

Reformed Theological Seminary

**Jonathan Edwards: His Theology of Revival and Awakening**

Submitted to  
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## List of References

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Jonathan Edwards has continued to arouse attention for more than two centuries. The reasons for this are obvious. How many other individuals in church history can lay claim to the titles revivalist, theologian, pastor, philosopher, missionary, college president, and family man? To fulfill such a wide array of seemingly conflicting roles would appear to take several lifetimes, yet Edwards fulfilled them all with excellence in a span of approximately 50 years. A strong grasp of the balance of biblical teaching allowed Edwards to succeed in these disparate areas. In particular, Edwards' theology of revival and awakening display this sense of balance. In this paper I will look at several of Edwards' writings to discover his theology of personal and corporate revival and awakening.

### **A Brief History of Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup>**

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in Windsor, Connecticut. Both his father and grandfather were pastors, and young Jonathan began learning Latin at the tender age of six, and entered Yale at the age of twelve. He graduated from Yale in 1720 as the valedictorian, and then spent two more years preparing for the ministry. During these formative years, Edwards developed a habit of rigorous thought, especially with regard to the things of Christianity. For example, he wrote a series of now famous "Resolutions" which detail his desires in life. Resolution #61 declares, "Resolved, That I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it."<sup>2</sup> Edwards wanted to use all of his energies and abilities to serve God and bring glory to His name.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this information is gleaned from John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 49-75, and John Gerstner, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (taped audio series distributed by the Institute for Theological Studies), (Grand Rapids: Outreach, Inc.), Lectures 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint of 1834 Hickman edition originally published in Great Britain), 1:lxiv.

This same passion for God can be seen in his selection of a wife. Sarah Edwards displayed great love for Christ from her early years, and this devotion continued throughout her life. She and Jonathan enjoyed a very happy marriage, raising eleven children while serving God and his people, thus providing an excellent model for later church leaders.

The majority of Edwards' life, and the part which will most concern this paper, was spent as pastor of the Congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He served as pastor of this congregation for twenty three years, and was used of God to lead the first Great Awakening that shook the American colonies during the 1730's and 1740's. Thus, Edwards developed a theology of revival and awakening, not from the academic rooms of Yale or Princeton, but as the pastor of a congregation experiencing one of the great movements of God in the history of the Christian church. It is principally from his sermons and writings produced during this time that I will derive his theology of revival and awakening.

### **Edwards on the Sovereignty of God and Responsibility of Man in Revival and Awakening**

The first step in corporate revival and awakening is personal regeneration. In regeneration, the soul that is dead in trespasses and sins is brought to life. When this happens to many individuals at once, it is often called revival or awakening. Therefore, to discover Edwards' view of revival and awakening, and why these occur, we must begin by looking at his view of the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in seeking salvation.

Clearly, the sovereignty of God formed the cornerstone of Edwards' theology. A brief perusal of sermon titles displays this point plainly: *The Sole Consideration, That God is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty; God Glorified in Man's Dependence;* and *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*. On the other hand, Edwards also spoke many

times of man's inability to save himself in sermons such as: *Man's Natural Blindness in the Things of Religion*; *Justification By Faith Alone*; and *God Makes Men Sensible of Their Guilt*.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, many particular statements of Edwards display his foundational belief in divine sovereignty in salvation. For example, he declares "It is from diminutive thoughts of God, that you think He is obliged to show mercy to you when you seek it, though you have been for a long time willfully sinning against Him, provoking Him to anger, and presuming that He would show you mercy when you seek it."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Edwards states that "The nature and contrivance of our redemption is such, that the redeemed are in every thing directly, immediately, and entirely dependent on God: they are dependent on Him for all, and are dependent on Him every way."<sup>5</sup> For Edwards, the foundation of salvation, and therefore revival and awakening, was the sovereignty of God.

However, this did not mean that human beings were merely passive agents. On the contrary, Edwards urged his hearers to avail themselves of the means God had provided to seek Him. In his sermon *The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought*, Edwards sought to prove the statement "We should be willing to engage in and go through great undertakings, in order to our own salvation."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in this sermon he laid out the proposition "There is a work or business which men must enter upon and accomplish, in order to their salvation. Men have no reason to expect to be saved in idleness, or to go to heaven in a way of doing nothing."<sup>7</sup> Although salvation is the work of God alone, and only He can sovereignly dispense His grace and regenerate the human soul, yet this gives no excuse for

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<sup>3</sup> All of these sermons may be found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. The sermon I have entitled "God Makes Men Sensible of their Guilt" is listed as Sermon II, and is found in 2:830-838.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:108.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:3.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:51.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:52.

idleness on the part of men. On the contrary, men must be faithful in hearing the word, crying out to God in prayer, and gathering with believers if they desire for God to save them. Those who ignore these means of grace have no reason to believe or expect that God's Spirit will change their hearts. Thus, the work depends entirely upon God, yet men must earnestly seek God and entreat Him to do this work.

The same pattern also held true in Edwards' view of corporate revival and awakening. These were not the product of human invention and design, but were rather the sovereign work of God. Charles Finney would later argue that revival was no more a miracle than a crop of wheat, and that proper means would always produce a revival. Edwards knew that such was not the case. For him, revival occurred not when proper means were employed, but when "the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us."<sup>8</sup> Corporate revival, like personal salvation, was the work of God rather than man.

However, Edwards did recognize that God often used means to produce this corporate effect. For example, in the outpouring of the Spirit in 1734-1735, Edwards noted that God used the gathering of the young people into small group meetings on Sunday evening and the unusual death of an elderly person to spark the flames of revival.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when people embraced false doctrines or grieved the Spirit in some other way, Edwards noticed that the work of God abated.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although no means could produce a revival, not attending them could lessen the likelihood of revival or abate its continuance.

### **Jonathan Edwards' Views On How To Judge A Revival**

Edwards also carefully considered how to discern if a revival was actually the work of

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "A Narrative of Surprising Conversions" in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1965), 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 70-71.

the Spirit of God, or if it was really the work of man or Satan. In his famous lecture *The Distinguishing Marks of A Work of the Spirit of God*, Edwards discussed this question at length. In this lecture he listed nine tests that could *not* be used to test a work.<sup>11</sup> These are: 1) the work is carried on in an extraordinary way (as long as it is still within Scriptural bounds); 2) the work produces extraordinary effects on the bodies of men; 3) the work produces a great deal of talk about religion; 4) the work produces great effects upon the imagination of the people; 5) the work proceeds because of the example of others or through the use of means; 6) the subjects of the work are guilty of great imprudence and irregularities in their conduct; 7) the work has the work of Satan intermingled with it; 8) some who were thought to be subjects of the work later fall away; and 9) the work is promoted by the preaching of the law and the terrors of hell. In fact, Edwards admitted that these were all true in one measure or another of the Great Awakening. This did not prove it was not a work of God, however, for the Scripture does not give warrant for the use of such tests, and in fact all of these things are true to one degree or another of all works at all times.<sup>12</sup>

How then can one judge if a work is truly wrought by the Spirit? Edwards used the tests listed in 1 John 4, where the apostle discusses this very question. From this chapter Edwards stated that a work was from the Spirit of God if 1) it increases the esteem and honor of Jesus Christ; 2) it operates against the interest of Satan and His kingdom, especially by producing holiness; 3) it increases men's regard for Scripture; 4) it produces a love for and discernment of truth in the people; and 5) it produces love for God and man. Edwards affirmed that "when there is an extraordinary influence or operation appearing on the minds of a people, if these things are found in it we are safe in determining that it is the work of God, whatever other circumstances it

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<sup>11</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 75-147.

<sup>12</sup> For Edwards' discussion of these points, see *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 89-108.

may be attended with, whatever instruments are used, whatever methods are taken to promote it; whatever means a sovereign God, whose judgments are a great deep, employs to carry it on; and whatever motion there may be of the animal spirits, whatever effects may be wrought on men's bodies."<sup>13</sup> The test of true regeneration, and therefore of all true revival and awakening, is not in the external results produced on the body, nor in any temporary alteration of the individuals habits. In *The Revival of Religion in Northampton in 1740-1742* Edwards stated that "the good estate of individuals is not chiefly to be judged of by any exactness of steps, and method of experiences, in what is supposed to be the first conversion; but we must judge by the spirit that breathes, the effect wrought upon the temper of the soul in the time of the work and remaining afterwards."<sup>14</sup> In short, the test of true regeneration in the individual, and of true revival and awakening in the corporate body, is not any outward effect on the body, but a true change in lifestyle and conduct, a new longing for God and His ways. Where these are evident over a long period of time, the Spirit of God has been at work, and where they are absent, the work is by some force other than the Spirit of God.

### **Jonathan Edwards' View on How To Grow As A Christian**

Edwards' view of growth in the Christian life is no less balanced. Edwards' theology stressed both thought and experience. In his sermon *Christian Knowledge* Edwards stressed the need for both head knowledge and heart experience of that knowledge. He wrote "there are two kinds of knowledge of the things of divinity, viz., speculative and practical, or in other terms, natural and spiritual. The former remains only in the head. No other faculty but the understanding is concerned in it... The latter rests not entirely in the head, or in the speculative ideas of things; but the heart is concerned in it: it principally consists in the sense of the heart....

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<sup>13</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 160.



Neither of these is intended in the doctrine exclusively of the other: but it is intended that we should seek the former in order to the latter. The latter, even a spiritual and practical knowledge of divinity, is of the greatest importance; for a speculative knowledge of it, without a spiritual knowledge, is in vain and to no purpose, but to make our condemnation the greater. Yet a speculative knowledge is also of infinite importance in this respect, that without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> For Edwards, both the heart and the head are primary in Christian faith! While this seems to be a contradiction, it is not, for they are primary in different ways.

The head is primary or first because it is the gateway to the heart. There is no way to truly engender religious affections without going through the head. True affections come from the heart, but it is impossible to get directly at the heart; we must go through the head. This is what Edwards means when he says “a speculative knowledge is also of infinite importance in this respect, that without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, the heart is primary because it is the goal in our knowledge. If knowledge stops at our head and does not reach our heart, it is of no use. This is why Edwards says “a speculative knowledge of it, without a spiritual knowledge, is in vain and to no purpose, but to make our condemnation the greater.”<sup>17</sup> True spiritual knowledge of Christ arises not from the head, but from the heart. Even Satan has rational knowledge of God; yet it is of no avail, for he does not love this knowledge, but fears it (James 2:19).

How rare is this sense of balance in the modern church! Too often the head and the heart are pitted against one another, and Christians are asked to opt for orthodoxy or experience, as if

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

the two are mutually exclusive. In Edwards we see the mind and the heart embrace, and theology and experience kiss before the throne of God. Mark Noll has observed that “Edwards’s *piety* continued on in the revivalist tradition, [while] his theology continued on in academic Calvinism.”<sup>18</sup> Notice that the two were no longer joined. One group carried on Edwards’ stress on personal piety and experience, while a different group carried on his stress for thought and orthodox theology. Yet, the separation of the two strands has proved disastrous for the church, as the hunger for experience apart from sound theology gave birth to revivalism,<sup>19</sup> and the pursuit of theology apart from a profound desire for experience eventually led to a cold formality, which in many places eventually led to a drift from orthodoxy itself. Thus, Noll correctly laments that “the disappearance of Edwards’s perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In these pages you have hopefully grasped why I think it is imperative for the modern American church to “rediscover” Jonathan Edwards. In an age when many speak of longing for personal and corporate revival and awakening, it is critical that we understand how God’s Spirit works to bring these about, how a work in an individual or group can be biblically judged, and how Christian growth occurs and is sustained. Edwards is a great guide in all of these areas.

This does not mean that such a rediscovery will be without its difficulties. Edwards is not always easy to read, both because of his style of writing and the depth of his thought. Yet, the treasure to be uncovered is worth the effort. If the modern American church, and especially

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent review of this decline see Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1758* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1994). Separated from the profound thought of Edwards, the revivals of later generations eventually degenerated into emotionalism, and in some cases, downright heresy. As a result, we have not seen a mass awakening on American soil in almost 150 years.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 20.

her leaders, would apply themselves to the writings of Edwards, we would undoubtedly be strengthened in our walks and have our vision of God greatly expanded. If the truths and the balance found in these writings were learned and applied, perhaps God in his grace would be pleased to come down and visit the heirs of Edwards with another great awakening.