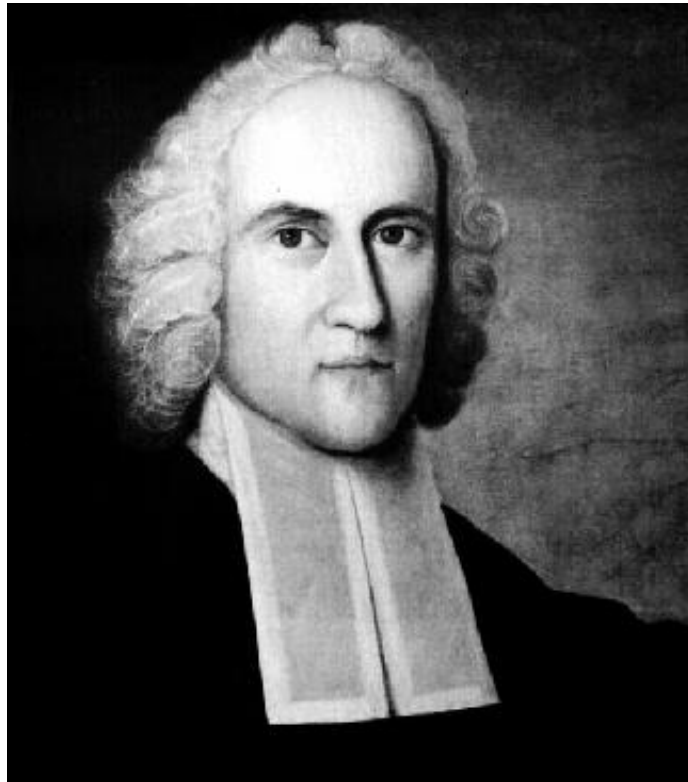


**THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS:
A TRICENTENNIAL APPRECIATION**



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O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us!

Sarah Edwards to Esther Edwards Burr
upon hearing of the death of her husband

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703 at East Windsor, Connecticut, a town then far from the centres of power and influence in the transatlantic Anglophone world. Timothy Edwards (d.1758), his father, was the pastor of the town's Congregational Church for more than 63 years. His mother, Esther (d.1770) was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), the powerful pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1669 till his death in 1729.

Edwards received his elementary education from his father—an education that included beginning Latin at seven. He also received a thorough nurture in Puritan piety. In Edwards' *Personal Narrative* he notes of this time in his life:

I had a variety of concerns and exercises about my soul from my childhood; but had two more remarkable seasons of awakening... The first time was when I was a boy, some years before I went to college, at a time of a remarkable awakening in my father's congregation. ...I used to pray five times a day in secret, and to spend much time in religious talk with other boys; and used to meet with them to pray together. ...I, with some of my schoolmates joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very retired spot, for a place of prayer. ...My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved, and I seemed to be in my element, when engaged in religious duties.²

¹ Especially helpful in preparing the following sketch of Edwards' life has been Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards—A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987). Portions of this lecture were originally given at the Canadian Carey Family Conference on August 29, 1990, and subsequently appeared as "Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and His Legacy" in *Evangel* (Autumn, 1991), 17-23.

² *Personal Narrative* [*Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16; New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1998), 790-791].

But this childhood spirituality—albeit a prognostication of his future interests—soon disappeared and, in his words, he “returned like a dog to his vomit, and wen on in ways of sin.”³

Meanwhile, Edwards entered the Collegiate School of Connecticut in New Haven (later to become Yale University) in 1716. Although he went on to graduate from the Collegiate School in 1720 at the head of his class academically, Edwards had neither inner peace nor saving faith. Writing later of his life at this time, Edwards said that it was characterized “by great and violent inward struggles” regarding wicked inclinations and objections against God’s sovereignty in salvation.⁴

Conversion and the *Resolutions*

It was probably in the spring of 1721 that Edwards was converted.⁵ As he was reading 1 Timothy 1:17,⁶ Edwards later said that

there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in Heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever. ... From about that time, I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in him.⁷

It is vital to note that Scripture was central in his conversion. Edwards also notes the “inward, sweet sense” that gripped his soul after his conversion as he meditated upon

³ *Personal Narrative (Letters and Personal Writings, ed. Claghorn, 791).*

⁴ *Personal Narrative (Letters and Personal Writings, ed. Claghorn, 791-792).*

⁵ For the date of Edwards’ conversion, see Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 35.

⁶ “Now unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen.”

⁷ *Personal Narrative (Letters and Personal Writings, ed. Claghorn, 792, 793).*

what Scripture says about God and Christ and upon their utterly free and sovereign grace in salvation. As we shall shortly see, such biblical meditation would become central to his piety.

Not long after his conversion Edwards drew up what are known as the *Resolutions* (1722-1723) in which, at the outset of his ministry, he committed himself to keeping a list of 70 guidelines to help him stay passionate in his pursuit of God and his glory.⁸ Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), one of his closest friends and his first biographer, commented that these *Resolutions* “may justly be considered as the foundation and plan of his whole life.”⁹ Though young when he wrote them, they bespeak a mature understanding of genuine piety and the way such piety should be evident in all of life and pursued with ardour and zeal. In the first Resolution, for example, he “[r]esolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God’s glory, and to my own good, profit, and pleasure, in the whole of my duration.” Resolution 5 subjected his use of time to scrutiny: “Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.” The final resolution, the seventieth, recognizes the importance of being circumspect in all of his speech: “Let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak.” And in Resolution 56, Edwards admits to times of spiritual failure but was resolved “never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.”

There are two resolution that I especially wish to note. The first has to do with the Scriptures. Resolution 28 stated what he hoped would be a life-long characteristic of the way he approached Scripture. He declared that he was “[r]esolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.”¹⁰ The adverbs Edwards uses here—“steadily,

⁸ For a recent edition of the *Resolutions*, see *Jonathan Edwards’ Resolutions And Advice to Young Converts*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001). The *Resolutions* can be found on pages 17-26.

⁹ “The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards” in David Levin, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 7.

¹⁰ My attention was drawn to this Resolution by John Piper, “Saturate...Search”, *The Standard* (March 1986), 36.

constantly, and frequently”—surely indicate his desire to saturate his mind with Scripture.

What Edwards appears to be resolving to do in this resolution is nothing less than saturating his heart and mind with Scriptural truth and the meta-narrative of the Bible, something accomplished by the practice of biblical meditation. This can be readily seen from a second text in which he describes his encounter with Scripture after his conversion. This text also makes it abundantly clear that he is not merely thinking of academic Bible study in the resolution I have cited.

I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever. Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt an harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light, exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing ravishing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading. Used oftentimes to dwell long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.¹¹

This pattern of meditation upon God’s holy Word, one that was part of Edwards’ Puritan heritage, appears to have been central to Edwards’ walk with God in the latter years of his life as well. Samuel Hopkins noted that Edwards was, “as far as it can be known, much on his knees in secret, and in devout reading of God’s word and meditation upon it.”¹² And Hopkins continued, “he studied the Bible more than all other books, and more than most other divines do. His uncommon acquaintance with the Bible appears in his sermons, and in most of his publications; and his great pains in studying it are manifest in his manuscript notes upon it.”¹³

A good example of the fruit of his life-long meditation on Scripture can be seen in what has been termed Edwards’ “Blank Bible.” This was a small printed Bible that Edwards owned in which blank sheets were placed between all of the pages. These blank sheets

¹¹ *Personal Narrative (Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. Claghorn, 797).

¹² “Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards” in Levin, ed., *Jonathan Edwards*, 39.

were divided into two columns so that Edwards could then write commentary on adjacent texts. Edwards' "Blank Bible" contains as many as 10,000 entries, written on the entire Bible between 1730 and 1758.¹⁴

The second resolution that I wish to take especial note of concerns prayer. In Resolution 65, dated July 23 and August 10, 1723, Edwards made a life-long commitment to pray:

Resolved, very much to exercise myself in this, all my life long, viz. with the greatest openness, of which I am capable of, to declare my ways to God, and lay open my soul to him: all my sins, temptations, difficulties, sorrows, fears, hopes, desires, and every thing, and every circumstance; according to Dr. Manton's 27th Sermon on Psalm 119.¹⁵

The statement to which he is referring from the Puritan author Thomas Manton (1620-1677) can be found in the doctrinal assertion of his twenty-seventh sermon on Psalm 119, in which he states: "They that would speed with God, should learn this point of Christian ingenuity, unfeignedly to lay open their whole case to him."¹⁶

Northampton and marriage

After a relatively brief stint of pastoring a small Presbyterian work in New York, Edwards moved back to his hometown of East Windsor in April of 1723. That summer he finished his M. A. thesis and subsequently received his degree in the fall. From 1724 to 1726 Edwards was a tutor at his alma mater in New Haven, though it was a situation in which he was not entirely happy. He found his niche finally in August, 1726, when he was invited to become assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in Northampton,

¹³ Cited "Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards" in Levin, ed., *Jonathan Edwards*, 40-41.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Stein, "The Spirit and the Word: Jonathan Edwards and Scriptural Exegesis" in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121.

¹⁵ *Jonathan Edwards' Resolutions And Advice to Young Converts*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001), 26.

¹⁶ *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16; New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1998), 758, n.5.

Massachusetts. Two years later, when Stoddard died in 1729, Edwards became the sole pastor of the church.

Edwards had married within a year of his arrival at Northampton. He had known his bride, Sarah Pierrepont (1710-1758), since his days at Yale. What had impressed him about her when he first met her in 1723 was her piety and spiritual maturity. Though she was but thirteen, he wrote of his future wife: “They say there is a young lady in [New-Haven] who is loved of that Great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight; and that she hardly cares for any thing, except to meditate on him.” Edwards was especially struck by the fact that her outward deportment matched her inner spirituality. “She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure ... She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her.”¹⁷ They were married on July 28, 1727.

Samuel Miller, one of the nineteenth-century founders of Princeton Theological Seminary, would rightly remark that “perhaps no event of Mr Edwards’ life had a more close connexion with his subsequent comfort and usefulness than this marriage.”¹⁸ Throughout their married lives Sarah and Jonathan were deeply devoted to one another. Moreover, her godliness, evident in Edwards’ description of Sarah cited above, fully matched his.

Their first daughter, Sarah (1728-1805), was born the year following their marriage. She was the first of eleven children, all of whom survived infancy. In a day when infant mortality was extremely high, this is amazing. For instance, Cotton Mather (1663-1728),

¹⁷ Cited Timothy Dwight, “Memoirs” [*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834 ed.; repr. Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:xxxix-xl]. For a study of Sarah’s life, see Elisabeth A. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man. The “Uncommon Union” of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971). For smaller studies, also see Ethel Williams, “A Colonial Parson’s Wife: Sarah Pierrepont Edwards 1710-1758: “And a Very Eminent Christian””, *The Review and Expositor*, 47 (1950), 41-56; Ruth A. Tucker, *First Ladies of the Parish. Historical Portraits of Pastors’ Wives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 73-81.

¹⁸ Cited Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 91.

the influential New England Puritan, had fifteen children, of whom only two survived infancy. With regard to Edwards' interaction with his family, it should be noted that the frequent portrayal of him as stern and implacable is belied by his tenderness as both a husband and a father, "whose children seemed genuinely fond of him."¹⁹

Revival in Northampton, 1734-1735

The Northampton church had enjoyed a number of small revivals during Stoddard's long pastorate, the last one having been in 1718. After that time, though, Edwards judged there had been little spiritual advance. In his words:

Just after my grandfather's death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion. Licentiousness for some years prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others. It was their manner very frequently to get together, in conventions of both sexes for mirth and jollity, which they called frolics; and they would often spend the greater part of the night in them, without regard to any order in the families they belonged to: and indeed family government did too much fail in the town. It was become very customary with many of our young people to be indecent in their carriage at meeting, which doubtless would not have prevailed in such a degree, had it not been that my grandfather, through his great age (though he retained his powers, surprisingly to the last), was not so able to observe them. There had also long prevailed in the town a spirit of contention between two parties, into which they had for many years been divided; by which they maintained a jealousy one of the other, and were prepared to oppose one another in all public affairs.²⁰

As Edwards notes in this text, the adults in the town were split into two factions, the "haves" and the "have-nots," those who were wealthy and had property and those who were jealous of them and who sought to diminish their power and influence.²¹ Most of these adults were taken up, not with the things of God and his kingdom, but with other cares and pursuits, especially the pursuit of material wealth. Outwardly they were

¹⁹ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 7.

²⁰ *Faithful Narrative [Jonathan Edwards on Revival]* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 9]. In this and all subsequent quotations from Edwards' writings, all italicized words are italicized in the original unless otherwise indicated.

²¹ Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 87.

orthodox, but they had no inward religion. Their orthodoxy was dry and lifeless. Not surprisingly their children were, in Edwards' own words, "very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices." As American historian Richard Lovelace has noted, if these teens had had drugs, they would have used them.²²

In the early 1730s, however, there began to be a growing sensitivity to sin and a willingness to listen to religious counsel.²³ A series of sermons on justification by faith alone—the doctrine that had been so central to the Reformation—were particularly used of God to awaken the lost and the spiritually indifferent. The series was preached by Edwards in November and December, 1734, and especially stressed that God, in justifying sinners, does so on the basis of his mercy alone. Those whom God saves are not saved because God sees anything in them that would merit his favour and blessing. To quote Edwards: when God justifies a person he "has no regard to anything in the person justified, as godliness, or any goodness." In fact, Edwards went on to say, "before this act [of justification], God beholds him as an ungodly creature." Justification entails God choosing to reckon Christ's perfect righteousness to the sinner and in this way the sinner can be declared righteous.²⁴

Edwards identified the exposition of this central feature of the New Testament as a major catalyst that the Holy Spirit used to begin an extraordinary revival in Northampton.

There were some things said publicly ... concerning justification by faith alone ... It proved a word spoken in season here; and was most evidently attended with a very remarkable blessing of heaven to the souls of the people in this town. ... And then it was, in the latter part of December [of 1734], that the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us; and there were very suddenly, one after another, five or six persons, who were to all appearances

²² *Dynamics of Spiritual Life. An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 38.

²³ *Faithful Narrative (Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 9-10).*

²⁴ *Justification by Faith Alone (Works of Jonathan Edwards, 1:622).* For a study of Edwards' doctrine of justification, see Samuel T. Logan, Jr., "The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards", *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 46 (Spring 1984), 26-52.

savingly converted, and some of them wrought upon in a very remarkable manner.²⁵

Edwards here makes a direct link between the preaching of biblical truth and the onset of revival by his use of the connective “then.” It was *after* the preaching of justification by faith alone—which Edwards also denotes as “the way of the gospel, ... the true and only way”²⁶—that the Spirit began to work so “wonderfully” and “suddenly.”

Soon, Edwards narrated, an intense concern to be right with God and to walk with him gripped the town.

Although people did not ordinarily neglect their worldly business, yet religion was with all sorts the great concern, and the world was a thing only by the bye. The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid, it appeared in their very countenances. It then was a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons’ minds were intent upon, was to escape for their lives, and to fly from wrath to come. All would eagerly lay hold of opportunities for their souls, and were wont very often to meet together in private houses, for religious purposes: and such meetings when appointed were greatly thronged.²⁷

Out of a town of about twelve hundred people, Edwards initially reckoned that some three hundred were saved in about six months.²⁸ At the revival’s height, in March and April of 1735, there would be about thirty people a week professing conversion.²⁹ Edwards would later judge that there were not as many converts as he had thought during the actual time of the revival.³⁰ Nevertheless, he never doubted that what took place during 1734 and 1735 was a tremendous, God-wrought awakening in the town.

At the time, the impact on the town and church meetings was nothing less than dramatic.

²⁵ *Faithful Narrative (Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 11-12)*. For a discussion of other subsidiary causes of the revival, see Samuel T. Logan, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards and the 1734-35 Northampton Revival”, *Preaching and Revival* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1984), 63-65.

²⁶ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 12*.

²⁷ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 12-13*.

²⁸ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 19*.

²⁹ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 21*.

This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alternation in the town: so that ... the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The goings of God were then seen in his sanctuary, God's day was a delight, and his tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbours.³¹

Nor was the revival limited to the town of Northampton. It spread swiftly to thirty-two other towns throughout the Connecticut Valley.

Edwards' account of this revival, the *Faithful Narrative*, was first published in London in 1737. Among those who read it at that time and were deeply impressed by it was the Howel Harris (1714-1773), the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist evangelist, who came to possess a copy of the book in February, 1738. After reading it, he was led to pray, "O go on with Thy work there [i.e. in New England] and here."³² Harris' prayer received an answer in 1740-1742, when God again visited New England with revival, but this time on a much more extensive scale.

The Great Awakening, 1740-1742

This revival has come to be known as the Great Awakening, and it made a profound impact not only on New England, but also on the other American colonies to the south. Estimates of those converted in New England alone, where the population was around

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, Letter to Thomas Gillespie, 1 July 1751 [C. C. Goen, *The Great Awakening* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1972), 565].

³¹ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 14.

³² Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 72.

250,000 at the time, range from 25,000 to 50,000. These figures, it should be noted, do not include conversions of those who were already church members.³³

In the middle of the revival William Cooper (1694-1743), the Congregationalist minister of Brattle Street Church, Boston, gave his perspective on what God was doing in his day.

The dispensation of grace we are now under, is certainly such as neither we nor our fathers have seen; and in some circumstances so wonderful, that I believe there has not been the like since the extraordinary pouring out of the Spirit immediately after our Lord's ascension. The apostolical times seem to have returned upon us: such a display has there been of the power and grace of the divine Spirit in the assemblies of his people, and such testimonies has he given to the word of the gospel. ... A number of preachers have appeared among us, to whom God has given such a large measure of his Spirit, that we are ready sometimes to apply to them the character given of Barnabas, that "he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith" (Acts 11:24). They preach the gospel of the grace of God from place to place, with uncommon zeal and assiduity. The doctrines they insist on are the doctrines of the reformation, under the influence whereof the power of godliness so flourished in the last century. The points on which their preaching mainly turns are those important ones of man's guilt, corruption, and impotence; supernatural regeneration by the Spirit of God, and free justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ; and the marks of the new birth. The manner of their preaching is not with the "enticing words of man's wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:4); howbeit, they "speak wisdom among them that are perfect" (1 Corinthians 2:6). An ardent love to Christ and souls warms their breasts and animates their labours. God has made those his ministers active spirits, a flame of fire in his service; and his word in their mouths has been, "as a fire, and as a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces" (Jeremiah 23:29).³⁴

Here Cooper places the revival in New England within the broad sweep of church history. He is utterly convinced that no other revival, in either his lifetime or that of his Puritan forebears, is comparable to what God was doing in the early 1740s. In some respects only at the time of Pentecost could one find something genuinely comparable!

³³ Graham D. Harrison, "Ferment in New England: Reactions to the Great Awakening" in *Faith and Ferment* ([London]: The Westminster Conference, 1982), 72.

³⁴ "Preface" to Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (Jonathan Edwards on Revival, 77, 78-79, *passim*). See also the comments of Thomas Templeton Taylor, "The Spirit of the Awakening: The Pneumatology of New England's Great Awakening in Historical and Theological Context" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1988), 233-235. On William Cooper, see William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), I, 288-291.

The preaching through which God had brought about this revival, though, did not contain anything new. Essentially it was the same doctrine of salvation that was trumpeted forth at the time of the Reformation. And the preaching style fit the doctrine: it was plain and ardent.

Cooper goes on to specify what he considers so extraordinary about the revival. First, there is the incredible way that it has swept through “some of the most populous towns, the chief places of concourse and business.” Then, there are the numbers that have professed conversion: “stupid sinners have been awakened by hundreds.” During the winter of 1740-1741 in Boston alone, Cooper states, there were “some thousands under such religious impressions as they never felt before.” People of all ages, from the very elderly to the very young, have been saved: the elderly “snatched as brands out of the burning, made monuments of divine mercy” and “sprightly youth ... made to bow like willows to the Redeemer’s sceptre.” Moreover, God has drawn to himself some of the grossest sinners in New England: drunkards, fornicators and adulterers, people addicted to profanity and “carnal worldlings have been made to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” On the other hand, many of those who deemed themselves upright and moral have become convinced that “morality is not to be relied on for life; and so excited to seek after the new birth, and a vital union to Jesus Christ by faith.”³⁵

Now, among the preachers whom Cooper likens to Barnabas were Edwards and the English itinerant evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770). Whitefield had landed in America at Lewes, Delaware, on October 30, 1739, and did not return to England until early 1741. He met Edwards for the first time on Friday, October 17, 1740, nearly a year after he first set foot in the New World. Whitefield’s memorable visit at the Edwards’ home lasted until the Sunday evening, October 19. In his journal entry for that day, Whitefield wrote:

Felt great satisfaction in being at the house of Mr. Edwards. A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, as become the children of those who, in all things, ought to be examples of Christian

³⁵ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 79-81, *passim*.

simplicity. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek and quiet spirit; she talked solidly of the things of God, and seemed to be such a helpmeet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers which, for some months, I have put up to God, that He would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.³⁶

There were, however, other leaders in the revival of quite a different stamp than either Edwards or Whitefield.

James Davenport (1716-1757), for instance, was a minister from Southold, Long Island, whose preaching in the early stages of the revival could not be faulted. But as the revival progressed, his words and deeds became increasingly tinged with fanaticism. Although Davenport eventually came to his senses, admitted his errors and sought to make restitution, he had helped to unleash a “wild-fire” spirit that in many places made havoc of the revival.³⁷ Moreover, Davenport’s antics provided anti-revival forces, known as the “Old Lights,” with a highly visible target for their attacks. To them he came to epitomize the anarchy and destruction of church harmony that the revival inevitably brought in its wake. The captain of these forces was Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), the co-pastor of Boston’s prestigious First Church, also known as “Old Brick.” Chauncy declared in particular about Davenport: “he is the *wildest Enthusiast* I ever saw.”

As the religious situation in New England began to polarize between those who took Chauncy’s position and those who defended the revival, excesses and all, a Presbyterian named John Moorehead, who was sympathetic to the revival, prayed: “God direct us what to do, particularly with pious zealots and cold, diabolical opposers!”³⁸

³⁶ *George Whitefield’s Journals* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 476-477.

³⁷ For the public recantation that he made, see the excerpt from *The Reverend Mr. James Davenport’s Confession and Retractions* in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (1970 ed.; repr. Chapel Hill, North Carolina/London: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1989), 53-55.

³⁸ Cited C. C. Goen, “Editor’s Introduction” to his ed. *Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1972), 64.

Edwards' reflections on the revival

The answer to Moorhead's prayer came by way of a book, Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*. Prior to the appearance of this book in 1746, Edwards had produced a couple of works which sought to find a middle ground between "pious zealots" like Davenport and "cold, diabolical opposers" such as Chauncy: *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *Some Thoughts concerning the present Revival of Religion in New-England* (1742). It is, however, the *Religious Affections*, which is his consummate work on revival. Harold P. Simonson, who has written a book on Edwards as a theologian of the heart, has stated of this book that it is the culmination of "some twenty-five years of thought about the nature of religious experience."³⁹ Iain Murray describes it as "one of the most important books possessed by the Christian church on the nature of true religion."⁴⁰ In it we find Edwards' most exhaustive and penetrating expositions of the nature of true Christian spirituality, a spirituality in which both heat and light are vital.

Edwards' *Religious Affections* seeks to answer both of the positions of Davenport and Chauncy, but it is noteworthy that the longest section of the book is an answer to Davenport's position. Edwards regarded the misguided zeal of a Davenport as a much more serious hindrance to the advance of the gospel in times of revival than the cold intellectualism of a Chauncy.

The first section of the book argues against Chauncy that biblical Christianity "consists in Holy Affections." True faith is never found in a state of indifference to the things of God and Christ. Such a state is what the Scriptures call lukewarmness, which to God is revolting. At its heart, the Christian life is a passionate engagement of the entire person in seeking the glorification of Jesus Christ.

³⁹ *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (1974 ed.; repr. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1982), 56.

⁴⁰ *Jonathan Edwards*, 267.

By the time that Edwards wrote the *Religious Affections*, however, he was very conscious that in addition to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Great Awakening, Satan had also been powerfully active in producing a counterfeit religion. The latter was a religion that made much of experience, “discoveries of Christ” and the work of the Holy Spirit. Knowing that some of his readers would be shocked at such assertions, Edwards rightly reasoned that the devil would never trouble himself to counterfeit valueless things: “t here are many more counterfeits of silver and gold, than of iron and copper; there are many false diamonds and rubies, but who goes about to counterfeit common stones?”⁴¹ Satan, ever the master of cunning and lies, employs his subtlety in making imitations of the most excellent things. Thus, it is vital to know the marks of genuine Christianity as it is laid out in the Scriptures. Edwards enumerates twelve such marks. Of the twelve, four are particularly noteworthy.

Genuine love for God is based ultimately upon who God is in himself and not on what he does for us. If we love God chiefly because of what he does for us, then, instead of God being the end of our existence, he becomes a means to an end, namely our happiness and self-fulfillment. But a genuine Christian loves God because he is altogether loveable and lovely. Edwards does not entirely rule out elements of self-love in our love for God. But he rightly argues that our love for God for who is in himself must ultimately be primary.⁴²

Second, genuine Christians have a tender heart, especially towards God. They are sensitive to all that displeases him. They are “like a burnt child that dreads the fire.” They are very conscious of how sin separates them from the God they love, and so they strive not to readmit it to their lives and press on to be as godlike in behaviour and conduct as they can.⁴³

Then, true Christianity is marked by a longing for more of God. The more grace believers receive, “the more they see their imperfection and emptiness, and distance from what ought

⁴¹ *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 146.

⁴² *Religious Affections*, ed. Smith, 240-253.

⁴³ *Religious Affections*, ed. Smith, 357-364. The quote is from page 364.

to be.” In genuine believers, “there is,” as Edwards puts it in a remarkable turn of phrase, “a holy breathing and panting after the Spirit of God to increase holiness.”⁴⁴

The acid test of genuine Christianity for Edwards is what is called the fruit of the Spirit. True spirituality bears visible fruit in Christian practice and living in the world. As Edwards notes on the basis of Titus 2:14, Christ’s people “not only do good works, but are zealous of good works.” In other words, while works do not save us, we cannot be saved without them. “Obedience, good works, good fruits, are to be taken...as a sure evidence to our own consciences of a true principle of grace.” In fact, Edwards asserts, Christian practice is “the chief of all the signs of grace” and “the principal sign” by which to determine true godliness.⁴⁵

Dismissal from Northampton and ministry at Stockbridge

In 1748 a controversy began which engulfed Edwards’ congregation in Northampton.⁴⁶ The heart of the controversy involved a practice which Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had instituted at the beginning of the century. Stoddard was of the opinion that the reception of the Lord’s Supper was not to be restricted to believers, since he vigorously maintained that God could and did use it as a means of conversion. He thus encouraged all in his congregation who could give intellectual consent to the essential truths of scripture and who were seeking to live respectable lives, even though they might be able to profess conversion, to come to it.

The conviction that this practice was thoroughly unscriptural had been deepening in Edwards’ mind for quite some time before he openly declared in December of 1748 that a person must profess to be regenerate before he or she would be allowed to come to the Lord’s Table. In taking this position Edwards found himself opposed by most of his congregation, and a painful controversy ensued, which ultimately issued in his dismissal

⁴⁴ *Religious Affections*, ed. Smith, 376-383. The quotes are from pages 378 and 382 respectively.

⁴⁵ *Religious Affections*, ed. Smith, 383-461. The quotes are from pages 387, 424, and 406-407.

⁴⁶ For a good discussion of this controversy, see Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 311-349.

as pastor in 1750. Of roughly 230 male members, only 23 or so supported Edwards. The vast majority of the rest voted for his dismissal.

The atmosphere that the controversy created in Northampton is well displayed in the following portion of a letter that Edwards wrote to his good friend Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) at the end of 1749. “ ’Tis a time of great trial with me,” Edwards informs his friend, “and ... I stand in Continual need of the divine presence & merciful conduct in such a state of things as this. I need God’s counsel in every step I take & every word I speak; so all that I do & say is watched by the multitude around me with the utmost strictness & with eyes of the greatest uncharitableness & severity and let me do or say what I will, my words & actions are represented in dark colours.”⁴⁷

After his dismissal Edwards became the pastor of the church in what was then the frontier village of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and a missionary to the Mohawk and Housatonic Indians of the area. There is little doubt that Edwards saw his removal from Northampton to Stockbridge in 1750 as providential, for it was during his seven years at Stockbridge that he had the time to write those books which established him as the “greatest Christian theologian of the eighteenth century.”⁴⁸ Among these works was his notable defence of Calvinism, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency* (1754).

This period of literary fruitfulness at Stockbridge came to an end in 1757, though, when Edwards reluctantly accepted an invitation to become president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University.

⁴⁷ Letter to Joseph Bellamy, December 6, 1749 [ed. Stanley T. Williams, “Six Letters of Jonathan Edwards to Joseph Bellamy”, *The New England Quarterly*, 1 (1928), 239].

⁴⁸ Miklós Vető, “Book Reviews: *America’s Theologian. A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*. By Robert W. Jenson”, *Church History*, 58 (1989), 522. See also John F. Wilson, “Jonathan Edwards’s Notebooks for “A History of the Work of Redemption” ” in R. Buick Knox, ed., *Reformation, Conformity and Dissent* (London: Epworth Press, 1977), 240.

Final days and legacy

Edwards had been at the College only a few weeks when he was inoculated against smallpox, which was raging in Princeton and the vicinity. The vaccine initially appeared to be successful, but complications set in, and Edwards, never a strong man physically, died on March 22, 1758. Among his last words were some for his wife, who was still at Stockbridge with most of their children. To his one child who was present at his bedside, Lucy (1736-1786), he said: "Give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue for ever."⁴⁹ Shortly after he had said this, those at his bedside, supposing he was unconscious, were lamenting what his death would mean to the college and to the church, when they were surprised by what were his last words: "Trust in God, and ye need not fear."⁵⁰ When Sarah heard of the death of her husband, she wrote to their daughter Esther, "O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us!"⁵¹ And what was that legacy?

- First, at the beginning of Edwards' life, Calvinism was in decline and a house under siege. Through his writings, Edwards was the key individual God used to restore it to a place of spiritual vigour and influence.
- Then, Edwards' writings, in particular, *The Religious Affections*, comprised one of the most profound analyses in the history of Christianity of what is the nature of genuine piety.
- Finally, Edwards' life speaks of faithfulness to the Word of God. When, during the communion controversy that led to his dismissal from Northampton, it was suggested to Edwards that his views would lead to a small, uninfluential church, Edwards was content to leave such matters to God. He was called, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, to preach and teach the whole counsel of God. He had stayed true to that resolution he had penned at the outset of his Christian life, "to study the Scriptures so

⁴⁹ Cited Dwight, *Memoirs (Works, 1:clxviii)*.

⁵⁰ Cited Dwight, *Memoirs (Works, 1:clxxviii)*.

⁵¹ Cited Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 442.

steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.”

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