JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

IN NEW ENGLAND

Prayer
Scripture: I Timothy 1:17
Hymn: 460 "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

The Great New England Awakening began under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards in his church at Northampton, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1734. Edwards has been called "The Father of the Great Awakening" and "The Father of Protestant Revival Preaching" because of the way he stands out among the revivalists of the Great Awakening that swept through the colonies in the 18th century. He has been acclaimed the most important religious figure in the colonies before the Revolution. Some even speak of him as the greatest and most original religious thinker America has produced.

The revivals of the New England phase of the Great Awakening did begin in his church but it is important to remember that there had been many local revivals in many New England congregations before the one in Northampton. The Northampton congregation could boast that it had experienced five revivals during the fifty-seven years of the ministry of Solomon Stoddard, the maternal grandfather of Jonathan Edwards (in 1679, 1683, 1696, 1712, and 1718). There had been notable revivals in Hartford in 1696, at Taunton in 1705, in Windham in 1721, and many others. There had been something of a religious quickening following the great earthquake of October 29, 1727. Frelinghuysen's revival in New Jersey was at its high tide (1726) at least eight years before the beginning of the revival at Northampton under Edward's preaching. There was something different about Edward's revival—it was contagious. It spread through New England and its story spread through the colonies and was eagerly read and told in England and on the continent of Europe. It inspired revivalists where ever the story was told. A great part of its influence came from Edward's own published detailed account of it and the voluminous and powerful defenses that he published. Edwards published twenty-seven works bearing on and furnishing doctrinal undergirding for the revivals during his lifetime. Within a few years of his death nine volumes of his works were published. He also left a wealth of material in notebooks and manuscript notes that little by little have been published in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before his untimely death at the age of fifty-five he had made plans for larger and more important works that he hoped to write.

THE EARLY YEARS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in the parsonage at East Windsor, Connecticut, where his father, Timothy Edwards, began his ministry in 1694 upon completing his studies in divinity at Harvard and where he remained during his entire ministry. Jonathan's paternal grandfather, Richard Edwards, was a well-to-do merchant and cooper of Hartford, Connecticut. Jonathan Edward's mother, Esther, was one of the daughters of Solomon Stoddard, a Harvard graduate whose church was the largest and the most important among the frontier churches. It was second only to the churches of Boston. Solomon Stoddard was famous as the father of "Stoddardism"—the practice of admitting all the respectable citizens to the Lord's Table. He considered the Lord's Supper an "assisting ordinance." He hoped admitting people to the Supper would encourage them to open their hearts to a conversion experience. Jonathan's grandmother, Esther Warham Mather Stoddard, was the widow of Solomon Stoddard's
predecessor in the congregation at Northampton. She was a woman of great force of character and piety. Esther Edwards, Jonathan's mother, was a woman of dignity, uncommon piety, well-read in theology, very practical in every-day affairs, kind and gentle, and devoted to her husband and children.

The parsonage was a gift from Timothy Edward's father to the church. Timothy Edwards in addition to his duties in the church conducted a school for the children of the village. Both father and mother took great pains in educating their children. They were especially careful to give Jonathan a good foundation in Latin. Great care was taken with religious devotions and instruction in Holy Scripture. Jonathan had ten sisters; he had cousins and plenty of village boys for friends. The boys constructed a little chapel in the woods where they played church. Before Jonathan was thirteen he had written some unusual pieces for a boy his age: a thousand word essay, "Of Insects," in which he recorded careful observations of spiders; an essay in which he demonstrated the soul was not material; an analysis of the rainbow and its colors; also a description of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in East Windsor in a revival.

EDWARDS AT YALE

Jonathan Edwards entered Yale College in September 1716, about a month before his thirteenth birthday. The school was fifteen years old and still very small. In September, 1701, ten ministers, led by James Pierrepont of New Haven, had laid their gifts on the table of Samuel Russell's parsonage in Branford, one of them saying, "I give these Books for the founding of a College in this Colony." Harvard was too far away to send their boys and besides they had been hearing disturbing rumors that Harvard was drifting into dangerous liberalism. They wanted a place to train young preachers in traditional orthodoxy. The government of the Colony of Connecticut issued the charter in 1702 with the ten men designated trustees. The school was to be called "Collegiate School." The trustees could not agree on a location for the college. Saybrook, Weathersfield, New Haven and Hartford all wanted the school. The Connecticut ministry divided into two camps over locating it on the coast or in the interior. In the early years little bands of students met in Saybrook, in Weathersfield, and in New Haven. In 1716, the year Edwards enrolled, the little school received two collections of books: one from Jeremy Dummer, London agent for Massachusetts Colony, and the other from Sir John Davie, a Connecticut husbandman. There were more than a thousand books to add to the original forty but they were stored in boxes at Saybrook until the trustees could agree on a site for the college. These books were modern books—the latest science, philosophy, and theology from England. Not even Harvard had such a collection of modern books.

When Jonathan Edwards enrolled in October 1716, he was one of ten new freshmen. Samuel Johnson, later to be the first president of King's College (Columbia University) had just been appointed tutor. The students greatly disliked Samuel Johnson and within a few weeks the whole freshman class left New Haven and went to Weathersfield where Elisha Williams served as tutor. He was the cousin of Edwards, was twenty-one years of age, and was a recent graduate of Harvard. The boys had to find places to board in the homes of the village, but they found Williams an inspiring teacher.

At Weathersfield under Tutor Williams, Jonathan Edwards did well in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. He read John Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding.
Edwards later wrote that he devoured Locke with all the greed of a miser who had discovered a hoard of gold. Williams also introduced him to the works of Newton. From his studies Edwards prepared two notebooks: one was "Notes on the Mind" and the other was "Notes on Natural Science." Edwards was wrestling in depth with the questions and problems that his studies raised for Calvinistic Orthodoxy.

The graduation ceremony of the New Haven part of the school in 1718 was an important occasion, attended by the dignitaries of Connecticut, but boycotted by the students of Weathersfield who held a rival graduation ceremony of their own. The ceremony at New Haven included an elaborate recognition of a sizable gift to the school by Elihu Yale with the naming of the school Yale College in his honor. Elihu Yale was a Boston Merchant who became governor of Madras under the East India Company. His interest in the Connecticut college had been aroused by the London agent of the New Haven colony and by a letter from Cotton Mather. In addition to Yale's gift the General Assembly of Connecticut had appropriated 500 pounds for the erecting of a suitable building for the college. New Haven had the most money and offered a plot of land. The trustees finally agreed on New Haven and ordered all the students to move to New Haven and that the books be moved there from Saybrook.

In October, 1718, Jonathan Edwards and the other boys obeyed the General Assembly and moved to New Haven. After a month all the boys except one and also Tutor Williams, had returned to Weathersfield. Six months later they had to return to New Haven when Tutor Williams had to withdraw because of ill health. After June, 1719, all the students were in residence in New Haven. Timothy Cutler, who was a graduate of Harvard, and who was thirty-five, was appointed Rector; Samuel Johnson and Daniel Browne were the tutors.

Edwards completed the college course of Yale in September, 1720, at the age of seventeen. He stayed on for two years to study for the ministry as was the custom of the time. It was during this period that he underwent a momentous experience that he called his conversion. He went through a period of illness. His devotions ceased to be a joy. He believed he had fallen into sin. He had never been admitted to the kingdom. Then one day as he was reading I Timothy 1:17, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen," he for the first time experienced the "sweet delight in God and divine things." His whole life was altered. He saw the divine glory everywhere. He knew religion would be the main business of his life. He sought time to wander in the woods and to meditate on the loveliness and beauty of Jesus. At night he loved to look at the stars and moon and to meditate on the glory and love of God. In these meditations he experienced

A calm, sweet Abstraction of Soul from all the Concerns of this World; and a kind of Vision, or fix'd Ideas and Imaginations, of being alone in the Mountains, or some solitary Wilderness, far from all Mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrap't and swallowed up in God. The Sense I had of divine Things, would often of a sudden, as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my Heart; an ardor of my Soul, that I know not how to express.

The Rector, Cutler, and the Tutors, Johnson and Browne, were following a very different path. They and four young ministerial companions—John Hart, Samuel Whittelsey, James Wetmore, Jared Eliot—had discovered in the library
of new books works of Anglicans, Arminians, and Deists that aroused great soul searching and doubting. They became greatly concerned over episcopalian ordination. They questioned the validity of non-episcopal ordination which raised doubts about their qualifications to hold their positions. Rumors spread that they were falling into heresy.

MINISTRY IN NEW YORK

In August, 1722, Jonathan Edwards completed his study for the ministry and accepted a call to become the minister of a Scotch Presbyterian Church in New York. For a Congregationalist to accept a Presbyterian ministry was not too unusual in those days. After the Connecticut Congregationalists adopted the Saybrook Platform in 1708 the Connecticut Congregationalists and Presbyterians had drawn closer and closer together. Young preachers like Edwards tended to be indifferent to forms of church polity--especially when they were so nearly alike. Both churches were Calvinistic. Edward's first church met in a building on William Street between Liberty and Wall. The little congregation had seceded from the First Presbyterian Church of New York, situated on Wall Street near Broadway. The seceding members had disagreed with the minister, James Anderson, who had gotten the congregation deep in debt for a new building.

Edwards faithfully devoted himself to his studies and meditations and to ministering to the little congregation but did not involve himself in the busy life of the growing city. He had little taste for the exciting bustle of New York. He became a fast and warm friend of John Smith, a currier and dock worker, in whose home he lived. They would correspond throughout their lives. Edwards loved his people but the church did not grow. The old congregation desperately needed the seceders to return. They realized they could not hope to keep a minister so well trained. Edwards resigned in the spring of 1723 when he received a call from the church in Bolton, Connecticut. When he left New York in April it was a sad parting.

TUTOR AT YALE

Jonathan Edwards spent the summer at his old home in East Windsor while carrying on negotiations with the church in Bolton. In November the negotiations were completed, including salary, house, wood and pasture land. He signed the town book. Shortly thereafter he sought and received his release from the church before he reported to Bolton. He had received an invitation to become a tutor at Yale.

While Edwards was in his early days in New York all Connecticut had been shocked at events at Yale. Rector Cutler and his Tutors, Johnson and Browne, and their four minister friends had decided to go to England to receive episcopal ordination. Following the commencement exercises on September 12, 1722, the trustees had gone into secret session. The next day, September 13, they ordered the Rector and his Trustees to submit in writing their views. They gave frank statements of their new position. The trustees urged them to reconsider. When they refused a public debate was arranged. It was held on October 16, 1722, with Governor Saltonstall as Moderator. Three of the ministers recanted: Hart, Whittelsey and Eliot. Wetmore wavered. Cutler, Johnson and Browne refused to change. The trustees dismissed them from further service in Yale: they carried out their plans to join the Anglicans.
Yale conferred the Master of Arts degree on Jonathan Edwards in September, 1723, and invited him to become the Tutor. Edwards assumed the office of Tutor on May 21, 1724. There was no Rector or President. As Senior Tutor he was in charge of Yale with its sixty students. He threw himself into his work with all his energy and with great determination to make Yale the bastion of Orthodoxy and to recover its good name. It was probably from overwork that he suffered a severe illness in September, 1725. His mother came to New Haven and nursed him back to health. The trustees voted him a five pound raise in salary for his extraordinary services that included in addition to his teaching and administrative duties, the sorting and cataloging of the books of the library.

EDWARDS AT NORTHAMPTON

In April, 1725, the church at Northampton voted that the time had come to choose an associate pastor to help the aging Solomon Stoddard. Edwards, the Yale Tutor, was invited to preach in August, 1726. He proved satisfactory to the congregation and Stoddard wanted his grandson for his associate. Edwards was invited to be the associate minister on November 21, 1726. He accepted the offer and left Yale for the church. On February 15, 1727, he was ordained. Edwards was twenty-three and Stoddard was 81. They worked well together and Edwards learned much from his grandfather.

It had been fifty-five years since Northampton had welcomed a new minister. The town was the largest and most important in inland Massachusetts. The church was the largest and most influential outside of Boston. It was the only one in the town. The people were prospering and felt comparatively safe from Indian raids. The people wanted to give the new pastor a suitable welcome. Edwards was given 300 pounds to purchase a home, with more promised if necessary. He was promised a salary of 100 pounds which was to be increased if the value of money declined or if his family increased. He was granted 10 acres of pasture land and 40 acres up the river. After the first month his salary was increased 80 pounds. He was welcomed with a church ball with feasting and gaiety. Edwards bought a home site on King Street where he would live and serve for twenty-three years.

On July 20, 1727, five months after his ordination Jonathan Edwards went to New Haven to take Sarah Pierrepont for his bride. She was the daughter of James Pierrepont, the first minister of the church in New Haven and the one who first proposed the establishment of the college for Connecticut that led to the founding of Yale. Her mother was the granddaughter of Thomas Hooker who in 1630 had led the migration from Massachusetts to the Connecticut Valley where he founded Hartford. Probably in Hooker's group was William Edwards, the cooper, Jonathan's great grandfather, and the first of the Edwards line in America. Edwards was twenty-three at the time of the wedding and his bride was seventeen. She was beautiful, well educated, at ease in conversation, noted for her flashing wit and gay repartee. She was unusually devout, considering piety the goal of life. In Northampton she came to be considered the model New England minister's wife.

Jonathan and Sarah Edwards' first child, Sarah, was born on August 25, 1738. On February 22, 1729, Solomon Stoddard died and Jonathan Edwards, at the age of twenty-five, going on twenty-six, was the minister of one of the largest and most famous churches in Massachusetts. At the time it had some 600 members.
Edwards was respected and admired for his quiet, scholarly sermons. He spent some thirteen hours a day in his study working on the two sermons that he delivered each week—one on Sunday and the other a week-day lecture delivered once a week. The people loved both Edwards and his wife. When he fell ill late in 1729 and was absent from the pulpit for several Sundays the people showed great concern and helpfulness in many ways. While he was ill the men built him a good, large barn.

Jonathan Edwards was not given to much visiting from house to house. His own house was always open and the members were welcome to bring their problems and questions to him. He always had time for his people. He took great care in his catechizing of the children. He showed great interest in his young people and encouraged them to meet in prayer in homes following the weekly lecture. Soon the young people were coming to church more regularly.

From the first Jonathan Edwards was distressed over the extraordinary dullness in religion in Northampton. He felt the people were lacking in deep religious emotions. He described the religious conditions in the town at the beginning of his ministry as follows:

Licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night walking and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices wherein some by their example exceedingly corrupted others. It was their manner to get together in assemblies of both sexes, for mirth and jollity, which they called frolics; and they would often spend the greater part of the night in them, without regard to order in the families they belonged to: indeed family government did too much fail in the town.

Edwards soon noticed that the mood of the town was beginning to change. He was not an extempore preacher. He read his carefully prepared sermons. For his topics he chose the great themes of the Bible. His quiet seriousness held the people's attention. The concern he showed for his people outside the pulpit touched their hearts.

In 1731 Edwards received an invitation to the "Great and Thursday Lecture" in Boston. The Harvard men were anxious to hear the successor of Solomon Stoddard that they tended to speak of as "The Pope of Northampton." They were anxious to take the measure of a Yale education and to see what influence Timothy Cutler, who had become rector of Boston's Christ Church (Anglican), had left in New Haven. The twenty-eight year old minister spoke with a soft voice but took a firm doctrinal position, condemning the Enlightenment drift from the faith of their fathers and the new schemes of divinity put forth by those who prided themselves on being "free and Catholick". His title was "God Glorified in the Work of Redemption, by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It." He did not address himself to the old controversies that had wrecked New England. He spoke to the conditions of the times. He left his hearers deeply troubled by his treatment of the high Dornian Calvinistic doctrines from a new perspective that made use of philosophical idealism and Lockeian psychology.

Edwards returned to his work in Northampton and his usual round of duties. In 1734 at the request of the congregation he published a series of his sermons on revival themes under the title A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately
Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both a Scriptural, and Rational Doctrine. He defended Calvinistic doctrine in a new and rational way. He began a new series of sermons against Arminianism that he felt was invading the Hampshire Ministerial Association of which he was a member. He began a series of sermons on justification by faith that would be published in 1738 under the title Discourses on Various Important Subjects, Nearly Concerning the Great Affair of the Soul's Eternal Salvation. These sermons when delivered in 1734 powerfully moved his audience. Edwards denied that any action "however good in itself, done by an unconverted man" could avail anything toward procuring salvation. Salvation was a gift from God alone. With terrible vividness he depicted the wrath of God and exhorted his people to flee this wrath. The people were so moved that religion became the chief topic of conversation in the town among people of all ages. Edwards called the role of the town's sins, which he preached were shutting men out from God's mercy and kindling divine wrath for their destruction. To the people it was as if he were walking down the village street pointing his accusing finger at each house, uncovering secret sins and holding them up for all to see.

The revival that was the beginning of the Great Awakening in New England began in December, 1734, with the conversion of a young lady of loose reputation in the town. Other young people came in tears. The whole town was moved. Day and night agonizing sinners began thronging the parsonage seeking the pastor's help that they might join the number of the saved. Edwards urged the people to come to him privately. With great common sense he sought to bring his people to conversion and inner peace. Later he described the beginning of the revival:

Presently upon this a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages; the noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things was soon thrown by; all the conversations in all companies, and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people carrying on their ordinary secular business. Other discourse than of the things of religion would scarcely be tolerated in any company.

The whole town was filled with great excitement when on a single Sunday a hundred newly converted people were added to the church. Within six months 300 people experienced dramatic conversion experiences.

Northampton was completely changed. Edwards described the results of the revival as follows:

This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, anno 1736, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy, and yet so full of distress as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought to them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The doings of God were then seen in his sanctuary, God's day was a delight, and his tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God's service, every
one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.

Almost the whole town was converted and became communicants in the church. Strife, backbiting and gossip disappeared from the town. The town was filled with the joy of the beauty of holiness. Edwards declared that he had never seen "the Christian Spirit in love to enemies so Exemplified" in all his life. Edwards organized singing and prayer groups for the people to express their emotions.

In May, 1735, the revival began suffering a series of terrible shocks. Thomas Stebbins, a man of weak mind, became over-wrought and committed suicide. A few weeks later, Joseph Hawley, one of the leading men of the town and an uncle to Jonathan Edwards, cut his own throat on Sunday morning and died immediately. The whole town was in shock. Other suicides followed. Edwards said these were impelled as if they had heard a voice, "Cut your own throat. Now is a good opportunity."

A reaction set in against the revival with sober people questioning the wholesomeness of so much excitement in religion. By the end of 1735 both Edwards and his congregation were lamenting that a "dead time in religion" had come to Northampton.

Edwards saw in the end of the revival in Northampton the work of God. The harvest of souls in Northampton had been exhausted. The revival had begun to spread from Northampton to other communities before the tragedies in Northampton. Revivals had come to South Hadley, Suffield, Green River, Hatfield and Enfield in Massachusetts and to Windsor and East Windsor in Connecticut. They spread through the Connecticut Valley. Edwards could thank God that he had moved his work to other towns that needed it. Edwards responded to invitations to a number of towns to help their revivals.

In Northampton the congregation had grown to the point the building could not hold the people. The congregation voted to build a new building that would be almost twice as large as the old one. It was to stand close to the old building on Meeting-house Hill. Work was begun in the summer of 1736. The whole town watched with excitement. On March 13, 1737, on a Sunday morning when the old building was filled to overflowing, the balcony collapsed with some seventy people sitting directly under it. No one was killed—they were protected by the high pews. The accident spurred the builders to hasten the completion of the new building. At the dedication of the building on Christmas Day, 1737, Edwards took for his text, "In my Father's house are many mansions."

In a letter to Benjamin Colman of Boston Jonathan Edwards gave a detailed account of the revival in Northampton. It was published in London in 1737 and in Boston in 1738. It was entitled, A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and Neighboring Towns and Villages. Edwards saw in the revival "an Extraordinary dispensation of Providence." The book was widely read and became a powerful influence for the spread of revivals. Whitefield was greatly moved by it. John Wesley read Edwards' Narrative as he walked from London to Oxford and exclaimed, "Surely this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

The Great Awakening was not over. It had not even reached its height in New England. It was awaiting the coming of George Whitefield.