

The Great Awakening and Jonathan Edwards: A Perspective for Today

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The Congregational Way has had a long and proud history in both the United States and Europe. The basic understandings of faith have evolved and been re-defined many times throughout that history. There were time of great success and influence on society and religion. On the other hand, there have been divisions, causing rancor and consternation. The basic tenets of the Way (faith, fellowship and freedom in a covenantal relationship) have remained constant although different in expression. The other major constant has been change. Over recent years, those of the "Way" as well as most (if not all) major Protestant denominations have faced a crisis of survival.

This crisis is not new. An article in *Time Magazine* in the early 1990's stressed that over the past 25 years Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians have seen membership shrink by 20 to 40%. That same article notes that this stands in marked contrast to other facts. The importance of "spirituality" has grown tremendously so that it has threatened to overwhelm even secular ideals. Moreover, Pentecostalism, both domestically and abroad, had doubled or tripled its membership during that same period¹

There may be a serious problem looming on the horizon. The law of "Survival of the Fittest" may apply to the visible Church. Some denominations may become "extinct" in time. Yet this "fire" of the Pentecostals burns brightly despite the condemnations of many who question their theology and their emotionalism. Regardless of one's opinion, one must take notice.

Religious fervor is not new. There have been numerous "revivals" over the last 300 years, perhaps the most important of which was the Great Awakening. That event benefited the Congregationalists who saw great increases in membership as well as the level of commitment. At the same time, there were also those who questioned its

theological basis and emotional outpourings. The “man in the middle”, so to speak, was Jonathan Edwards. Although he did not start this great revival, he came to struggle with its effects and ramifications. His understanding and responses to these events reflected his view of God and the world. His recorded reflections provide a basis of understanding that may well transcend his particular time and culture.

His success can be seen in the renewed academic interest in his ideas. In the last 60 years or so, the “extent of research on [his] thought ... is nothing short of phenomenal”.² Numerous books and articles have looked at his attributes in depth. To name a few areas of inquiry, he has been seen as “artist”, “preacher”, “theologian”, and “philosopher”.³ Some, such as Perry Miller, have viewed even him as “psychologist”⁴ Studies on Jonathan Edward’s have been exhaustive. His attributes and style have been analyzed and catalogued, along with his influences on religious thought that followed.

This paper will try to tread a new path. Taking note of much of the work that has been done, this paper will endeavor to utilize it on order to “see the forest through the trees”. Just as Jonathan Edwards maneuvered through the troubled waters of this Great Awakening, he may provide some basic understandings to guide those who struggle with change today. Congregationalists need a Great Awakening to spur growth in both numbers and commitment to Christ. The “Way” needs to survive what seems to be an inhospitable environment, at least to mainline Protestantism.

The proposed thesis is the distillation of the key elements of the mindset of Jonathan Edwards, the key to his vitality, influence and staying power. His view of God

¹ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley), xv.

² Hyun Lee and Allen Cuedos, *Edwards in Our Time* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans), 1.

³ Nathan Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds. *Jonathan Edward’s and the American Experience* (NY: Oxford U. Press), xv.

and the world allowed him to respond to change in a meaningful and successful way. He embraced change and yet held firm to his core belief system. His success was due, at least in part, to his balancing of tradition with modernity, history with the Bible, faith with secular philosophy, and head reasoning with heart affections. This approach to change shows a man of faith who handles change in a positive way. It may even provide a key for many today who struggle in a challenging environment of change.

The paper will prepare a brief overview of the times and culture in question, including a summary of some key theological issues. After an additional summary of the elements of revivals, the paper will focus on the Great Awakening, especially the published interpretations of Jonathan Edwards himself. Analysis will be based on response and reflection. It will examine the responses of Jonathan Edwards and his critics as well as reflections of others, both contemporary and by hindsight. Finally, there will be a determination of general attributes that may be responsible for his success.

The period of the (first) Great Awakening, 1635-1643, was one of change. The thirteen colonies were in the midst of social and economic progress. The frontier was expanding and the economy was booming. The Puritans no longer had a “lock” on faith. The philosophical reflections of the Enlightenment changed the fabric of American attitudes including religion.

The effects of Enlightenment thought can not be exaggerated. It affected many areas but, according to Ahlstrom, “its significance is not so much in any particular thought content as in the use the Enlightenment makes of philosophical thought”.⁵ Its impact on religious thought was nothing short of daunting. The Congregational churches

⁴ Hatch and Stout, 12.

of New England were ripe for rejection. The focus on conversion as a requirement for church membership had given way to the Half-way covenant which had been an easy way to maintain the connection of second and third generation Puritans with the visible church. People had been drifting away because of the “deadness and dullness of the church...”⁶ Religion had become “intense and demanding” characterized by “picky morality”. As a result many were not at all concerned about “right and wrong”.⁷ The American sense of independence went against what their religion taught them.⁸ Before the Enlightenment, the Bible held a place of highest esteem. In the view of Hans Frei, this period marked what might be called a “ ‘great reversal’ whereby the biblical narrative was gradually replaced from its centrality”⁹. The core of the old order had been torn apart. The basis of reform theology (“sola scriptura”) was suspect. The churches needed a new source of unity and authority.¹⁰

That void was being filled in many divergent ways. Wesleyan evangelism was in force in all thirteen colonies, straining the Puritan order.¹¹ At the same time there was a deistic type of Unitarianism in which there was no place for positive revelation. Thomas Jefferson espoused such a theology and held a view of scripture that “located the apostle Paul with dupes and imposters.”¹²

⁵ Ahlstrom, 352

⁶ Michael J. McClymond (*Encounter with God: An approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, NY: Oxford U. Press), 108.

Richard E. Wentz *The Shaping of Religious traditions in the United States*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 174.

⁸ Harold P. Simonson *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans), 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ John E. Smith *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame U. Press), 7.

¹¹ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley *History of American Congregationalism* (Cranberry, NJ: Associated U. Press), 103.

¹² Henry C. Sheldon *History of the Modern Church, Vol. 3* (US: Hendrickson), 103.

The new vision of the universe as one that was mechanistic and self-contained was in constant tension with the Puritan notion of a national Covenant, in which New England was seen as blessed or cursed depending upon the morality of the people. Under this system, God would punish in proportion to the degree in which it held true to the covenant.¹³ Although individuals continued to live their lives, these forces of change and conflict were bubbling under the surface. The religious orthodoxy of the colonies was in direct opposition to the “rationalistic man-centered thought of Enlightenment Europe”.¹⁴ The cracks of the old order were becoming wider and wider. They, in turn, were filled by the cement of this new order. According to Wentz, this sets the stage for revival that occurs “when accepted modes of order and meaning in society appear to be incapable of sustaining life”.¹⁵

The Revival known as the Great Awakening emerged in this state of societal transition. It had been prepared in advance in what we might call five mini-revivals during the ministry of Edwards predecessor at Northampton, Solomon Stoddard.¹⁶ The concept of “revival” implies a stirring of the comatose¹⁷. The revivals were known for emotional demonstrations including “tears, trembling, and loud outcries”.¹⁸ It seemed to be in direct contrast with the established expression of religious feeling. The dominant “federal theology” stressed the ability of the natural power of people to obey the covenant; however this had been gradually shifting to “human effort and moral

¹³ McDermott 12.

¹⁴ John H. Gerstner *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, (Wheaton IL: Tyndale House Publishers), 12.

¹⁵ Wentz, 174.

¹⁶ Ahlstrom 282.

¹⁷ Wentz, 172.

¹⁸ Lee, 115.

striving...”.¹⁹ Prosperity in Massachusetts had led to a complacency, resulting in a “static” religion.²⁰

Revivals became the main way to spread “evangelical pietism” in a way that was clearly biblical and with a missionary fervor.²¹ Begun by itinerant preachers, Whitfield and Davenport, the revivalist fervor spread eventually reaching Northampton. Triggered by the untimely deaths of two young women, a renewed interest in the things of the soul occurred.²² Soon thereafter, the strange phenomena were occurring within the church of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards found himself in the midst of what he considered to be the mysterious workings of God.

The time of the Great Awakening was indeed a clash of worldviews. Jonathan Edwards stood on the cusp and would come to be known as the “last of the Puritans” and “First of the Evangelicals”. In a similar vain, he would not reject the new philosophies (as did Barth in later times)²³. In contrast, he was characterized by “manifold reaching and grasping after a multitude of diverse particular thoughts, impulses, and experiences that apparently [connected with] so many potential openings into the complex edifice of life”.²⁴ In order to understand the ability of Jonathan Edwards to be such a powerful influence in these strange and turbulent times, one must look at the man, especially his theology.

Even as a child, he showed the beginnings of this remarkable synthesis of divergent ideas. From an early age he showed amazing interest in the “mysterious world of religion”, constructing a “secret booth where he and his friends could discuss religious

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards *The Great Awakening*, (Carlisle PA: The Banner of Truth Trust), 1.

²⁰ Ahlstrom 166.

²¹ Edwards, 1.

²² Simonson 46.

ideas”.²⁵ At a young age, he experienced conversion; however they seemed to be a series of “deepening disturbances” which led to “sweet complacency in God”.²⁶ These experiences were to form the spiritual framework of his life. On the other hand, he was an avid learner, and read works of many Enlightenment authors, including geometry and astronomy texts as well of Newton’s *Optiks*.²⁷ He had established the base from which to derive his “ability to reshape ideas inherited from abroad in the light of the needs and interests of the American situation”.²⁸

The mature theology of the man was deeply enmeshed with the importance of conversion. Just as the original American Puritans had emphasized the recitation of a personal conversion story, Jonathan Edwards held it to the same level of importance. Like the early Puritans, Edwards believed in meeting the “needs of the soul”, beginning with the understanding of the “essential misery of life”.²⁹ As a true Calvinist, he stressed the absolute sovereignty of God in reaching out to the elect by grace. He opposed any hint of Arminianism in which human effort played a role.

His perspective was rather unique in that it focused on the importance of an experiential base. Moreover, he believed that a saving faith would reflect a “grand synthesis of social concern and private real experience”.³⁰ The former idea reflected his early “experiences” with God. The latter was shown in his life and his writings which expressed that a ‘good society’ expresses love by caring about the poor and denouncing

²³ Smith 127.

²⁴ Hatch and Stout, 103.

²⁵ Simonson, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ Simonson, 24.

²⁸ Smith, 1.

²⁹ Atkins and Fagley, 167.

³⁰ McDermott 180.

“economic exploitation”.³¹ He practiced what he preached and was described as a “concerned citizen, deeply interested in the social and political winds swirling around him...”³².

Experiencing God’s loving grace was foundational. Unless a theology was based on real experience, Edwards considered it “mere speculation”,³³ implying the futility of finding truth by “logical abstraction”.³⁴ Edwards, however, certainly practiced and believed in the power of reason. His sermons were “always models of carefully reasoned discourse”.³⁵ The words, however, were designed to reach the “heart (soul) of the hearer, designed to allow the endowment of the human listener to embrace God through faith.”³⁶ Edwards believed in the uniting of two aspects of faith – spiritual experience and apologetics. The religious experience represented the former. The latter involved an “effort to rethink intellectual traditions so that the reality and activity of God could become visible in them and through them”.³⁷

In all things the ultimate authority was the Bible. Although critical exegesis of scripture had already begun, Edwards still followed the more conventional approach of viewing the Bible as truth. He took care to view the scriptures “as a whole” in order to discern “the way of the Spirit”.³⁸ This “truth” was the formulation of key doctrines.³⁹ At the same time, he knew that this did not provide “truth” in the modern sense. Edwards was able to look to other areas (history, metaphysics, and ethics) to provide this “proof”

³¹ Ibid., 181.

³² Gerald McDermott *One Happy and Holy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (University Park: Pennsylvania U. Press), 8.

³³ Simonson 13.

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Smith 139.

³⁶ Simonson 13-14.

³⁷ McClymond v-vi

³⁸ Angoff, 25.

that would appeal to the modern generation⁴⁰ Some doctrines, Edwards believed, were not only revealed in the Bible but also in "observation and experience".⁴¹ Scripture, however, had held firm against any kind of direct revelation that threatened to take that scripture "where it isn't supposed to go".⁴² To that end he always used a very disciplined approach, even to the extent of studying them in their original language.⁴³

Edwards viewed traditional ("profane") history as useful in human understanding, but saw the Bible as more useful in the spiritual realm. Scripture reveals God working in the lives of real people. It is seen as a "large and long river" whose branches may follow many different courses. Yet they inevitably flow into the plan of God.⁴⁴ The present then becomes a part of this vast history in which God would continue to touch people through grace. Jonathan Edwards saw himself as a part of this divine plan.

Jonathan Edwards held a tension between the poles of being a sacramentalist and a conversionist, for he maintained that both reflected the glory of God⁴⁵. Of course, he is most well known for the latter. There are many who joke about his preaching style which has been described as "fire and brimstone" preaching. The purpose, of course, is to literally scare the "hell" out of the parishioners. In truth this was an established homiletic approach at the time.⁴⁶ Edwards preaching was absolutely not emotional. Although the "fire and brimstone" description applied to only about 30% of his published sermons⁴⁷, they all had a similar construction: a text, a doctrine and an application. The first two

³⁹ Simonson, 57.

⁴⁰ McClymond, vii.

⁴¹ Smith, 84-85.

⁴² Carl J. C. Wolf *Jonathan Edwards on Evangelism*, (Westport CT: Greenwald Press Publishers), 36.

⁴³ Smith, 143.

⁴⁴ McClymond v.

⁴⁵ Lee, 113.

⁴⁶ Wolf, viii.

⁴⁷ McDermott, 133.

parts were very academically oriented, and the last provided “concrete experiences” designed for “improvement”.⁴⁸

Although his sermons show his academic side, it was that “application” part of the sermon that touched the “heart”. As Wilson Kinnach comments, “Jonathan Edwards had a way of touching them where they lived, getting into their hearts, their feelings, ...”⁴⁹ It seems that he was able to take the literal sense from scripture and achieve his “ultimate aim”, that is the “spirit-given sense” of the passage.⁵⁰ In other words he took a pre-critical approach to scripture but extended its scope by his hermeneutic approach.⁵¹ He wanted to overcome what had become a serious problem within congregations of that time. The words used in sermons had somehow become separated from the ideas and spiritual feelings to which they referred.⁵² It was empty rhetoric speaking to a heart that yearned to be filled with God’s love. According to Edwards, the words spoke to the head, but true holiness has its seat chiefly in the heart”.⁵³

Jonathan Edwards would “pull out all stops” in order to make sure that the hearts of his congregation would know God through the ideas he presented.⁵⁴ The approach was influenced by his generally negative view of New England in light of National Covenant. The “sins of the flesh”, so flagrant and rampant, demonstrated a profound ingratitude for the great mercy that God had shown New England.⁵⁵ In addition, he viewed human

⁴⁸ Angoff, 31.

⁴⁹ Angoff, 54.

⁵⁰ Hatch and Stout, 123.

⁵¹ Ibid., 119.

⁵² McClymond, 11.

⁵³ Wolf, 37.

⁵⁴ Hatch and Stout, 3.

⁵⁵ McDermott, 25.

history in a predetermined way; and all history will inevitably culminate with the millennium.⁵⁶

Edwards would appeal to the heart in an effort to affect human will dominated by motives reflecting original sin.⁵⁷ He was the “quintessence of Puritanism”, holding to ‘strict reform doctrine’ and using exegetical preaching to present a “bold and original conception of the human faith.”⁵⁸ This new conception was creating a narrative that formed an image of something that one cannot comprehend directly. The details of that narrative are designed to lead the mind “‘naturally and easily’ so that they are able to see ‘the whole transaction’ ”.⁵⁹ Even though he knew that “truth anchors belief”, he wanted his parishioners to “get the picture” in which the imagination would lead to a type of “visual sense impression”.⁶⁰ That impression was designed to create an apprehension of the “dark night of alienation”. Following traditional Puritan theology, such an impression formed the first step in the process of salvation.⁶¹ Edwards was very aware that the work of salvation flowed to the elect. by God’s loving grace. He was “priming the pump” in a sense, for, according to Edwards, “unless a person experiences the love of God as a power from the outside that registers itself upon the mind, he cannot be said to know the idea of God’s love”.⁶² To that end he would, somewhat like the parables, use images ideas from every day life. That imagery did more than stimulate the “sensible

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁷ Ahlstrom, 306.

⁵⁸ Ahlstrom, 312.

⁵⁹ Hatch and Stout, 119.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁶¹ McDermott, 135.

⁶² Simonson, 29.

experience; it relates all creation to the concrete and present world.”⁶³ In this way, Edwards believed that the Spirit of God infuses something supernatural”.⁶⁴

When the Great Awakening began, it did seem (at least to some) that the supernatural was somehow involved. There were surprising conversions throughout New England accompanied by ecstatic signs. Such occurrences were clearly “very spontaneous and wide ranging” and not part of a human plan.⁶⁵ The sermons of Edwards emphasized the centrality of individual saving faith and seemed to producing changes in the congregation. In Northampton, there were conversions that were “sudden, dramatic, inexplicable”, to which Jonathan Edwards had a ready explanation. They were the “peculiar and immediate work” of God’s Spirit.⁶⁶ He was not all surprised that conversions were often “accompanied by ecstatic signs”⁶⁷; it would naturally flow from the actions of the Spirit of God as it produces “terror” associated with the “mortified corruption of the heart”.⁶⁸ Those signs might also manifest because of “God-intoxication” when people are “consumed by the sovereignty of God”.⁶⁹ Regardless of the presence of these signs, there was clearly what seemed to be a response the Edwards’s ability to describe the corrupted state of the soul with imagery that broke through to the heart. In a similar vein, reports on Whitfield’s preaching spoke of “people going down as before a cannonball”.⁷⁰ In addition there was a general renewing of interest on reconciliation and saving faith.⁷¹ There was a great awakening indeed.

⁶³ McDermott, 135.

⁶⁴ Hatch and Stout, 108.

⁶⁵ Wentz, 172.

⁶⁶ Simonson, 45.

⁶⁷ Lee, 120.

⁶⁸ Smith, 35.

⁶⁹ Atkins, 108.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

In retrospect, the seeds of this awakening had been sown earlier. Similar events had occurred even in the Northampton Church under Stoddard. They were also occurrences in Connecticut and in parts of Europe.⁷² As has been discussed, a conducive atmosphere may have been created by the tensions of conflicting thought and other changes in society. It was a time when remembering the past was becoming more and more irrelevant to real life⁷³ The established reform view of the importance of scripture and the Augustinian idea of an individual's "hunger for God"⁷⁴ were confronted with the influences from Europe which brought a new source of revelation. This new revelation was fueled by the achievements of the new science and triggered a wholesale re-evaluation of many aspects of society including religion.⁷⁵

Regardless of the backdrop, the awakenings were profound. It was probably a wonderful surprise for Jonathan Edwards, for he had been very concerned with the state of Congregationalism. He observed many who "pretend to own the covenant [but are prone to] freely declare to their neighbors that they have [no] faith in Christ..."⁷⁶ Not all religious persons, shared his concern. The events of the Great Awakening" created great debate, for it was seen as either a great blessing or an horrendous curse. The changing nature of the times was focused on this one event. Jonathan Edwards became the spokesman for one perspective.

The controversy that ensued has been documented and so a detailed analysis is not necessary. Some of the basic aspects of this dialog, however, seem to speak to the

⁷² Ahlstrom, 281.

⁷³ Simonson, 63.

⁷⁴ Atkins, 107.

⁷⁵ Ahlstrom, 352.

⁷⁶ Edwards, 14.

greater issues underlying the “theological” debate. Theology is certainly involved; however it also reflects the stresses of societal change that were taking place.

The very public academic debate was acrimonious at times, reflecting the tension between the two sides. As is typical, people chose sides and there were two defined groups – the “Old Lights” and the “New Lights”, spokesmen being James Chauncy and Jonathan Edwards respectively. Chauncy, a Unitarian, had responded to the pull of Enlightenment thinking in a very different direction. He had very clear ideas as to the nature of God’s working.

As was stated earlier, the preaching of itinerant preachers, a relatively recent development, triggered the revival. These preachers presented a threat to the pastoral “status quo” and fully stressed individual conversion. Their approach not only involved the theological, it also impacted others of concern. The revivalists were seen by many as being “anti-intellectual”⁷⁷ as the ecstatic signs were apparently emotional. It was viewed as posing a threat to existing church structure as well. Not only was the nature of “itinerancy” a radically new idea, the revivalists questioned the authority of pastors who did not meet their criteria for personal conversion. There were overtones that suggested a danger to societal structure, and some of the later revivalists (especially James Davenport) had gone to such extremes as book burning.⁷⁸

The Old Lights had very clear notions of proper conduct. Led by Chauncy, they responded to this challenge to the Calvinist idea of “decency and order”. The revivalist “enthusiasm” was seen as a “form of illusion or idolatry, detracting [people] from the

⁷⁷ Lee, 114.

⁷⁸ Ahlstrom ,287.

truth of God's merciful love".⁷⁹ Underlying this theological argument was a more secular one, namely that the "emphasis on invisible witness, verbal testimony, and disrespect for authority, all opened the way to rejection of the Law."⁸⁰ Acknowledging Edward's ability as an academician, Chauncy attacked his interpretation by concluding "error is much more likely to be propagated, when it is mixed with the truth."⁸¹ Thus the revival was seen by some as a direct confrontation to the established order.

Of course, there was another interpretation to the same circumstances. Whereas Chauncy seemed to be responding to revivals mainly associated with the itinerant preachers, Edward's had first hand knowledge from the events that were actually happening within his own congregation. He was able to probe deeper and move beyond fear of change motivated by the apparent revival provoked disorder. In response to the assault by the Old Lights, Edwards was forced to examine and reflect upon the evidence on hand as seen through the lens of his own understanding of God. In the years of the Great Awakening and afterwards, Edwards published several works that showed his profound insight. The most notable were *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion*, *The Surprising Work of God* and *Religious Affections*. Within those works and other secondary sources, Edwards crystallizes a defense that embodies his theology and philosophy. Using both the Bible and his reasoning, he presents an academic understanding of a very emotional issue. In this way he makes it more acceptable to the academically inclined. He took some events that had "potential for chaos and disorder"⁸²

⁷⁹ Wentz, 178.

⁸⁰ Wentz., 162.

⁸¹ Hatch and Stout, 160.

⁸² Wentz, 178.

and presented a reasoned, balanced perspective. He was able to channel the winds of change into the fresh air of new understanding.

That new understanding always held the sovereignty of God in highest regard. The metaphysics and philosophical underpinnings were always secondary. Edwards assumed that God had always been active in history in the desire for redemption, and this outreach of God through grace continues into his present day. He saw God's hand at work in the revival and advised people not to "expose [themselves] to the calamity of those who pried into the Ark of God."⁸³ According to Ronald Knox, Edwards saw religious enthusiasm as a faith "requirement" that was "visibly penetrated with supernatural influences".⁸⁴ Talk of the revival had many aspects to it. Without knowing it, Edwards was forced to use his theological ideas to address psychological issues.⁸⁵ To Edwards, the Great Awakening was mixture of the secular and the divine. The difficulty was to avoid "throwing out the baby with the bath water". It was necessary to see the divine at work in the midst of the purely human response.

His analysis always involved the combining of biblical revelation with reason. He viewed humans as having a God created "soul and body ... so united that the body always follows the choices made by the mind".⁸⁶ The individual is affected by the "precise and disciplined way of what is founded in experience and reason".⁸⁷; therefore the life of a person includes "habits and tendencies that have been established over time".⁸⁸

⁸³ Hatch and Stout, 166.

⁸⁴ McClymond, 109.

⁸⁵ Lee, 117.

⁸⁶ Smith, 69.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 65.

Experiences and reason must be combined. Yet it must always be within the greater context of God. He is aware of emotional “false piety” that burns like a meteor and is quickly extinguished as contrasted with the “fixed stars” of true piety.⁸⁹ He was aware that revivalism can cause a separation of “emotion from reason ... feeling from thinking”, but genuine religion will be both “light and heat, head and heart”.⁹⁰ Jonathan Edwards knew that all he had done was bring to reality in the heart of his listeners Niehbur’s notion of “the precariousness of life’s purpose ... the utter insecurity of men and mankind.”⁹¹ It follows the Puritan view of salvation as a sequential process with distinct steps beginning with the awareness of the sinful state. The actual spiritual state is not based on the “approval of the godly” but by the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”⁹² Those signs of the indwelling of the Spirit are to be seen through Holy Scripture “... within the limits of those rules that the scriptures have given to distinguish a work of the Spirit of God...”.⁹³ One must always look for the “degree of conformity” to those rules.⁹⁴

Being biblically based, Jonathan Edwards held to the truth of 1Jn 4:1, the need to “test the spirits”.⁹⁵ Satan was very real to him and he was fully convinced that Satan could cause manifestations in a person so as to make that person believe he was converted when that was not the case.⁹⁶ He was aware that some “signs” were

⁸⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁰ Angoff, 20.

⁹¹ Angoff, 23.

⁹² Smith, 36-37.

⁹³ Edwards, 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁹⁵ Angoff, 24.

⁹⁶ Smith, 36.

objectionable and suggested that others might be demonic.⁹⁷ Therefore, one must be aware of possible “negative” signs that come from an origin other than God’s Spirit.

The main concern of Edwards, however, was those positive signs. He quickly distinguished what he called an ‘affection’ from pure emotion or passion. The “affections” were viewed as somewhat parallel to the conversion experiences of the Apostle Paul: love dwelling in the heart, joy of believing, a special kind of peace, and light of knowledge of Christ as the God.⁹⁸ The first of these is love from which all others flow. Love, according to Edwards, results from various “spiritual influences” that can be described as “supernatural and divine”.⁹⁹

His sermons, therefore, became a catalyst for this supernatural influence. Conversion occurred as a result of a true encounter with one’s sinful state and the knowledge of a loving, redeeming God was revealed. Edwards may have allowed the signs to appear, but he did not induce them. In contrast, many of the negative signs (crying “Hosanna”, some bodily actions and “appearances” of love) arise from no previous religious event.¹⁰⁰ The true conversion experience is a mixture of both the “natural and divine”.¹⁰¹

The important observation is the heart of the person as reflected in attitude and behavior. The various “affections” would stem from a change in heart. There would be a “new spiritual sense” and a new understanding of “moral excellency”. It would be an

⁹⁷ Ahlstrom, 302

⁹⁸ Smith, 32.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰⁰ Simonson, 58.

¹⁰¹ Wolf, 64.

internal change and linked to the message of the Gospel, not “visions” and other direct revelation.¹⁰²

As was indicated before, the first affection was love and all others flowed from that. These were, of course, what are now called the “gifts of the Spirit”. Edwards described them in great detail, some of the most important of which were pure love of God, the beauty of holiness, humility, change in nature, and the development of a Christ-like character.¹⁰³ This was to be the ultimate effect of sanctification that followed conversion (justification). Edwards knew that those other signs that some found so objectionable could “lead to those ‘ultimate’ effects”.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the evaluation of effect must be on the ultimate. Edwards knew that a true inner change was never divorced from eventual outward expression. In other words, “holy practice is meant to be the evidence of the person’s true Christianity to others ... it is not just the motion of the body that counts, but the ‘motion and exercise of the soul’”.¹⁰⁵ The “affections” are not emotions, passions or aspects of the “will”. Edwards saw them as signs of “genuine piety”, vehicles that move a person “from neutrality to God”.¹⁰⁶

Edwards then agreed with his opponents that certain signs, in and of themselves, might not have any spiritual significance. Yet he emphasized that, while rejecting such “ensorious behavior”, one must not judge the whole by a certain part. In *Thoughts on Revival in Religion*, Edwards cautions people of faith not to simply stand by and “not

¹⁰² Smith, 41-42.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 41-44.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁶ Ahlstrom, 303.

come to the help of the lord, whenever he pours out his spirit".¹⁰⁷ In that same work, the words of Edwards himself eloquently explains his position:

Whatever imprudence there have been and whatever sinful irregularities; whatever vehemence of the passions, and heats of the imagination, transports and ecstasies; and whatever error in judgment, and indiscreet zeal; and whatever outcries, and fainting, and agitations of the body ... That has been attended with the following effects, viz. A great increase of serious and sober consideration of the eternal word ... It is astonishing to see the alteration that is in some towns, where before was but little appearance of religion."¹⁰⁸

Edwards espouses a balance of head and heart advocating an evaluation based on internal changes, reflected by an outward expressions of the gifts of the Spirit.

He certainly acknowledged the validity of some his critics' conclusions. Yet he was aware that criticism does not always spring from godly motivation. He had suggested at least three other reasons for unwarranted criticism. The first is the tendency to judge events by one's own history of experience and understanding. Since it hasn't been seen before (at least by them), they choose to "limit God where he has not limited himself".¹⁰⁹ Second, he believes that "spiritual pride" can cause individuals to use an incorrect principle of direct revelation that can "take scripture where it wasn't supposed to go".¹¹⁰ Finally, he points out a fact of human nature which affects how one can fail to judge a true work of the Spirit. He relates his observation that some have "great options ... to doubt of things that are strange; especially it is difficult for elderly persons, those

¹⁰⁷ Wolf, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁹ Wolf, 39.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

that have lived a great while in the world, to think that to be right that which they have never been used to in their day...”.¹¹¹ Jonathan Edwards really believed in evaluating the end result rather than the process that created it. He firmly held that God does “work in mysterious ways”, and that human mind has developed ways of not seeing divinity at work.

The current prominence of Edwards is remarkable. Yet one must how much that influence would have been if the great Awakening had not taken place. He may be an excellent example of the idea that that fame and influence often result from “being the right person at the right time”. The time was one tremendous change in which the tension between the pull of the past and the push of new ideas was tearing at the fabric of society. The old order of religion had become “comatose”. The influences of the Enlightenment created a new way of look at life and faith. It would appear that somehow God chose to work in a most amazing way, and Edwards had the eyes that could see it. He could stand fast and see a divine plan at work, but he was also aware of the inherent problems of the purely human response. He was able to “see the forest through the trees”.

In many ways the forces of that time remind this author of today. Much of the mainline religion is waning while all forms of new ideas of spirituality grow and develop. The world is in a state of changed dominated by technology, but also wrenched by the powers of war, terror, power, politics and distribution of wealth. Humankind is basically the same, looking to fill the basic needs of the soul. God may truly work again.

As a result, one must look at why Jonathan Edwards may have been the “right person” in his day. Certainly, he was a product of his world and a certain worldview.

¹¹¹ Edwards, 22.

His approach to scripture is different for many; his view of National Covenant and the importance of the millennium no relevance. Yet one can see various threads that may transcend the limitations of his time. As Douglas Elwood reflects, “Religion is not a way of looking at certain things, but a certain way of looking at all things”.¹¹² The threads that formed the fabric of this special of way seeing all things included the following:

1. Edwards always used an absolute standard for judging actions, one that wasn't subject to fad and changing philosophy. Scripture, as he understood it, became the arbiter of truth.
2. Edwards accepted new ideas of the Enlightenment as having potential and worthy of study. As he learned and incorporated them, they were used to bolster and define his faith rather than to dilute it.
3. Edwards understood the nature of humankind as being a unity of body, mind and spirit; that could all interact with one another.
4. Edwards knew the reality of the “hole in the soul”. He may have understood it in terms of facing the reality of hell and judgment, but the motive was to bring the truth, love and power of the Gospel message into a person's reality.
5. Finally, Edwards understood that nobody could put God “in a box”. God may choose to work in ways that are different from what is the norm, but one must keep an open mind (and heart) and judge by the fruits that grow from it.

Some of the events of the Great Awakening (and all revivals) were unusual and disconcerting. Some may have been responses from sources other than God. Yet in the final analysis, many were brought in to the Church with a deep inner change of heart. It forced people out of their comatose spiritual state. In the end, the face of religion had been changed forever.

The visible church today is facing a difficult environment. Generally speaking, the numbers of members is shrinking and interest in mainline religion waning. American

¹¹² McClymond, 110.

society has become complacent and many see a developing moral laxity. Perhaps the time is ripe for another work of God. Jonathan Edwards' experience may be a model for those of the "Way" today.

Let us be open to God's Spirit and not assume that past expression is the only way of expression. Let us reaffirm the mystery of God in working out the divine plan of redemption. In describing Jonathan Edwards, an English professor reflected "... despite my ignorance of the technical aspects of [his] metaphysics, epistemology, and logic.... They were genuine attempts to come to terms with the Unknowable."¹¹³ Let those who covenant together to follow the "Way " use the appreciation of faith, fellowship and freedom to try to do the same.

¹¹³ Angoff, 17.

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