

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE V.

JONATHAN EDWARDS, AND THE GREAT AWAKENING.¹

BY THE REV. EZRA HOYT BYINGTON, D.D.

THE publication of a new book on the religious life of New England, by Dr. George Leon Walker of Hartford,² will lead to a fresh study of that section of our history. The third part of this rich and stimulating book is entitled "The Great Awakening and its Sequels." The materials for this period in the history of New England were already abundant, but Dr. Walker has incorporated in his volume some papers never before published, and has presented some of the facts in a new light.

A high standard of piety was maintained in the Pilgrim and Puritan churches for thirty or forty years. The second generation fell below the standard of the fathers. We have the well-known statement of Thomas Prince, that a little after 1660 there began to appear a decay in the spiritual life of the people; that this decay attracted more attention among devout people during the next ten years, and that it was much more evident in 1680, when but few of the first generation of colonists remained. This state of things led to the calling of the Reforming Synod, which met in 1679. This Synod, after a careful examination of the religious condition of the people, set forth a statement,

¹The right is reserved to republish this article by the author.

²Some Aspects of the Religious Life of New England, with special reference to Congregationalists. Lectures delivered on the Carew Foundation before Hartford Theological Seminary in 1896, by George Leon Walker, D.D., Hartford, Conn.

which, as we read it now, in the pages of Cotton Mather, is simply appalling. They lamented the neglect of public worship, the desecration of the Sabbath, the lack of family government, the alarming increase of worldliness among the people, accompanied by dishonesty in trade, lying, intemperance, profanity, extravagance, and a general decay of godliness in the land.

The plain dealing of the Synod led to an earnest attempt, under the lead of the General Court, to secure a return to the better way. The decline of religion was checked for a time, and yet there was no radical and thorough change during the next half-century. There were occasional revivals of religion in the churches. We have an account of a remarkable religious work in Taunton in 1704, and of a number of revivals in Northampton during the ministry of Rev. Solomon Stoddard. The list might easily be extended. But, on the whole, the ministers and churches of New England had departed very far from the ways of the fathers, during the second half of the first century of our history. The Half-way Covenant had brought into the churches large numbers of people who were not, even in their own judgment, converted persons. The doctrine of regeneration was not made prominent in the preaching of that time. The ministers were preaching morality, and the people were becoming more immoral every year. Men were trusting to their good works to save them, but they were not careful to do such works as God had required. "And yet," says one of the old writers, "never had the expectation of reaching heaven at last been more general, or more confident." Universalism was in the air, even then.

The Protestant churches of Great Britain were no better off at that time. Bishop Butler remarks, in the preface to the "Analogy" (1736), that "it had come to be taken for granted that Christianity is now at length discovered to be fictitious." Addison declared that there was "less appear-

ance of religion in England than in any neighboring state or kingdom." "In the higher circles of society," said Montesquieu, on his visit to England, "every one laughs if one talks of religion."¹

It was time for a Great Awakening. He, to whom the church is dearer than the apple of his eye, was preparing a group of men of remarkable gifts, as his agents in promoting the great revival which gave an impulse to the church which it has not yet lost. Some of these great evangelists had been trained in Great Britain; such as, Whitefield and the Wesleys. Others had been trained in this country; as, Edwards, the Tenants, Parsons, and Wheelock. The Church of England needed the awakening, quite as much as the Dissenters, or the Puritan churches of New England.

Jonathan Edwards was the son of Timothy Edwards, the pastor for sixty years at East Windsor, Connecticut. His mother was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, whose pastorate at Northampton lasted from 1672 to 1729. He was born October 5, 1703. He was a precocious boy. He has been compared to Pascal in respect to the early manifestation of intellectual power. His early writings and the books that he read even before he entered college show a decided bent toward the study of nature and of mind. He entered Yale College at thirteen, and was graduated at seventeen. Afterwards he spent two years in the study of theology, in connection with the college. He was licensed to preach at nineteen. His first preaching was in New York, where he was very much liked. After eight months he declined to remain longer, and having received the degree of A.M., he went back to the college, where he served for two years as tutor, continuing his studies in divinity and in psychology. He was ordained at Northampton,

¹ Green's *Short History of the English People*, p. 736; Fisher's *History of Doctrines*, pp. 389-391.

February 15, 1727, in his twenty-third year, as the colleague pastor with his grandfather, then in his eighty-fourth year.

Eight years later, the Great Awakening began in that parish, in connection with the preaching of that remarkable man. He is spoken of most frequently as a hard logician, a metaphysician, a Calvinistic theologian. If that had been all, the revival would not have begun in his parish. He was, undoubtedly, a man of the highest order of genius. He was a brilliant scholar. He was a man of deep piety. He was accustomed as a child to go by himself to secret places in the woods for the purpose of prayer. He passed through very deep religious experiences during his college life. The diary which he kept in his early years shows how deep his religious experiences were, and how entire his consecration. He recorded his solemn engagement, "always to do whatever he thought to be most for the glory of God, and his own good, without consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence; no matter how great or how many the difficulties he might meet; to do his duty and what is most for the good of mankind in general." He resolved never to lose a moment of time, to live while he lived with all his might. An instructive parallel might be drawn between the early religious exercises of John and Charles Wesley, and those of Jonathan Edwards. The revival had its spring in the deep searchings of heart, and in the complete consecration of these men.

President Edwards was a man of tender feeling, and of very strong affections. He had the imagination of a poet. "He had a rare combination," says a recent writer, "of power of feeling, of almost oriental power of imagination, and intellectual acumen which clothed all that he said with glowing force, while beneath his words flowed the stream of a most carefully elaborated theological system."

Let us select three or four specimens from the writings of this representative Puritan pastor. On a certain day, in his early youth, he writes that he was walking in his father's pasture: and "as I was walking there, and looking up in the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, as I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction, majesty and meekness joined together; it was a sweet and gentle and holy majesty, and also a majestic sweetness, an awful sweetness; a high and great and holy gentleness."

"I spent the most of my time," he says, "in thinking of divine things, year after year; often walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; and it was always my manner at such times to sing forth my contemplations."

In one of his private papers, written in middle life, he says, "The soul of a true Christian appeared like such a little white flower as we see in the spring of the year; low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory; rejoicing as it were in a calm rapture; diffusing around a sweet fragranc; standing peacefully and lovingly, in the midst of other flowers round about; all in like manner opening their bosoms to drink in the light of the sun."¹

Here is a passage from his journal, in which he describes Sarah Pierrepont, who became his wife a few years later:—

"They say there is a young lady in ——— who is beloved 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, invisibly comes to her, and fills her mind with exceeding great delight, and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him; that she ex-

¹Life of Edwards. New York reprint of the Worcester Edition, Vol. i. p. 18.

pects after a while to be received up where he is; to be raised up out of the world, and caught up into heaven, being assured that there she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love and delight forever. She will sometimes go about from place to place singing sweetly, and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure, and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her."

He describes an experience which he had while in middle life, in which he had "a view of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception,—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour, which kept me the greater part of the time in tears, and weeping aloud."

In his personal appearance, Mr. Edwards is said to have been a tall, slender man, upwards of six feet in height. His face was of the feminine type, like that of the apostle John rather than that of the apostle Peter or Paul. There was about him the air of a seer, of one inspired. His appearance in the pulpit was graceful, his delivery natural, easy, and very solemn. His voice was not loud, or strong, but he spoke with such distinctness, clearness, and precision; his sentences were so full of ideas, set in a plain and striking light, that he commanded the attention of the audience. His sermons were written, but he was not closely confined to his notes. He was accustomed to lean on one arm, fastening his eyes upon some distant part of the meeting-house. He used very little action in the pulpit, but he spoke with such fervor and earnestness that his words had great power. He was one of the great preach-

ers of the age. Professor Allen, of Harvard, speaks of him as the greatest of them all.

It was the mission of this man of great intellectual power and profound spiritual insight, to apply the truths of the gospel to a people in a very low religious condition. He had to meet what was then called Arminianism, a system that differed radically from the evangelical Arminianism which Wesley preached, and which has been a leading factor in the revivals of the last century and a half. This so-called Arminianism was combined with Arian and Socinian opinions. It had grown up in New England as a reaction from the extreme Calvinism of the early New England fathers. Its progress had been helped by the working of the Half-way Covenant. Inasmuch as the change at conversion was supposed to be altogether beyond human power, men inquired whether there were not some religious acts which they could perform which would lead on towards conversion. The Arminians of that day taught that the use of "the means of grace," such as, the reading of the Scriptures, prayer, attendance on public worship, and especially the use of the sacraments, would prepare them for the kingdom of heaven. This relieved them from a sense of responsibility for their continued impenitence. They persuaded themselves that they were doing their part of the work, and that there was nothing more for them to do until they should receive the Divine Spirit, who would change their evil nature, and give them the new heart and the new spirit. The preaching of the time was mainly didactic. It was addressed to the understanding, rather than to the heart. Its tone was ethical, rather than spiritual. It dwelt mainly on the duties of men to each other, and the outward duties to God. Multitudes were lingering among the so-called preliminaries to regeneration, waiting for the divine work in their hearts. So that, in many of the Puritan churches, the people were

trusting in forms and ritualistic observances, while spiritual religion had lost its power.

The long and very able ministry of Mr. Stoddard at Northampton had molded the opinions and habits of the people of that town. He had taught them that the Lord's Supper was a converting ordinance. The Half-way Covenant had brought into the church a large number who were not even in their own opinion regenerated persons. Mr. Edwards tells us, in his Narrative, that the town had about two hundred families. He believed that the religious condition of the people was at least as good as that of the people in other parts of New England. But, he says, that it was a time of extraordinary dullness in religion; that for some years licentiousness had prevailed among the young people; that many of them were very much addicted to night walking, and frequenting the tavern, and to lewd practices; that they used frequently to get together for "what they called frolics, and would spend the greater part of the night in them, without any regard to order in the families they belonged to; and that, indeed, family government did much fail in the town." He found also that many of the young people were indecent in their conduct in meeting.¹

Two or three years after the beginning of the ministry of Mr. Edwards, there began to be a marked improvement in the habits of the young people of his congregation. They became more decorous in their behavior during the religious services, and more disposed to keep the Lord's day, and to listen to religious instruction. Late in the year 1734, the young pastor determined to meet the errors which prevailed among his people by a series of sermons on justification by faith alone, the doctrine by which, as

¹ Edwards' Works, Vol. i. p. 29; Narrative of Surprising Conversions; Works, Vol. iii. p. 233; The Great Awakening, Dr. Joseph Tracy, p. 213; Allen's Life of Edwards, pp. 40, 126.

Luther declared, a church stands or falls. He tells us that "although great fault was found with meddling with the controversy in the pulpit, at that time, by such a person [as the young and inexperienced pastor], and though it was ridiculed by many, yet it proved a word spoken in season, and was most evidently attended with a very remarkable blessing of heaven to the souls of the people."

In these sermons he attempted to sweep away the hopes which men had built upon their morality, their "owning the covenant," partaking of the Lord's Supper, and using the other means of grace. He taught that the first thing, and the only thing, for them to do was to come to Christ, with penitence for their sins, relying only upon the free promises of the gospel. "This way of the gospel was made evident," to use the words of Edwards, "as the true and only way. Then it was, in the latter part of December (1734), that the Spirit of God began to work wonderfully amongst us, and there were, very suddenly, five or six persons, to all appearance, savingly converted, and some were wrought upon in a very remarkable manner."¹

The revival was connected very closely with the preaching of Mr. Edwards. He set forth with great power the Calvinistic system of doctrine, but, in the stress and pressure of the religious work, he was led into those modifications of the older Calvinism out of which the New England Theology has grown. The urgent motive, with the great evangelist, was to present the truth in such a way as *to deepen the sense of personal responsibility*. He made much of the difference between natural and moral ability. He taught that the sinner has a natural ability to repent, and is therefore under obligation to repent. His inability is moral, and consists in an unwillingness to do his duty. For this unwillingness he is guilty. To continue in the use of means, without repentance, is only to add to the

¹ Works, Vol. iii. p. 234.

sins of the past. The promises of God are addressed only to those who repent. He insisted, therefore, upon immediate repentance. Means were nothing without repentance; strivings and resolutions were nothing. They were exhorted to cast themselves, just as they were, upon the mercy of God, and trust him to save them in his infinite love and grace.

The revival spread rapidly into all parts of the town, and reached persons of all ages and conditions in life. Religion "became the great subject of thought and conversation. There was scarcely a person in the town unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. In the spring and summer following, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God. Our assemblies were then beautiful. Our public praises were greatly enlivened. Our young people when they met, were wont to spend the time in talking of the love of Jesus Christ, the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God; his glorious work in the conversion of souls, and the truth and certainty of the great things of God's word."¹ Mr. Edwards believed that more than three hundred were brought to Christ, in that town, within six months, and that almost everybody in the town at that time, above sixteen years of age, was a true Christian. He mentions that some thirty children, of from ten to fourteen years, were among the subjects of this work. He gives an interesting account of the conversion of a child about four years of age.² It appears from his statements that religious meetings for children were very common during the revival.

The work extended from Northampton into the adjoining towns. In March the revival was general in South Hadley and in Suffield. It soon appeared in Sundeland, Deerfield, Hatfield, West Springfield, Longmeadow, and

¹ Narrative, p. 235.

² Works, Vol. iii. p. 265; also p. 348.

Northfield. There were revivals of great power in ten or twelve of the leading towns of Connecticut. It continued in the Connecticut Valley for about six months. It reached towns as far apart as Stratford, New Haven, Groton, Lebanon, and Coventry. The next year Mr. Edwards wrote his "Narrative of Surprising Conversions," which was published first in Great Britain, and, two years later, was republished in Boston, with several of the sermons that had been most useful in promoting the work.

It will not be necessary to follow minutely in this article the history of the Great Awakening in the ten years that followed 1735. Mr. Edwards had a very important part in the work through all those years. He was, in a sense, the moving spirit of the revival. By his preaching, and his personal labors, and his counsel to the pastors who were constantly consulting him, and by his publications, he helped on the work, and gave it steadiness and permanent influence. In 1740 and 1741, there was another work of grace in Northampton even more extended than the one some years before. There was another revival two years later, and a third two years afterwards.¹ During these years the religious work extended into all parts of New England, and into the Middle and Southern colonies. In 1740, Whitefield came to this country, and his preaching gave a great impulse to the revival. The period of religious inertia had been effectually broken up. A rift had been made in the old fatalism which had paralyzed so many of the churches. The revivals gave them a new sense of the spiritual power that was within their reach. A considerable number of pastors began to labor as evangelists in parishes near their own. There was an interchange of such labors at that time that was very profitable. There was also a class of itinerating evangelists, who were employed in many of the churches.

¹ Christian History, Vol. i. p. 367.

We have accounts of the preaching of Mr. Edwards in Westboro, Leicester, Sutton, Enfield, Boston, and various other places. In some instances he spent several weeks in a place.¹ Of the effect of his famous sermon at Enfield, we have an account written by an intelligent minister, who was present. He says: "While the people of the neighboring towns were in great distress for their souls, the inhabitants of Enfield were very secure, loose, and vain. A lecture had been appointed there, and the neighboring people, the night before, were so affected at the thoughtlessness of the inhabitants, that they spent a considerable part of the night praying for them. When the time for the lecture came, a number of the neighboring ministers attended, and some from a distance. The appearance of the assembly in the meeting-house was thoughtless and vain. The people hardly conducted themselves with common decency. Mr. Edwards preached, from a passage in Deut. xxxii. 35: 'Their foot shall slide in due time.' As he advanced in unfolding the meaning of the text, the most rigid logic brought him and his hearers to conclusions which the most tremendous imagery could but inadequately express. The effect was such as might have been expected. Before the sermon was ended, the assembly appeared deeply impressed and bowed down with an awful conviction of sin and danger. There was such a breathing of distress and weeping that the preacher was obliged to speak to the people and desire silence, that he might be heard. This was the beginning of the same great and prevailing concern in that place, with which the colony in general was visited."²

This sermon is often quoted as though it were a fair

¹ Journal of Rev. E. Parkman, of Westboro', in Library of The Antiquarian Society, Worcester.

² Rev. Mr. Wheelock of Lebanon, quoted in Trumbull's History of Connecticut, Vol. ii. p. 145.

specimen of the ordinary preaching of Mr. Edwards. One has only to read the titles of his published sermons to learn how great a variety of topics he presented in the pulpit. "The excellency of Christ," "Ruth's Resolution," "The peace which Christ gives his true followers," "A divine and supernatural Light imparted to the soul," "A God who heareth prayer," "God the best portion of the Christian,"—these suggest a style of thought and discourse much more in accordance with the other works of the great preacher. He believed and taught that love is the chief of the Christian graces, and that from love of God all other graces flow. He felt that the state of opinion and practice at that time made it necessary to preach the "terrors of the Lord," and he knew how to uncover the hypocrisy and unbelief of men in a convincing way, but the dominant tone of his preaching was argumentative and winning. If he was a "son of thunder," it was in the same sense with the apostles James and John.

It is not the purpose of this article to trace the controversies which grew out of the preaching of Whitefield and some others, who were active in connection with the revival. There is only space for a brief statement of the *results* of the Great Awakening.

The most careful students of the history of this period agree that *it was a religious work that has never been equaled in intensity in this country.* One writer says, "There has never been so extensive a manifestation of religious feeling in New England in any period of similar duration." Estimates, by the older writers, of the number of conversions vary from twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand. The later and more careful historians make the number less than the smallest of these numbers. We have no reliable statistics of the number of churches and communicants at that time. So far as we can get reliable statements, it would appear that there were about three

hundred and eighty Congregational churches in New England, and that the entire population of New England was about three hundred thousand. Rev. Ezra Styles, afterwards President of Yale College, states that between 1740 and 1760 about one hundred and fifty new churches were founded in the new towns and parishes. This does not include a large number of Baptist churches that were gathered in those years; and probably does not include the Separatist churches.

More important than the increase in numbers was the higher standard of piety in the churches. The revival led to the gradual disuse of the Half-way Covenant. Those who were friendly to the revival returned to the ancient practice of admitting to church-membership only those who gave credible evidence of piety.

The cold and formal Arminianism with its Arian and Socinian elements was no longer dominant in the Congregational churches. From the time of the Great Awakening, there were "two wings in the Congregational body." On the one side were the Old Calvinists and the followers of Edwards with his modified Calvinism. These were the friends of the revival, and they were confirmed in their theological views by the results of that work of grace. On the other side were the so-called Arminians, who found themselves out of sympathy with the spirit and methods of the revival. These were numerous and influential. They continued the practice of admitting to their communion persons who were living moral lives, without reference to the question whether they gave evidence of personal piety. In the course of about two generations, these two divergent tendencies led to the great separation of the Puritan churches into two bodies which we designate as the Unitarian and the Orthodox Congregationalists.