

The First Great Awakening and Jonathan Edwards

Life in the new world was a continual struggle. As more and more migrated, there was a population boom, and more diversity among the settlers. Each colony came to think of themselves as a separate entity, rather than part of a unified movement. The churches that once were filled with the passion of the original pioneers had begun to wane. Attendance at churches, especially among the Congregationalists and the Anglicans, had become alarming. Congregationalists had been formed by a union of the Puritans and the Separatists. The resulting new denomination, however, bore more the marks of Separatists than the Puritans. They adopted a congregational form of church government. Their services were more similar to the Separatists. The Puritans and Separatists shared the same focus on holiness: however, the more evangelical approach of the Separatists soon passed by the wayside.

In order to encourage church participation, the Anglicans adopted a measure known as the "Half-Way Covenant" in 1662 through the influence of Rev. Solomon Stoddard. It said that children and grandchildren of church members were considered "half" members, even if they did not profess Christ and go through confirmation, or even come to church. The Half-Way Covenant provided a partial church membership for the children and grandchildren of church members. Those who accepted the Covenant and agreed to follow the creed within the church could participate in the Lord's supper. could be baptized in the church. These partial members, however, couldn't accept communion or vote. The result was inflated membership numbers, and that was essential it. It did nothing to evangelize the people. The net results were church rolls filled with the unconverted.

As early as 1662, Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth penned "God's Controversy with New England," which put a spot light on the spiritual decline among the populace and the need for repentance. Increase Mather said in 1678:"Clear, sound conversions are not frequent. Many of the rising generations are profane Drunkards, Swearers, Licentious and scoffers at the power of Godliness." Other ministers were equally concerned. In 1700 Samuel Willard preached, "The Perils of the Times Displayed." Stephen Buckingham preached, "The Unreasonableness and Danger of a People's Renouncing their Subjection to God,"(1711). William Russell preached, "The Decay of Love to God in Churches, Offensive and Dangerous,"(1730)

In the years preceding the Great Awakening, some of the Puritan/Separatist pastors began evangelical style preaching in response to the spiritual decline. Some say that the first evangelical preacher was Samuel Torrey of Weymouth, Mass. Who called for a new Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a "Heart Reformation" that led to a localized revival there from around 1670-1690s. Torrey was preached prophetically that the real problem centered around the unregenerate clergy. Another disciple of Torrey, William Adams, preached "The Necessity of the Outpouring of the Spirit from on High upon a Sinning Apostasizing People" (1678). Near the end of his ministry, Torrey believed that no such reformation was possible. In his "Man's Extremity, God's Opportunity" (1695), Torrey proclaims that nothing less than a special divine intervention will save the day.

This despite the fact that many local pastors such as John Cotton and Increase Mather had attempted moral reform through the strictly Puritan method of “Covenant Renewals.”

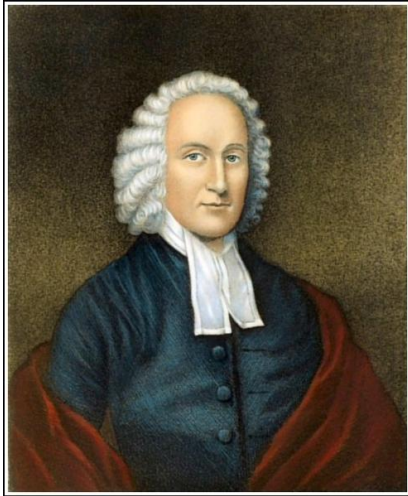
Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), grandfather of Jonathan Edwards and Harvard’s first librarian, believed that the impact of covenants and reforms was miniscule due to a lack of preaching on the reality of hell. Stoddard believed that people are motivated by one of two things: love or fear. Since the people did not love God enough to change, then the other motivation comes into play. Stoddard preached “The Efficacy of the Fear of Hell, to Restrain Man from Sin” (1713). In it he noted that Jesus preached more about hell than anyone else in the Bible, and that it was a legitimate motivation for spiritual recovery. A year later in 1714, he will write an evangelistic work entitled *A Guide to Christ* that will have a long range impact on Edwards as well as George Whitefield, who recommend it to all. However, his solution of the Half-Way Covenant will prove to more a part of the problem than a solution, as Edwards will point out.

By the time that Edwards becomes an impact, there is little to no evangelical work being done, especially among the Puritan/Congregationalists. *Jonathan Edwards* will become the leading edge of the Outpouring of the Spirit in a wide sweep, so hoped for by Samuel Torrey and others. But the vast movement of God will neither be localized to New England, nor isolated among the Congregationalists. Every major group will be impacted with by this outpouring, changing the spiritual direction of the country. None will have more impact than *George Whitefield* who will impact the colonies more than any other man before the Founding Fathers. Among the Baptists, *Shubal Stearns*, a Whitefield convert, led the Awakening. Other Awakening leaders include the *Tennant Brothers*, *Theodore Freylinghuysen*, *Nicholas von Zinzendorf*, *John Witherspoon*, and *Isaac Backus*.

Awakenings are distinguished from revivals and crusades in the extent of the effect. Awakenings have a much wider impact, essentially nationwide, or upon the preponderance of people. Revivals are awakenings in a microcosm. When revivals are seen in vast areas of the country, then it can be considered to be an Awakening.

Despite the impact of the Great Awakening, there were those among the “staid orthodox” that opposed the evangelical thrust. However, the most vocal opposition came from a rapidly evolving liberalism slowly making its way from the early stages of the European Enlightenment. *Charles Chauncy and Theodore Parker* are representative of the new thinking which resulted in denying key doctrines of the Faith, and the establishment of Unitarianism (a denial of the Tri-unity of God) and Universalism (a denial of everlasting condemnation in hell). Liberalism will have a rapidly deteriorating effect on America after the Constitution, which will lead to rapidly decline in the church.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)



Key Designation:

- “Scholar-Precacher of the Great Awakening”
- The First Psychologist in America
- Father of the Great Awakening

Key Background Information:

- ◆ Raised in a minister’s home
- ◆ Valedictorian of his Yale class in 1720 at age 17
- ◆ Experienced a profound conversion in 1720, inspired by the thought of being chosen and elected by God, evidenced by his desire for salvation
- ◆ Ordained a Scholar-Pastor at Northampton in 1727

Key Events:

- ◆ 1733 in Northampton, a revival broke out as a result of his preaching, resulting in over 300 added to the church over the next two years (an amazing number for the size of the town and the congregation)
- ◆ 1735, a member of his congregation, his uncle, commits suicide, presumably believing that he was not of the Elect and could not possibly be saved. Another suicide in New Jersey based on the same idea led to the first wave of his work coming to an abrupt end. The doctrine of Predestination, which he adamantly preached, obviously having a negative effect on the otherwise dynamic awakening.

- ◆ 1739, works in conjunction with George Whitefield to promote Whitefield's crusades. Edwards, a more intellectual-type, was not as dynamic a preacher as Whitefield, and also did not evoke as much emotional response as did Whitefield.
- ◆ 1741, inspired by Whitefield, Edwards preaches his most controversial sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Unlike Whitefield, Edwards preached from a sermon manuscript, had little voice inflection, and wore thick wire-rim glasses which often settled at the end of his nose. This led to active opposition by the mainline Congregationalist ministers, as well as "old-school" members of his own congregation.
- ◆ 1751, after two years of turmoil over various issues, Edwards is forced to resign his Northampton pastorate
- ◆ 1758, became President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton)

Key Ideas:

- ◆ Edwards sought to synthesize Enlightenment, Calvinistic, Congregationalist, and Evangelical positions into one consistent theology. He worked on this his entire life.
- ◆ Edwards believed in instantaneous conversions, however, in the context of discovering one's Election.
- ◆ Having a very strong marriage, resulting in 11 children, he was a forerunner of women's positive role in the church.
- ◆ Having a profound interest in natural history, he continued to write treatise, which began in his youth, on God's design and beauty in nature.

Key Works:

- ◆ 1737- *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God....* Tells the story of the Awakening at Northampton.
- ◆ 1738- *Discourses on Various Important Subjects.* Sermons that helped spark awakening.
- ◆ 1754- *An Inquiry into Modern Prevailing Notions Respecting Freedom of the Will....* A treatise against the concept of Free Will and Armenianism.

Conclusions:

Jonathan Edwards sparked revival among the Congregationalists in New England. The result was a split between the "Old Light" and the "New Light," who accepted the Awakening movement. This is typical of all reform and revival movements, just as in New Testament era. Spiritual Awakening transforms lives but also causes resentment by those who do not follow the Awakening. The split among the Congregationalists reached its apex in the exiting of Isaac Backus from the Congregationalists to join the Baptists. Backus was the best known publisher of his era, and perhaps the best known layman among the Congregationalists. Along with Backus went thousands of others to join the Baptists. Its not surprising that the Congregationalists, with strong separatist roots, would move to become Baptists, since the earliest Baptists had also been separatists.

