

CONVERSION IN JONATHAN EDWARDS' PRIVATE LIFE AND PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY

by

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In the 1740's New England saw a spiritual renewal so amazing that it became known as the "Great Awakening." What caused this awakening? One approach to this question is to look at one of the most well-known and influential preachers of the day, Jonathan Edwards. Why did 300 people come to a knowledge of Jesus as Savior and Lord within half a year in his small town of Northampton, Massachusetts? Why were 140 added to his church of 620 communicants? Surely, Jonathan Edwards himself was an important factor. What did he do to be so instrumental in the conversions of others? And what made him, so in love with God and such a deeply committed Christian? Answers to these important questions can be sought through studying the process of conversion in Jonathan Edwards' personal life and in his professional ministry.

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703 in Windsor, Connecticut. His family was to have a decisive influence on him. His maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was a distinguished minister. He was the minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, where Jonathan Edwards would later be a minister. Stoddard undoubtedly had some effect on Edwards. Yet certainly Edwards' own parents had even more impact on his life. He wrote in his diary on Saturday night, May 18, 1723, "I now plainly perceive what great obligations I am under to love and honor my parents. I have great reason to believe, that their counsel and education have been my making; notwithstanding, in the time of it, it seemed to do me so little good. I have good reason to hope that their prayers for me, have been in many things very powerful and prevalent; that God has in many things, taken me under his

care and guidance, provision and direction, in answer to their prayers for me."¹ Edwards' father, Timothy Edwards, was a minister in Windsor, Connecticut, so he not only received the Christian upbringing a minister would give his child, but he was early ~~father~~ with the practice and language of the ministry. Jonathan Edwards' father was a man of great intelligence. He ^{was} graduated from Harvard in 1691, and was the first student ever to receive the Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees on the same day. So Timothy Edwards was the instructor ~~not only of his own children~~ but also of some of the children of the town. Timothy Edwards kept a close but not harsh supervision over his children. He wrote to his wife on Tuesday, August 7, 1711 from Newhaven, ~~while on military duty~~ (spelling modernized):

I hope thou wilt take special care of Jonathan that he don't learn to be rude and naughty etc. of which thee and I have lately discoursed. I wouldn't have thee venture him to ride into the woods with ~~Jim~~. [ghore boy]

I hope God will help thee to be very careful that no harm happen to the little children by scalding wort, whey, ~~water~~, or by standing too nigh Tim when he is cutting wood...²

Filial obedience was the first law of the household, but Jonathan also had a deep, loving relationship with his father, and he often conversed with and confided in his father. Timothy Edwards was indeed the head of the house, but he depended a great deal on his wife as his able helper in running the household. There was a comradeship between them, and Timothy Edwards was kind to his wife. He also respected his wife's competence with the routine duties of home and children. It is quite possible that the relationship between his parents was a model for Jonathan Edwards' later partnership with Sarah Herrepoint Edwards. In any case Jonathan Edwards' parents' guidance of him profoundly affected his entire life.

Another formative influence on Edwards' life was his education. With a very intelligent father and his own able mind, which he apparently inherited from his father, Jonathan Edwards was "born to be educated," and there is

some evidence that his schooling began as soon as he could talk. His early education consisted of individual tutoring by his father. Timothy Edwards believed in education for all his children and gave even his ten daughters the equivalent of a college preparatory course, a rare occurrence in those days. Jonathan began his study of Latin at age six. The schooling from his father was strict. Timothy Edwards demanded accuracy, perfection, and permanent not temporary knowledge of what was studied. Each child was taught by the older ones and in turn taught the younger ones, so that the information was indeed impressed on each child for life.

Jonathan Edwards was curious and eager to learn. His father stimulated his interest in natural sciences. Jonathan learned from direct observation, hypotheses, experiments, and an appreciation of beauty. When he was ten or twelve, he wrote a study on spiders and one on rainbows, both rather precocious. His curiosity in natural sciences continued until the end of his life. His curiosity and empirical methods were very useful to him later in his ministry, especially in the field of the psychology of religion.

Jonathan's early schooling with his father developed his capacity for intellectual reasoning as well as giving him factual knowledge such as a reading knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He was certainly well-prepared for college! Jonathan's thirteen years at home had given him a good education.

Jonathan entered Yale in 1716 at thirteen years of age. At first he immersed himself in the study of natural sciences. Yet for two reasons he turned from sciences to philosophy. The first was the fragmentary nature of scientific knowledge. Facts were not enough for him; he wanted an all-inclusive system. The second reason was that science was superficial; he could answer the questions too easily and simply. He wanted to search in a discipline where no answers were obtainable. So for a time Edwards turned

to the study of philosophy.

Yet the study of philosophy could not hold him permanently either. For one thing, if he did want to teach philosophy he would have to be ordained. He turned to theology, yet other factors were probably more important in this decision than the need for ordination to be a professor of philosophy. For one thing, theology is applied philosophy, and Edwards didn't want truth only for truth's sake. Also, while a philosophy is individualistic and worked out primarily for the benefit of the philosopher, theology is socialistic and is useful not only for the theologian but also for the entire church. Also, there were the influences of his having been brought up in a parsonage and of his own religious experiences. When it came to choosing a denomination, Edwards selected the Congregational Church. Congregationalism was the most dominant in New England, but Anglicanism was common, too. Yet the Episcopal church was tainted with Arminianism, and Edwards was strongly Calvinistic. Therefore, the Congregational Church was much more suitable for him. Edwards received his Bachelor of Arts degree in September 1720. Then he prepared for the ministry and received his Master of Arts degree in September 1723.

As important as his family and education were to him, surely his religious experiences had the most profound influence on his becoming such a devout Christian. Edwards felt that he never had a conventional conversion experience, a fact which troubled him somewhat. However, he had several experiences which led to his being a Christian. When he was about ten years old, a revival in his father's church caused him and some of his friends to be rather "religious" for awhile. They built booths for prayer in the woods and did other pious duties. It was not an overly profound religious experience for Edwards; it was more a quickened delight in the outward duties of religion, an imitation of the adults, a playing at religion. Yet it meant enough to Edwards that he built a second booth ~~in the woods~~ in the woods where he could pray alone. He felt that religion was too personal to be fully shared with others. This was a

a foreshadowing of his later statement that religion must be an individual experience or it is nothing. The effect his religious experience had on him was reflected in a letter to his sister Mary, written when he was twelve years old. He saw life in the town from the angle of the pulpit and told her first of the thirteen new church members, then of five deaths in the town, and only last of his own recent illness and toothache. Just before he left for college there was another revival in his father's church, and his mother and one of his sisters were converted. The first thirteen years of his life determined many things for Edwards. He had developed a rather sober view of life for a young boy. He had a reflective bent and was quite self-disciplined. Religion was his unquestioned goal in life. He could think for himself. He knew the benediction of solitude amid the quiet beauty of the woods, and he had the beginnings of a deep understanding sympathy, probably learned from his relationship with his father.

During college he became even more self-disciplined and broke off "his wicked ways." Then in 1721 after he had been graduated from college, he had two very moving experiences. From childhood he had always rejected the concept of God's sovereignty, but in 1721 he became convinced and fully satisfied as to God's sovereignty and His justice. He became reconciled and peaceful about these ideas. It seemed so reasonable that at the time, Edwards did not even recognize it was a work of God. Later Edwards had not only a conviction of God's sovereignty but a delightful conviction of it:

The first that I remember that I ever found any thing of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Tim. 1:17. "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever, Amen." As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused thro' 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 wrapt up to God in Heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in Him. I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of scripture to myself; and went to prayer, to pray to God that I might enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do;

with a new sort of affection. But it never came into my thought, that there was any thing spiritual, or of a saving nature in this.)

That was how Edwards himself described that crucial Christian experience in his own account. From that time Edwards' delight in God grew. He enjoyed God, His majesty, holiness, and power. He was, in a sense, in love with God, as he described further in his writings:

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. I had an inward, sweet sense of these things, that at times came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant ~~visions~~ and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged, to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ; and the beauty and excellency of His person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in Him....I had vehement longings of soul after God and Christ, and after ~~more~~ holiness; wherewith my heart seemed to be full, and ready to break...)

Edwards' family, his education, and his religious experiences were the major^{over} influences in his life. He was a man who strove for perfection of knowledge, beauty, holiness, and self-discipline. He thirsted for knowledge and read many books, especially those on divinity. He was absorbed with God and took great delight in His word, receiving much spiritual food from it. One ~~other~~ large influence which should be noted was his wife, Sarah Pierrepont Edwards. She was absolutely devoted to him and guarded his health carefully, since he was prone to illness. She was also a great support in his later ministry, since^{she} was also a very deep Christian. She had rather mystical experiences with God, and there seemed to be a constant flowing of divine love from Christ's heart to hers. The two of them talked together on matters of religion and prayed together once a day.

The deep Christian man Edwards had become through all these influences was given direction by his great desire for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world. He became a preacher, and his burning desire to

spread the gospel was part of the reason why he ~~was to become~~ become a run-of-the-mill preacher who simply filled a necessary position in a church. Jonathan Edwards was called to the Northampton church where his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was the minister. Edwards was ordained to the ministry at the Northampton church on February 15, 1727. Stoddard and his grandson worked together until Stoddard's death two years later. Then Edwards continued the work at Northampton alone. Edwards' excellence in three major areas made him not only a very effective minister there but also a leader in the New England churches with an influence over even a wider area; his three areas of excellence were preaching, pastoral care, and writing.

There were several factors which made Edwards the outstanding preacher he was. First among these was his extensive preparation for his sermons and lectures. This preparation had first claim on his time. He often spent thirteen hours a day in his study. He studied many books, but he studied the Bible more than all other books and more than most other ministers. This careful Biblical study showed in his sermons and in his writings. Edwards long hours of study and preparation were made possible by his wife who took able responsibility for running many of the routines of the household, though, of course, he was the head of the household and did spend time with his family. Edwards mind was never far from his preaching and teaching responsibilities, and he took paper and pen and ink everywhere with him to jot down ideas as they came to him. After Edwards had gathered his ideas through study and thought, he took great pains in composing his sermons. He wrote out his sermons for twenty years, though he by no means simply read his sermons when he was in the pulpit.

A second important factor in his quality preaching was the content of his sermons and lectures. He was "a meaty preacher, constantly feeding the minds of his people and giving them much to think about as well as stilling their consciences."⁶ He spoke from a wealth of

knowledge about the Bible and of universal knowledge. His thoughts were both clear and logical. He used vivid imagery to illustrate his points.

The third vital aspect of his preaching was his delivery. His manner was easy, natural, and solemn. He spoke with distinctness and precision in a strong, loud voice. His sermons were not overly long; they did not need to be. He was sensitive to people's reception and varied his words according to the need. He appealed to emotions at times, but more often he relied on the content of the sermons to reach the people. The most important aspect of his delivery was his own inner fervor. His own sense of the divine truth and his own deep experience in Christianity were conveyed to the congregation;

He had--and in a peculiar degree he made ~~him~~ feel that he had--a consciousness of the reality and presence of God. God was not to him a being remote and obscure. He was the closest of friends, the highest object of his loyalty, his adoration, and his love. That he walked close with God must always be the deepest impression which Edwards makes on those who come to know him and to understand the source of his power.

His own experiences gave him insight into human nature, so he could lay truth before the minds of his congregation not only to convince the judgment but to touch the heart and conscience. He spoke "out of the abundance of the heart" (Matthew 12:34), so he was able to speak to the hearts of others.

Edwards was a strong Calvinist, and God's sovereignty was a substantial part of his preaching. Edwards felt that it was God's privilege and right to save or to damn, and this privilege was consistent with His justice and mercy. This doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty was, for Edwards, the most effective message with respect to the salvation of sinners. A recurrent theme in Edwards' preaching was that God never gives salvation unless men seek it earnestly; it is a great gift and should not be given unless there is a real desire. Seeking does not make a person more

deserving of God's grace; it only makes him a bit more relatively fit and a bit less evil. God has already taken the initiative toward men; men should respond by seeking, and directions for seeking God were in almost every one of Edwards' sermons. Edwards was predestinarian and felt that the ability to seek salvation would not always lead to the ability to find belief and salvation, yet if men did not seek God, there would be no possibility of their being saved. Men could not necessarily believe, but they could seek. So, though Edwards was a strong Calvinist, he was also an evangelist. Yet though he emphasized God's absolute sovereignty in giving salvation, he also stressed Christ's love, the truth and faithfulness of God, God's power to save, and God's certain promises. He encouraged people to find a balance and avoid presumption, because God is sovereign, and avoid discouragement, because God is gracious.

Edwards stressed the crucial necessity of seeking and strongly urged all to do so. He confronted them by their sinfulness, their sin of unbelief, their opposing salvation through Christ, and some of their sinful practices. He sometimes gave hellfire sermons and preached on the fearful terrors that would come to the wicked, but he also stressed the love of God and appealed to the hope of reward. He pressed his hearers for a decision and warned against prevarication because of theological arguments or quibbles against God.

Edwards found two basic steps in a person's conversion. The first was when the person was convicted of his guilt and need, perhaps through Edwards' preaching or through their own reading of the Bible. At this time the person felt miserable and like a beggar. Edwards' preaching encouraged the convicted person to seek the gift of belief through Bible reading, prayer, self-discipline, and waiting on God. Edwards preached that people must come to God through Christ alone. Salvation was given upon a person's

receiving the gift of belief. Then came the second step of conversion, which was God's help in straightening out the person's life. Yet, even for the converted, Edwards had a word. They must not rest on their laurels, but they must continue with Paul to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14) The converted now should seek God out of love for God and man and not just out of their own selfish interests as before conversion.. Edwards preached that Christians should have a disinterested love for God, a love for Him because of who He is and not because of what He can give. It should not be a sentimental love of being in love with being in love. This disinterested love for God should also lead to a disinterested love for others. Edwards really challenged his congregation at whatever stage they were, in relating to God.

That Edwards' preaching was indeed excellent was shown by the reactions of the people:

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 neighbors.

He greatly affected people, because "He was young, handsome, brilliant, incisive, convinced, and convincing."⁹ That he could preach well was further attested by the fact that the young people listened to him eagerly and even heeded his suggestions that they stay home at least twice a week and that they meet for prayer. Such response from young people was indeed a high tribute for Edwards as it would be for any preacher! Edwards' preaching must have been a major factor in the revival of 1734-35 and also in the Great Awakening of the 1740's.

A second factor after Edwards' skill in preaching which was important

in the conversions of people in his congregation was his pastoral care. His method was unique in that he did not do much visiting in people's homes unless he were sent for by the sick or unless he knew of some special affliction. He did not feel visiting was part of the gospel ministry unless a minister had a special calling for it. He felt that he could help people more through his preaching, counseling people in his study, and writing. Instead of visiting he encouraged people to come and talk to him in his study, and he also did some preaching at private meetings. Edwards was a skillful guide and counselor. His study often saw a steady progression of people during revival times, and even his wife Sarah had to help out with some of the counseling. At these times he would talk with at least four people a day for five or six weeks at a time. He was often sought by people scores of miles away. This work was very draining, but it was also very important in the conversions of many people. Edwards saw each person as an individual. He felt that because of each person's uniqueness, no two people would have the same conversion experience or follow the same patterns. The observation skills he had developed in his study of nature as a boy helped him in determining each person's uniquenesses and so in dealing with each person with methods that were especially appropriate for him. Edwards was an excellent counselor because of his own experience, his intimate knowledge of the Bible, and his experiences of talking with many people. He instructed people who were seeking salvation, he reassured the doubtful about their conversions (even though as a Calvinist he could never be truly sure about someone's salvation, he could give some assurance), and he taught converted Christians about grace and scripture and how to apply these to themselves. He often called children and youth to his house to pray with them, and every Sunday during the summer he used to catechize the children in public.

The effectiveness of Edwards' preaching and pastoral care was proven by the many conversions in his town,, especially during the revival times of 1734-35 and the 1740's. Though Edwards felt that no two conversions were alike, there were some common elements in the conversions. At first people usually reacted to hearing the gospel with excuses, rationalizations, and anger, but later they came to realize their need for help and came to talk to him. Many different things stimulated people's desires to seek salvation, such as the desire to receive the same blessings others received, something they heard at church or at another religious meeting, a conference with the minister, convictions of the truths and forgiveness of God, wanting communion with God, abhorrence at themselves and their sins, a desire to live for God's glory, reading something in the Bible, reasoning, a conviction of God's justice, or the news of another's conversion. This last, the news of another's conversion, was, in Edwards' knowledge, the most effective stimulus in awakening sinners, stirring them to seek the same blessings, and quickening the saints. Edwards found that when a person was convicted he was first awakened by a sense of his miserable condition, his danger of perishing eternally, and his need to better his condition. He then became convinced of his absolute dependence on God's sovereignty and grace and of his need for a mediator. These convictions might be quite sudden or might come on gradually.

Whatever the rate and means of conviction, there were two general effects. The first was that the convicted sinner quit many of his sinful practices; the second was that he began to seek salvation with earnestness. The ways of seeking salvation were many. Prayer, reading the Bible, meditation, waiting on God, doing moral and religious duties, paying the cost, and persisting even through difficulties were some of these. While it was true for Edwards as a Calvinist, that God alone saves, he also thought that God uses means to bring people to salvation, such as their firm resolution, self-discipline,

and obedience.

When a person sought salvation, God often bestowed it on him, and thus the person was converted. After the conversion the person felt an almost mystic love for God and Christ. He was utterly overcome by God and really longed for Him. His mind would often be wrapped in delightful contemplation of the glory and wonderful grace of God. Immediately after conversion, the Holy Spirit often brought pieces of scripture to the mind of the new Christian; these were appropriate for the person's need, such as promises or verses of praise. For the newly converted person, the gospel, the Bible, and preaching all usually seemed quite new, since the Holy Spirit had given him a new perspective and a new insight. New Christians often felt that Christianity seemed so logical, and they wondered why they had not sought God sooner. They became convinced of the truth of the gospel, that scripture was indeed God's word, and of the truth of certain doctrines; "The converting influences of God's spirit very commonly bring an extraordinary conviction of the reality and certainty of the great things of religion..."¹⁰ Edwards clearly saw salvation as God's gift and conversion as a work of His Spirit.

While Edwards' preaching and pastoral care had a strong influence in the conversions of people in Northampton, his writings had an influence over a much larger area. In the Great Awakening of 1740-41, ministers and lay people looked to Edwards for leadership, because they knew of his piety, experience, and knowledge, and they also knew about the 1734-35 revival in his church. His writings were a great help to both ministers and lay people during the revivals in their churches in the 1740's.

Four of his major works were on revivals. His first was an account of the 1734-35 revival at Northampton, written in the form of a letter dated November 6, 1736. He described the conditions in the town before the revival. There was dullness in religion, youth often frequented the tavern and were

often out late at night, and behavior of young people at church was indecent. Like a flash of lightning the revival struck the town. People saw their need for God and responded to Him. The town became full of love, and the tavern became almost deserted. Edwards' reaction to all this was shown by the title of the work, A Faithful Narrative of the surprising Work of God in the conversion of many Hundred Souls in Northampton. The word "surprising" gives evidence of his amazement at what happened. He did not just see it as the results of his own efforts in preaching; ~~he saw it as the work of God~~

In his next work on revivals he acted not as a historian of revivals as he had been in A Faithful Narrative but rather as an apologist of revivals against some of the opposition to them. The work was published in November 1741 as The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Applied to that Uncommon Operation that has lately Appeared on the Minds of Many of the People of New-England, with a Particular Consideration of the Extraordinary Circumstances with which this Work is Attended. In it he said that the revival was based on sound theory but is subject to perversion by those who do not know the difference between true and false religion. In his third work on revivals, he became a critic of them. The book was published in 1742 as Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England and the way in which it Ought to be Acknowledge and Promoted; humbly offered to the Public in a Treatise on that Subject. Edwards said that one possible reason why the revivals sometimes got out of hand was that the ministers were youthful and inexperienced. His last work on revivals was Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, in which he gave his theology of revivals, ~~and~~ the work was first given as a series of sermons in 1742-43 and then published as a book in 1746. In it he gave an answer to the question "What is Religion?" He felt that true religion would be the criterion by which any religious experience, such as those that

result from revivals, could be tested. First he discussed twelve popular ideas of religion (of some of the contemporary leaders) and then showed why each was wrong. He said that religion was not just emotionalism or loss of psychological control. He also declared that it was wrong to "limit" the Spirit of God to work in only certain ways in converting people. True religion, for Edwards, was a kind of ethical and emotional response to a specific intellectual stimulus; it was comprehensive and not just made up of ethics, or emotionalism, or orthodox beliefs. Edwards described a true religious experience as one that touched a person's conscience and produced a lifestyle of Christian practices. He felt that the essence of true religion was love and that the pre-eminent characteristic of love was humility. True religion should produce humility, courage, joy, a spirit of love toward all men, and disinterested love for God (love for God for who He is and not for what He can do for the person). Throughout his works Edwards made it plain that he was very much in favor of revivals. He knew their dangers, but he also knew the tremendous good they could do. It was for this reason that he spent the time and effort he did in promoting them in his own church and through his writings.

Edwards did quite a bit of writing besides those works on revivals. He wrote three works on Calvinistic beliefs, On Justification, The Freedom of the Will, and Original Sin. He edited Memoirs of David Brainerd, which was published in 1749. Brainerd was an extraordinary missionary to Indians. Edwards also published numerous sermons and left 1400 miscellaneous writings, all carefully catalogued. Edwards did quite a bit of writing indeed, and through them he was a great deal of help to pastors and laymen.

The results of Edwards' preaching, pastoral care, and writings were quite evident both in Northampton and in the surrounding area. Edwards described some of the effects of the revival of 1734-35 in A Faithful

Narrative: "The town was full of the presence of God; it was never so full of love nor so full of joy and yet so full of distress as it was then...."¹¹ Satan was restrained; there was less sickness and less depression during the revival than at other times. The ethical results were quite numerous. There were no more quarrels, backbiting, or meddling. Instead the people confessed their sins against each other and became reconciled to one another. The people spoke of Christian things, only conversing on secular topics when it was necessary for business. The revival penetrated all parts of society. The young people responded first. About the same number of men and women were converted; this was unusual, since before more women had been converted than men. A great number of elderly people were also converted, when in previous times it was rare that anyone past middle age was converted. Likewise it had been quite unusual for young children to be converted, but about thirty-three young children^(under fourteen) appeared to have received salvation.¹² Another amazing fact was the quickness of the response and conversion of the people:

God has also seemed to have gone out of his usual way in the quickness of his work, and the swift progress his spirit has made in his operation, on the hearts of many: 'Tis wonderful that persons should be so suddenly, and yet so greatly changed: Many have been taken from a loose and careless way of living, and seized with strong convictions of their guilt and misery, and in a very little time old things have passed away, and all things have become new with them.¹³

Within half a year, three hundred out of six hundred communicants were savingly converted. These results were really long-term results, too. One and a half years after the revival, Edwards wrote, "we still remain a reformed people, and God has evidently made us a new people."¹⁴

Revivals occurred in other towns, too. In 1735 there were revivals throughout much of Connecticut; New Jersey, and New York were affected, too. Some of these occurred after the pastor or a church member from a

different church heard about the revival at Northampton; some occurred without any knowledge of what had happened there. God's Spirit was evidently at work in many areas. In 1740 the Great Awakening began which spread like wildfire through much of New England and touched some of the middle colonies as well.

It is quite apparent that there are many answers possible to the question of why Edwards became such a deep Christian and such an outstanding minister and why he was such an influence in the conversions of others. In Edwards' own life, his family, his schooling, and his personal religious experiences were the most obvious factors. Yet many ministers' children totally reject the Christianity they hear preached from infancy, many who have great minds or who attend college do nothing out of the ordinary, and many who have religious experiences soon lose their fervor. What made Edwards more than what any of these or even all three together could make him was the Holy Spirit. Edwards himself recognized this. When he wrote about his parents in his diary, he not only expressed recognition and appreciation for what his parents had done, but he also noted, "I have good reason to hope that their prayers for me, have been in many things very powerful and prevalent; that God has in many things, taken me under his care and guidance, provision and direction, in answer to their prayers for me."¹⁵ He saw God as working through and beyond what his parents had done. In a similar way, God used Edwards' education to prepare him for his future work. In Edwards' personal religious experiences, the work of God's Spirit is also quite evident. His conviction of God's sovereignty and justice in 1721 apparently happened without any logical reason and rather suddenly. And in his description of his later delightful conviction of God's sovereignty, he says of 1 Timothy 1:17, "As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused thro' 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...went to prayer...and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection."¹⁶ The suddenness of his delight in God's sovereignty, the new effect of the words of 1 Timothy 1:17, and the changes that occurred in his appreciation of God and his attitude toward God were rather evidently the works of God's Spirit. As Edwards himself said, "Conversion is a great and glorious work of God's power."¹⁷ What Edwards' parents, his schooling, and he himself did were of immense importance, since God only works where people are open to Him, but the work of the Holy Spirit was the decisive factor in who Jonathan Edwards became.

In Edwards' ministry, too, the decisive factor was the work of the Holy Spirit. The time and effort Edwards spent in preaching, pastoral care, and writing were very necessary, but they were not in themselves sufficient to accomplish the great things that happened in Northampton and in the area around. Edwards often spoke of the revivals as God's work, but never as his own work. He used expressions like "God's work," "the work of God's Spirit," "this great work of God," and "the influences of God's Spirit" in almost every paragraph of A Faithful Narrative, giving the credit to God for the events that happened. That there were revivals in other towns besides Edwards' without the people's knowing of the revival at Northampton, is also evidence that the revivals were the work of God's Spirit and not the work of one man.

Therefore, the conversion of Jonathan Edwards into a dedicated Christian and the conversions which resulted from his ministry were the joint works of human instruments and God's Spirit. As people are open to the Spirit and do

their part, God does the actual work in the lives of others, convicting people of their need for Him, forgiving sins, giving new life, and pouring out His Spirit into their lives. As Paul said in I Corinthians 3:6, "I planted, ~~Apollos~~ watered, but God gave the growths".

Footnotes

¹ Samuel Hopkins, "The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards," in Jonathan Edwards, A Profile, David Levin, ed., (New York, Hill and Wang, 1969), pp. 16-17.

² Olga Elizabeth Winslow, Jonathan Edwards, (New York, New York, Collier Books, 1961), p. 46.

³ Hopkins, op. cit., p. 26.

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶ Arthur Cushman McGuiffert, Jr., Jonathan Edwards, (New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932), p. 98.

⁷ Williston Walker, Great Men of the Christian Faith, (Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press) 1908, p. 352.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the surprising Work of God in the conversion of many Hundred Souls in Northampton," in The Works of President Edwards, Vol. III, Isaiah Thomas, Jr., ed., (Worcester, Isaac Sturtevant, printer, 1808), p. 17.

⁹ McGuiffert, op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁰ Edwards, op. cit., p. 47.

¹¹ McGuiffert, op. cit., p. 54.

¹² Edwards, op. cit., p. 24.

¹³ Ibid., . . .

¹⁴ McGuiffert, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁵ Hopkins, op. cit., 16-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷ Edwards, op. cit., p. 45.

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