" **Works** Vol. 2 pp. 848-849.

yet we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous..."<sup>44</sup> Personal appropriation of the "sweetness" of grace in Jesus Christ comes much more readily when one is of a meek and lowly temper and nothing could encourage this happy end like conviction of sin.

In terms of preaching Edwards did not believe the minister ought to burden the sermon with an undue emphasis on the terror of damnation in order to effect conviction of sin in unbelievers. To him it was possible that a preacher concentrate on this aspect of the truth excessively, thereby neglecting the gospel. An imbalance here would have profound effects upon the congregation over time.

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44 "Letter addressed to a Young Lady, 1741" **Works** Vol. 1 p.liv

On the one hand he advocated preaching on themes of love and hope. The Christian should be of a tender spirit and delicate conscience and this is not fostered by preaching hell-fire sermons. Instead, it is "gracious affections" that encourage tenderness of mind and heart. "Persons are wont to have some convictions of conscience before they have any grace," he says, "and if afterwards they are truly converted, ...this has a tendency to put an end to terrors, but has no tendency to put an end to convictions of sin; it rather increases them." The reception of God's grace in the heart does not deaden the conscience. It makes it more "sensible," more disposed "thoroughly to discern the sinfulness of that which is sinful, and to receive a greater conviction of the heinous and dreadful nature of sin."<sup>45</sup> In Edwards' ongoing effort to encourage humility and conviction in his congregation he found, therefore, that preaching on God's unchanging love in Christ was most useful. A felt sense of the love of Christ fills the heart with trembling lest there be any sin against such redeeming grace.

On the other hand Edwards was convinced that "God's wrath and future punishment are proposed to all sorts of men, as motives to an universal and constant obedience, not only to the wicked, but also to the godly."<sup>46</sup> He was not averse to applying his most searching sermons to those who were believers already. Indeed, he was concerned that believers might think they had arrived, so to speak, and relax from religious duties or become triumphal. Edwards urged converts, for example, to "keep up as great a strife and earnestness in religion, as if you knew yourself to be in a state of nature, and were seeking conversion."<sup>47</sup> The preacher must be very sensitive to the needs of his congregation in order to administer the proper emphasis in preaching. His character and degree of development as a pious man play a vital role here for Edwards. In a sermon addressed to ministers he provides directives concerning appropriate behaviour and attitudes. Preachers should inspire in themselves the same characteristics they hope to cultivate in their people. And these characteristics ought to be patterned after Christ Himself. Ministers of Christ "should be persons of the same spirit that their Lord was of," he says, "the same spirit of humility and lowliness of heart; for the servant is not greater than his Lord. They should be of the same spirit of heavenly-mindedness, and contempt of the glory, wealth, and pleasures of this world." Preachers should have the same devotion and love to God as Jesus possessed and follow Christ's example of "prayerfulness....", and strict obedience to the commands of God.

Moreover, the Christian minister, in order to be effective, ought to cultivate the lamb-like spirit of Christ in terms of interpersonal relations too. He needs to have "the same spirit of forgiveness of injuries; the same spirit of charity, of fervent love and extensive benevolence; the same disposition to pity the miserable, to weep with those that weep, to help men under their calamities of both soul and body, to hear and grant the requests of the needy, and relieve the afflicted; the same spirit of condescension to the poor and mean, tenderness and gentleness towards the weak, and great and effectual love to enemies."<sup>48</sup>

Only when the preacher is in possession of a Christ-like character will he be useful in bringing souls to conviction and to saving faith in the Son of God.

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45 "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" **Works** Vol. 1 pp.308-309.

46 "Miscellaneous Remarks Concerning the Perseverance of Saints" **Works** Vol. 2 p. 596.

47 "Letter addressed to a Young Lady, 1741" **Works** Vol. 1 p. liii.

48 "Christ the Example of Ministers" **Works** Vol. 2 p. 961.

Accordingly, a minister who would, under Edwards' definition, be a "burning and shining light," must really know what religion is himself. What a man preaches must come from the heart. Text book knowledge would not be up to the mark. He must therefore be "truly acquainted with that Saviour and way of salvation, that he is to teach to others, that he may speak the things that he knows, and testify the things that he has seen, and not be a blind leader of the blind: he must be one that is acquainted with the experimental religion and not ignorant of the inward operations of the Spirit of God, nor of Satan's devices, able to guide souls under their peculiar difficulties." <sup>49</sup> One who has no sense of sin cannot be truly humble and therefore would not be equipped to instruct his people convincingly. One who has no real longing to live close to Christ and has never undergone the struggles of faith, and has never experienced the vicissitudes of spiritual life cannot possibly be a guide and help to troubled hearts. Edwards warned that a minister must be able to "...to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all that mourn: they are to lead those that 'labour and are heavy laden' to their Saviour." <sup>50</sup>

For the minister too, a sense of sin is fundamental to his understanding of experiential divinity.

A sense of sin, worked by the Spirit of God, had the power to humble the saint as well as the sinner and the preacher must administer weekly meat and drink appropriate to the needs of hungry hearts, but always with one eye on this goal. The attitude of humility was most desirable to Edwards for it would foster a reliance upon the grace of God. And it was chiefly this which certified for Edwards the veracity of the doctrines of his Puritan heritage, for they tended to strip man of optimism with respect to his own righteousness and focus on divine efficacy as the only true source of good.

For the unregenerate then, a sense of sin was a necessity. For the believer it was a blessing. Edwards therefore encouraged the preaching of the law. The preaching of the "gospel is like to be in vain without it." <sup>51</sup> He was convinced that gaining a sense of sin, worked in the heart by the Spirit of God, was preparatory to a sound, evangelical conversion. Edwards declared that conviction was "preparatory to grace." <sup>52</sup> It was the time of "legal striving" between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of fallen man. Edwards ascribes also this stage to the work of the Spirit of God. His emphasis on religion as a transforming, individual experience was spearheaded by his painstaking effort to instill conviction in the careless, and lasting humility in believers. For Edwards, as for the many other leaders of the Revival, on both sides of the Atlantic, saving faith was born of need and grew on the soil of meekness.

### III

Edwards' preaching did not dodge the issue of conviction. He preached with unction and clarity regarding the sins of his flock, both inherent and actual. Often it would seem to the congregation that he was pointing his finger directly at them, walking up and down the pews, unearthing hidden or forgotten sins in the hearts of the listeners. Edwards preached a full gospel

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49 "The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister" **Works** Vol. 2 p. 957.

50 **Works** Vol. 2 p. 957.

51 "Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" **Works** Vol. 2 p. 266.

52 "A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God" **Works** Vol.1 p. 352.

and a free offer of grace. But he habitually balanced his presentation with sermons that searched life and heart.

This preaching was honoured of God and bore fruit. By the winter of 1734 there were signs that a work of God was taking place in the congregation when about three hundred were converted. Happily, Edwards decided to record his observations of the revival.

In his description of the 1734-35 revival Edwards reports a three-stage conversion process.<sup>53</sup> Sinners were awakened to their guilt; secondly, they surrendered to sovereign grace, and then they emerged into the light and freedom of the knowledge of Christ. Let us look at these three strands or stages a little more closely.

First, Edwards noticed a fear or anxiety respecting one's sinfulness in the sight of a holy God: "Persons are first awakened with a sense of their miserable condition by nature, and the danger they are in of perishing eternally, and that it is of great importance to them that they speedily escape and get into a better state..."<sup>54</sup> Some were "seized" suddenly, smitten in conscience by a sermon or by the news of the conversion of someone closely related. With others the process was more gradual.<sup>55</sup> A sense of personal misery sat as a heavy weight upon the awakened so that they were "brought to forsake and dread their former vices and extravagances."<sup>56</sup> Many were afraid to go to sleep in such a condition. Certainty that God was sorely displeased reigned in the hearts of Northampton.

A remarkable effect of a sense of sin can be noted here. Edwards observed that persons under great awakenings were concerned because they thought they were not awakened. People who were sensitive to sin and soft in heart believed themselves to be hardhearted, senseless, still asleep. This is that mysterious paradox in the conversion process recorded in so many spiritual biographies when sinners are truly awakened and find in themselves a bad heart. They were most sensitive to their failings and misery, and yet felt themselves to be callous and unyielding. To Edwards their hearts had obviously been softened. Yet, if someone had asked them if they were now convinced of sin and its consequence for themselves their response likely would have been negative. Edwards noticed that "the sense of need they have to be awakened, and of their comparative hardness, grows upon them with their awakenings; so that they seem to themselves to be very senseless, when indeed most sensible."<sup>57</sup>

They were of a mellowed temper and yet they found themselves to be listless and cold with respect to godly things.

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<sup>53</sup> It is perhaps less helpful than one might think to divide Edwards' portrayal of the conversion experience as if he meant to splinter it into many little steps. Some have done so. Samuel T. Logan believes he has unearthed, in the "Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God," a profusion of little stages whereby a sinner is led to Christ: eight of them in all. However, he does admit that others might not agree with his findings and this writer believes Edwards himself would have demurred. It is difficult to find clear lines of separation between several of Logan's eight stages. What appear to Logan to be definite "steps" in the work of the Spirit are often simply different characteristics of the same one. In all probability Edwards' purpose was not so much to impress his readers with the complexity of God's work in the soul as to simplify. And, rather than seeking to elucidate many steps in the conversion process, EDWARDS seems instead to stress the variableness of the Spirit's work from one person to another as the subtitle of "Section II" suggests: "The manner of conversion various, yet bearing a great analogy". But, three distinct stages or strands are discernible in EDWARDS' account of the revival. See Samuel T. Logan "Jonathan EDWARDS and the 1734-35 Northampton Revival" Westminster Conference **Preaching and Revival** Colchester: Christian Print & Design, 1984, pp. 69-73.

<sup>54</sup> "Narrative...." p. 350.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards noticed that news of the conversion of others became a driving force in the Northampton revival and was made a means by God "of promoting his work amongst us" "Narrative..." p. 355.

<sup>56</sup> "Narrative...." p. 351.

<sup>57</sup> "Narrative...." p. 351.

They were made to "cry out" under an astonishing sense of guilt and wondered that God would let them remain in the land of the living. They had been cured of blindness to sin, were awakened to their danger. Obviously, from Edwards' point of view, much had been achieved. But that knowledge did not comfort the convicted. To the awakened sinner there was no apprehension that the mercy of God applied to them. Instead, they laboured under conviction, reproaching themselves for their failings. The heart felt its bondage, and was not yet set free. This was the phase of penitential struggle, very much akin to the "Buskampf" of the German pietists. It was but the first stage.

Edwards sometimes could recognize Satan's hand in their struggles. Threatened with dismissal from his throne the "old inhabitant" of the heart seemed to "exert himself, like a serpent disturbed and enraged." Several people, thus attacked, began to harbour a sharp spirit of envy toward those already converted, especially to relatives and companions, erstwhile as careless and indifferent as they themselves. There were "murmurings" against God as to why there were such discrepancies in his dealings with man. People thought it unfair that others were being converted. Edwards strongly warned his people against such thoughts, which, if allowed "tend exceedingly to quench the Spirit of God, if not to provoke him finally to forsake them."<sup>58</sup> He saw progress a great deal hindered by such temptations but often saw God bringing "good to them out of evil and made it a means of convincing them of their own desperate sinfulness, and bringing them off from all self-confidence."

During this stage of what Edwards called "legal strivings" or "legal convictions" people became convinced of their absolute dependence on God's sovereign grace. They felt they could not approach a holy God while in a sinful condition. A mediator was utterly necessary. And yet it seems that this persuasion was often mixed with thoughts that signified they were still trusting somewhat in self. For, a view of past sins made them try to live strict lives now and resolve to do so in the future. And, while good in itself, it was a feeble attempt by some to appease God's anger, as if personal reform in moral conduct would mitigate God's just wrath. And, some made much of this, says Edwards, thinking their efforts represented a sort of atonement to God. But this was short-lived and they felt worse than before and were convicted, not so much now about actual sins, but heart sins, personal tendencies and wicked thoughts. Still, several people began again to rise up in heart against God for not having more sympathy for them in their distress. No sooner were they aware of these thoughts however and they were worried for having them at all. Many feared they had committed the unpardonable sin, or that God would never show them mercy now. At times such as these Edwards would counsel them regarding the sovereignty of God in his dealings with man on the one hand and the great sufficiency of Christ to save and heal on the other.

Edwards declared that conviction was "preparatory to grace."<sup>59</sup> It was the time of "legal striving" between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of fallen man. Edwards ascribes also this stage to the work of the Spirit of God. Accordingly Edwards cannot be ranked with the preparationist school of evangelical theology in the sense that a sinner must prepare himself, in his strength, to come to God in a fit manner. He never preached that kind of preparationism.<sup>60</sup> No man, Edwards would have said, can come to Christ on the basis of his own merits. Regeneration was solely and totally a work of Divine power. The doctrine of the new birth was one of the central features in Calvinist theology. Therefore, in this he was simply a part of main-stream Puritanism, as were most of the other leaders of the Great Awakening a few years later.

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58 *Ibid.* Also see "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners" *Op Cit* p. 677 for an instance of this.

59 "Narrative...." p. 352.

60 The same point is made by Logan *Op Cit* p. 70 and by Iain H. Murray *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, pp. 127-129.

Nevertheless, he believed, with them, that there was a work of conviction or quickening in a person before regeneration. This work was "preparatory to grace." It was the time of "seeking". Sinners prayed to God, struggled, and wept. The purpose was to produce a knowledge of self in terms of personal ineptitude to gain peace with God, of innate depravity and of guilt. Sinners who were seeking salvation were divested of reliance upon false hopes and self-righteousness by sermons that discriminated clearly between what was genuine piety and what was not. It was therefore a stage rife with intense introspection. Afraid of the tiniest suggestion of self-deception the seeker would examine himself for sensible evidences of the Spirit's work, often with depressing results, and he would frequently find himself in a state more doleful and heavy-hearted than before this process began. And yet, convinced of his sinful condition before a holy God, he would not have wished a return to senseless ignorance of the great issues introduced to his heart. For, now he knew that without a thorough and supernatural work, he would remain without God in the world and would miss the peace of God in Jesus Christ forever. So he battled on, hurting , often confused, always hoping that he would achieve that one goal that would now make life livable and death acceptable.

The free offer of the gospel was extended unreservedly to these seekers by Edwards and his circle, especially when it was known that several were labouring under such deep conviction. But it was done carefully, nevertheless. Edwards knew that welcoming sinners to Christ without having plowed up the hard ground of the natural heart was an exercise in futility. No blind sinner would receive the salvation that Christ offered unless convicted of his need of it.

Generally speaking then, a stage in which the sense of sin prevailed came before rest and peace and joy. To avoid this element in the process of conversion could be fatal. Edwards suggests it would have promoted "self-flattery and carelessness" and would have served "utterly to undo them"<sup>61</sup> had he withheld the truth that God is under no obligation to show mercy. Had he counselled troubled souls that God might take pity upon them because of their sense of sin or because of efforts to reform themselves he would have placed the foundation of salvation where it does not belong and would seriously have hindered them from going further on the way to heaven.

At some time during the period of legal conviction came the critical turn. Here was the crisis point. People would either fall away from conviction, into an unseeing callousness and in a few cases even total despair, or, on the other hand, acquire a calm surrendering spirit. There was no neutral ground, especially when the Spirit was moving so powerfully amongst many people in one place. One was either drawn irresistibly onward and learned to bow to sovereign grace, or he hardened himself against the gospel. In the case of a few, life became desperate indeed.

Edwards reports an unsuccessful suicide attempt by one whose family had a record of emotional weaknesses and who was himself spiritually troubled in May 1735. This man was rescued, counselled and subsequently experienced the liberating power of the gospel. But a little later, Joseph Hawley, an uncle of Edwards and a leader in the town, "durst entertain no hope concerning his good estate" and became, "much discouraged, and melancholy grew again upon him, till he was overpowered by it." He cut his own throat, dying in despair. This event struck the people of Northampton with "astonishment". After this, says Edwards, many people of various dispositions were tempted to take their own life. It was as if someone said to them, "Cut your throat, now is a good opportunity. Now! Now! So that they were obliged to fight with all their might to resist it, and yet no reason suggested to them why they should do it."<sup>62</sup> Others, not subject to these temptations, still hardened themselves against conviction and became impervious to the attraction of the gospel, apparently never coming to saving faith.

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61 "Narrative...." p. 352.

62 "Narrative...." p. 363.

However, many there were, Edwards reported, whose hearts were changed for the better. They emerged from the raging battle of "legal striving" to position themselves meekly before their God, in frank recognition of what they had always owed him. Edwards says,

as to those in whom awakenings seem to have a saving issue, commonly the first thing that appears after their legal troubles, is a conviction of the justice of God in their condemnation, appearing in a sense of their own exceeding sinfulness, and the vileness of all their performances.

They surrendered themselves to God to do with them as he saw fit. Some felt that God might justly give mercy to everyone in Northampton, or in the whole world, and yet damn themselves to all eternity. So profound was their sense of sin! And yet the terror with which they earlier laboured seemed to have dissipated somewhat. Now, having a clear sight of God's justice and their own culpability they were simply quiet and submissive "with great humblings in the dust before God."<sup>63</sup>

Often, during this second stage, people would lie, as it were, at God's feet to await his time of blessing. Their attitude was one of quiet contrition. They had come to an end of selfconfidence and optimism. No longer could they pin their hopes for salvation on their own sanctity, inherent or earned. They found they had no virtue and no merit before God and they felt effectively bankrupt in the moral sense. If they would be saved at all they would be saved by the righteousness of Another who had already paid the redemption price. They felt their need of the great Mediator that Jonathan Edwards had spoken to them about. They stood in a posture of holy concurrence with the way of salvation as prescribed by the Sovereign of the universe. For, the natural inclination to reject free grace and work one's own salvation instead, had become an alien ambition. God was being glorified, as Edwards would have said, in man's dependence upon Him for the whole of redemption. A sense of sin had done its work.

The heart had been prepared. People were fitted for the application of mercy. Humility was not forced upon them, says Edwards, by "legal terrors and convictions." Rather, a "high exercise of grace, in saving repentance and evangelical humiliation" brought them to the feet of Christ. This period of calmness often continued for some time before any "special and delightful manifestation is made to the soul of the grace of God as revealed in the gospel." Still, some of them experienced a discovery of the all-sufficiency of divine grace to save at this juncture already. Convinced now of deserving utter hell, they would have had to agree with God's sovereign will had he left them in their sins. But at the same time they knew it would be equally just of God to show them mercy. Christ had already satisfied the demands of justice. Here lay their hope and expectation.

That was the third stage. It was with the pleasant shock of new discovery that sinners were overwhelmed with the great love of God. And new desires filled their souls. The redeeming love of Christ showed itself in converted sinners first of all in their longings of heart. They longed after God and Christ. They wished to know God and be joined in communion with Him. Their desire was to love Christ and be instructed by Him in the ways of His law. All the benefits of Christ's work became very clear and they longed for his gracious presence. Divine things became beautiful. Edwards says their longings, as expressed to him, were of the kind that could arise from nothing but

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63 "Narrative....." p. 353.

a sense of the superlative excellency of divine things, with a spiritual taste and relish of them, and an esteem of them as their highest happiness and best portion. Such longings as I speak of, are commonly attended with firm resolutions to pursue this good for ever, together with a hoping, waiting disposition. When persons have begun in such frames, commonly other experiences and discoveries have soon followed, which have yet more clearly manifested a change of heart.<sup>64</sup>

Here lay decisive evidence of the great change. A sense of sin had produced humility and surrender, and then a looking to Christ in faith. Moreover, the sinner was turned away from the morbid kind of self-examination linked with the first stage. And, this was observable. New desires viewed a new object. Selfish exertion in an effort to obtain righteousness, self-centered wrangling to appease God, and all other forms of "legal striving" were a thing of the past. The new heart possessed a "sense of the superlative excellency of divine things..." and was drawn out to them. The Triune God was worshipped and adored. Infused with divine light the regenerated soul was courted by a new lover and there was no resistance. To love God, to know Christ, to commune with Him in His benefits, and to serve Him; these desires were the evidence that to Edwards confirmed the genuineness of their conversion.

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64 "Narrative....." p. 354.

Had the focus been anything other than divine excellence Edwards would have been dubious about the fruit of his preaching for he knew that when man is regenerated he is no longer self-centered. On one occasion a few years later, during the Great Awakening, he was asked to write down some guidelines for ministers that they might properly examine the spiritual condition of those who came to them. One of the several entries lays emphasis on this point. He stressed discernment "whether their joy be truly and properly in God and in Christ; or whether it be not wholly joy in themselves, joy in their excellencies or privileges or experiences..."<sup>65</sup>

Edwards was often instrumental in bringing these objects of God's mercy to assurance of salvation. He relates of being "censured" by others for so doing. But when a person came to him for spiritual counsel and he was satisfied as to their "good estate" he would make it known to them. "No one knows," he says, "how long they would continue..." without assurance, "were they not helped by particular instruction."

His preaching and pastoral work had borne fruit. Clarity of doctrine throughout his sermons, permeated with the pathos of a personal acquaintance with sin and grace, and keen insight into the human heart, were mighty instruments in effecting spiritual change. Edwards writes: "...the town seemed...never so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress as it was then."<sup>66</sup>

The town of Northampton became a place where religion was spoken. Immorality and indifference to the things of God were of the past. This effect, which Edwards observed and recorded, confirmed to him that his labours were blessed of God. He wrote to a colleague in Boston an account of the reformation Northampton had undergone since that initial outpouring of 1734. It deserves to be quoted at length:

Ever since the great work of God, that was wrought here about nine years ago, there has been a great and abiding alteration in this town, in many respects. There has been vastly more religion kept up in the town, exercises, and in common conversation; there has been a great alteration among the youth of the town, with respect to revelry, frolicking, profane and licentious conversation, and lewd songs; and there has also been a great alteration, amongst both old and young, with regard to tavern-haunting. I suppose the town has been in no measure so free of vice in these respects, for any long time together, for sixty years, as it has been these nine years past. There has also been an evident alteration, with respect to a charitable spirit to the poor; though I think with regard to this, we in this town, as well as the land in general, come far short of gospel rules. And though after that great work nine years ago, there has been a very lamentable decay of religious affections, and the engagedness of people's spirit in religion; yet many societies for prayer and social worship were all along kept up, and there were some few instances of awakening, and deep concern about the things of another world, even in the most dead time.<sup>67</sup>

Edwards' peers in the ministry had also seen and heard much of this activity and a great deal of urgency crept into the efforts and messages of itinerant evangelists. Their one aim was the conversion of sinners in the "perceivable and knowable" way as outlined by Edwards.

Preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards addressed himself to an age that saw no difference between man's goodness and God's glory, between respectable morals and religious piety. It was an age that had confused man's ability to promote his own material success with man's ability to promote his own righteousness. It was to that age that Edwards preached on the guilt of the human race and on the saving work of God. He directed his audiences back to their Puritan

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65 "Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences" J.C. Wolf Op Cit.

66 "Narrative....." p. 348.

67 "Letters of Dec. 12, 1743" Works Vol. 1 p.lvii.

heritage, exhorting them into accepting its implications for themselves, and drove them to be mindful of the dangers of complacency. His emphasis on religion as a transforming, individual experience was spearheaded by his painstaking effort to instill a sense of sin.

Also in these days (should we say especially!) there is a prevailing confidence in the natural goodness of man and in his unlimited potential to achieve fulfillment and happiness. We too live in an age in which man confuses decency with piety, moderation with holiness, and material success with personal righteousness. Perhaps it does not go too far to say that this shapes the Christian church a good deal today. Our day needs a restoration of basic truth which includes the basic problem of man's estrangement from his Creator who stands above confusion and disappointment and would make him truly happy through His only Son. To us too Edwards still speaks of the depths of human blindness and obstinacy, and of the remedy provided by the Lord, a remedy which transcends human effort.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones's esteem of Edwards was well known in his own circle. He said, "No man is more relevant to the present condition of Christianity than Jonathan Edwards. He was a mighty theologian and a great evangelist at the same time. He is preeminently the theologian of revival. Read Jonathan Edwards! Go back to something solid and deep and real."