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Jonathan Edwards: A Case of Medium-Message Conflict

Klemet Preus

Jonathan Edwards, the great Calvinist theologian, in the waning years of Puritan influence in America attempted to bring people to a conviction of his message by employing revivals as his primary medium. While successful initially, the ultimate results of his effort were his own dismissal from his parish, the gradual decay of strict Calvinism as a theological force in America and the popularization of the revivals as a distinctively American phenomenon. Edwards' lesson for theologians and preachers of today is that a theological message of doctrine is often subject to limitations which its medium places upon it. The doctrinal message of any given church is undermined if placed into media which are inconsistent with it. Most churches, in order to survive, have developed media appropriate to and consistent with their particular doctrinal stance.¹

Edwards' tragedy was his inability to recognize that revivals and strict Calvinism were culturally and inherently incompatible.

The message which Jonathan Edwards preached tenaciously and inexorably for twenty-five years of ministry (1726-1751) at Northampton, Massachusetts, was the doctrine of strict Calvinism. Edwards inherited both his theology and his ecclesiastical predilections from the strict Puritans who came from England to establish a theocracy in the "Promised Land" of the new world. Theirs was a world view in which the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty permeated all of theology and all contemporary thought and life. The doctrines of man, sin, grace, faith, salvation, Christ, the means of grace, eternal election, and eternal life are all the necessary results of an intensely logical system of theology which refuses to compromise or vitiate the immutable sovereignty of God. It is difficult for the twentieth century mind to appreciate fully the manner in which a man like Jonathan Edwards applied the doctrine of God's sovereignty to everything he encountered. His extensive readings in mathematics, Newton's astronomy, geography, and especially the philosophical works of John Locke were all integrated into his theology.²

Unlike his theological descendants he would not divide his thinking into various schools or disciplines. Edwards was first, last, and

always the theologian who wished to glorify the sovereign God. He was, claimed Perry Miller:

The last great American, perhaps the last European, for whom there could be no warfare between religion and science or between ethics and nature. He was incapable of accepting Christianity and physics on separate premises. His mind was so constituted . . . that he went directly to the issues of his age, defined them and asserted the historic Protestant doctrine in full cognizance of the latest disclosures in both psychology and natural science.³

God had preeminence over all the knowledge or discoveries of men, and these achievements must be viewed only in the context of the unapproachable, incomprehensible, absolute, arbitrary, unimpressable, sovereign God.

Although the depravity of man seems to be the emphasis for which he is best known, to Edwards sin was an empty concept if divorced from the sovereignty of God. God's purpose in the creation and preservation of this world was that certain people would honor Him and acknowledge His sovereign decrees. When mankind sinned and transgressed God's laws, the human race was plunged into the "innate sinful depravity of the heart."⁴ This innate wickedness is all the more profound, and man's guilt all the more "heinous," since the absolute infinite and sovereign God is the offended party. Man's fall is damnable, firstly, because God's purposes in creation were apparently thwarted, and, secondly, because "there is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment."⁵ So dishonorable towards God is our sin and so repugnant to Him that His spokesman, Edwards, could rail against the wickedness of mankind with fierce eloquence:

And there is actual wickedness without number or measure. There are breaches for every command, in thought, word, and deed; a life of sin; days and nights filled up with sin; mercies abused and frowns despised; mercy and justice and all divine perfections trampled on, and the honor of each person in the Trinity trod in the dirt. Now if one sinful word or thought has so much evil in it as to deserve eternal destruction, how do they deserve to be eternally cast off and destroyed, that are guilty of so much sin!⁶

Edwards' Calvinistic soteriology is likewise predicated upon a belief in God's absolute sovereignty. According to an immutable decree God atoned for those whom He "from eternity had designed to save."⁷ Out of infinite mercy God sent His Son Jesus Christ to bear the humility of our race, to condescend to us in His passion and death as well

as His incarnation and birth. This condescension, which is God's part of the covenant, makes Jesus more approachable and worthy of our acceptance. Such affectionate acceptance or faith is our part of God's covenant. "What are you afraid of," queried Edwards, "that you dare not venture your soul upon Christ? . . . Are you afraid that He will not be able to stoop so low as to take any gracious note of you? . . . Behold Him hanging on the cross! Do you think that He that had condescension enough to stoop to these things, . . . will be unwilling to accept you if you come to Him? Christ's love commends the Savior to us as merciful, Who, if we accept and trust, will save us." Such trust is the condition for salvation. "If you come, you need not fear but that you will be accepted."⁸ "He will be united with you, if you accept Him."⁹

Faith, the condition of salvation on the part of mankind, was, however, purely a creation and gift from God. Only those who from eternity had been predestined to salvation could expect to come to faith, regardless of their best intentions or efforts at self-conversion:

Some hope by their striving to obtain salvation of themselves. They have a secret imagination that they shall by degrees work in themselves sorrows and repentance for sin, and love towards God and Jesus Christ. Their striving is not so much an earnest seeking to God, as a striving to do themselves that which is the work of God.¹⁰

God arbitrarily predetermined some to salvation and some to damnation, He arbitrarily atoned for the sins of only those who were elect, and He arbitrarily worked faith in their hearts but not in the hearts of the reprobate. On behalf of His elect God fulfilled both His part of the covenant and also the part of the sinful people. But for the reprobate God fulfilled neither His part nor their part.

The strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God coupled with man's inherent wickedness led Edwards to state, in as radical a manner as possible, the utter dependency of mankind upon God:

We are more apparently dependent on God for holiness, because we are first sinful, and utterly polluted, and afterward holy . . . So we are more apparently dependent on free grace for the favor of God, for we are first just the objects of his displeasure, and afterwards received into favor.¹¹

Even in such terrifying homiletical efforts as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Edwards' primary concern was neither to drive people to suicide,¹² nor to bring them only to the point of despair. His intention was to create in them the despondence which, according to his theology, was essential to their religion. God was portrayed as offended, wrathful, and jealous but somehow staying His

just retribution:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked . . . he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; . . . and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment . . . And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning. but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.¹³

As long as the fires of hell were held at bay, the horror-stricken sinner had some faint hope and was forced to cast his complete dependence upon God. The gist of Edwards' sermonic rhetoric was stated clearly in his philosophical writings:

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 upon him in every way.¹⁴

Edwards' theological consistency also forced him to adopt the Calvinistic view that God is sovereign over His Word. He believed that, while the Word of God could bring a person to an intellectual understanding and acceptance of the Gospel, only by a sovereign act, irrespective of the preaching of the Word, would God bestow upon an individual "a divine and supernatural light." Faith was not worked by the Word, but was "immediately the work of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵ The Word, claimed Edwards, "conveys to our minds these and those doctrines, . . . but not the sense of the divine excellency of them in our hearts . . . but that due sense of the heart wherein this light formally consists, is immediately by the Spirit of God."¹⁶ Some scholars have suggested "that Edwards joined that line of Puritan theologians who inclined away from outward means of grace by emphasizing the internals of grace in the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ But Edwards was merely repeating the teachings of his mentor, John Calvin, on this point.¹⁸ Both men held to this doctrine, not out of any latent mysticism, but because of the desire to protect the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Conrad Cherry summarized, ". . . this is Edwards' principal point of the subject—God has sovereign disposal over the means (i.e., the Word) and the striving attached to them. It is the power of God alone which decides the efficacy of the means."¹⁹

The Calvinistic doctrine of God's sovereignty encroached upon the Puritan views of God's covenant and God's covenant people. According to early Puritans, such as John Winthrop, John Cotton and Richard Mather, God had covenanted with the New England Puritans that He would be their God and He would establish His kingdom in the New World.²⁰ "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us," warned John Winthrop while his company was still in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean aboard the *Arbella* in 1630. Similar to God's covenant people of the Old Testament the people of New England perceived themselves as a people set apart to establish a theocracy and teach the future generations of the New World God's immutable dictates. According to the Puritans, God's covenant of grace resulting in individual salvation was fulfilled on man's part by personal faith wrought by the Holy Spirit.

The social and ecclesiastical covenant was another story.²¹ Individually and corporately all the people were to fulfill the ecclesiastical and social aspects of the covenant or expect the removal of God's care from the entire body. "Any unpunished individual breach of the covenant would be considered by God as a sin by the whole community and the entire covenant would be punished. If the volume and character of the sins committed by an individual should warrant, God would withdraw from the covenant leaving society to flounder helplessly in a natural state."²² The fragile nature of the covenant forced Puritans to adapt certain means to protect it. Rigorous suppression of sin as well as constant and dire predictions of gloom and doom were the duties of Puritan preachers since the preservation of the covenant required not only strict moralism but also uniformity of doctrine, purpose, and spirituality. In order to preserve the spiritual uniformity Puritans expected conversions to occur according to predictable patterns and developed what Edmund Morgan has called a "morphology of conversion." He describes conversion as expected by Puritan churchmen:

First comes a feeble and false awakening to God's commands and a pride in keeping them pretty well, but also much backsliding. Disappointments and disasters lead to fitful hearkenings to the word. Sooner or later true legal fear or conviction enables the individual to see his hopeless and helpless condition and to know that his own righteousness cannot save him, that Christ is the only hope. Thereafter comes the infusion of saving grace, sometimes but not always so precisely felt that the believer can state exactly when and where it came to him. A struggle between faith and doubt ensues, with the candidate careful to indicate that his assurance has never been complete

and that his sanctification has been hampered by his own sinful heart.²³

Any true convert was required to testify to having received or experienced this "infusion of grace." The possession of the "supernatural light," as Edwards dubbed it, qualified one for full entrance into the ecclesiastical covenant. The Covenant was further protected by the admonishment and even dismissal of any pastor who departed from the theology of Calvinism.²⁴

Over the years a crisis arose within Puritan society which created the type of situation in which revivals were a likely occurrence. Theologically, the corporate uniformity among Puritans was precluded by the theology of Calvinism itself. Since God was sovereign over the Word in Calvinist thought, there was no way for its power and effect to be predicted or marshalled among subsequent generations of Puritans. The first generation of Puritans all claimed, with Winthrop in 1630, to have experienced the "divine and supernatural light" immediately bestowed by the Spirit. But second and third generations had to claim the same level of spirituality in order to maintain corporate uniformity. While all second generation Puritans possessed an intellectual understanding of the Gospel, a sizable number could not claim the experience of the "Excellency of Christ" or to have undergone the conversion pattern expected of them. These "unsaved Puritans" maintained ties both socially and ecclesiastically with those who had been impressed with Christ's Excellency. Their presence in the Puritan community had a potential rupturing effect on the covenant community. By the 1660's the problem of unsaved Puritans had reached crisis proportions.

The Puritan response to this crisis further prepared the people for the revivals. Theologically the problem posed by "unsaved Puritans" could not have been solved without damaging the Puritan concept of the covenant. To forbid this growing number of people any entrance into the church would have been an admission that God had forsaken His remnant by causing apostacy in their children. But to grant admittance would have undermined the entire Calvinistic system of theology which insisted that historical faith was simply not enough for entrance into a covenant relationship. The solution was the establishment in 1662 of the "Halfway Covenant." According to the "Halfway Covenant" those people who had not been rightly saved could not attend the Lord's Supper or be given voting privileges, but they could be considered "partial members" and have their children baptized, a privilege heretofore afforded only to "true believers." It was hoped that such a compromise would not diminish the number

of the "full" members, nor create apathy among the "partial" members. Actually, neither hope was realized.²⁵

The results of the Halfway Covenant were manifold. One immediate effect was further to "rend the uniformity of New England thought."²⁶ Not only had there existed a wide disparity among the people but now the clergy itself had become divided over the entire concept of a Halfway Covenant. Many believed it to be unbiblical and thought that God's presence would certainly be withdrawn after this compromise action. A second result was that most of the congregations in New England were suddenly comprised of a majority of people who were in need of conversion and salvation. The preacher's job was suddenly changed from that of feeding and sustaining his flock to converting the pagans within the fellowship. The recognition that congregations were made up of unbelievers also created the need for a converting agent within the congregations themselves. Significantly, the Halfway Covenant created a class of people which could not rightly be called either in the covenant or out of it. These people eventually were considered neither totally depraved nor completely regenerate. The existence of this large group of people made the doctrine of total depravity extremely difficult to maintain.

The ambiguities of the "Halfway Covenant" were resolved in two different ways. The first, was to broaden the definition of "saint" and so erase the distinction between members of the covenant community. This resolution was practiced by Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards' grandfather and predecessor at the Northampton parish. In the 1680's Stoddard commenced the practice of allowing full church membership rights with the reception of the Lord's Supper to all who professed mere intellectual assent to the Gospel.²⁷ By so doing he delivered the church from the unhappy arrangements of the "Halfway Covenant" but also led his people into a rejection of the logical implications of Calvinism. By insisting that "historical faith" was sufficient for salvation, Stoddard had made the special "divine and supernatural light" of strict Puritans irrelevant. More significantly, he had inadvertently questioned God's role as solely responsible for salvation. Since man could arrive at historical faith on his own, according to Puritan thought, Stoddard had robbed God of His sovereign prerogatives in salvation. While the full implications of Stoddard's decision were not realized for almost half a century, synergistic forces had been activated which could not easily be thwarted.

The second way to circumvent the implications of the "Halfway Covenant" was simply to attempt a return to the strict understanding of the earliest Puritans. This was the goal of Jonathan Edwards. He retained the narrow definition of "saint" as one who had experienc-

ed the "supernatural light," while also repeating the theme of his forefathers that the New England Puritans were the covenant people of God. In order to do this, rather than allowing the "Halfway" group easy entrance into the Kingdom of God, he worked tirelessly for their full conversion. Insisting upon an unconditional acceptance of Calvinistic doctrine he railed ruthlessly against any theology which questioned or denied the sovereignty of God and man's complete dependence upon Him. Against the synergistic Arminian doctrine of man's free will Edwards produced some of his best known works, *Freedom of the Will* (1754) and *The Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1757). Coupled with his refusal to compromise the Calvinistic covenant doctrine was Edwards' identification of New England as the site of Christ's great and glorious second, millennialistic advent:

And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America. . . . And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must need appear the most likely of all American colonies, to be the place when this work shall principally take its rise.²⁸

Obviously, it was necessary for Edwards to convert the New Englander if God's glorious work was to take place. The most successful medium in effecting the conversion experience was the revival.

The revival initially was perceived simply as a time when large numbers of people gained entrance into the covenant. Gradually revivals assumed a more narrow definition. They were religious events in which the message of "salvation" was attended with specific and well defined evangelistic and rhetorical techniques. The first "Great Awakening" occurred in 1734 and, whatever its causes, was probably the only revival which genuinely surprised both pastor and people. Jonathan Edwards viewed the revival as a spontaneous work of God's sovereign grace. The hundreds of people who were "savingly wrought upon" also considered the events as a "surprising work of God." Edwards claimed with truth and amazement that "Scarcely a single person in the whole town was left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal Word."²⁹ On one Sunday over 100 people were brought as members into the Northampton parish. The news of the revival, at first greeted with skepticism by neighboring churches, soon began to bear the same fruits outside of Northampton. Edwards claimed that all but two of the towns in the Connecticut River Valley had experienced significant conversions during 1735 and even one of these two almost doubled its size during the six months of the revival.³⁰

The New England confidence in the sovereignty of God did not allow the people to consider causes of the revival which might be slightly more mundane. Actually New England and especially Northampton "had been obscurely tending toward revival for a hundred years."³¹ Stoddard had claimed five small "harvests," the most recent in 1718. The existence of the "halfway" community had necessitated a novel homiletical form so that "by 1730 a type of sermon designed for communal response was almost a perfect literary form, waiting only for someone to take it in hand."³² Latent fears and uncertainties within the collective mind of society further prepared Edwards' people for the revival. Opportunities for wealth through human endeavor due to land speculation, opening trade relationships, and population growth led to prideful ambition and success. But disease, Indian raids, and a host of other daily dangers reminded the people of God's sovereign control and enabled Edwards to rebuke their ambitious pride.³³ An "uncommonly impressive"³⁴ homiletician, Edwards, armed with a "perfected sermonic form" and an authoritarian countenance, brought the people to such an "agitated state of anticipation" that the expected conversion experiences were almost a foregone conclusion.

While more dramatic than those of a half a decade earlier, the revivals of 1740-1741 were a surprise to few Puritan leaders. Revivalists soon learned that the rhetorical techniques of revivals could be marshalled and the results therefore predicted. Since divine predictability was a precious commodity for the preservation of Puritan society, revivals achieved widespread use. The most crucial factor for the success of these revivals was Edwards' publishing in 1737 of *A Faithful Narrative*, which was a glowing account and defense of the revivals of 1734. While subsequent revivals differed from the first in many ways, the conversion experiences of 1734 recounted by Edwards "became firmly fixed in the popular mind."³⁵ The success of the 1741 "awakening" was guaranteed by other factors. This time George Whitefield traveled from London to New England and conducted the revival for thirty carefully planned days. Less rigid and logical in his sermonizing than the clergy of New England, Whitefield appealed almost exclusively to the emotions of the audience. His eloquence was acknowledged by both supporters and detractors. The revivals lasted only a couple of days at each parish, after which Whitefield was off to other "harvests," leaving the local clergy to care for the souls which had been won. Critical evaluation was precluded. His itinerancy was so successful that the clergy of New England gladly emulated the foreigner. Ola Winslow asserted that the New England "ministry was all on horseback during the summer 1741, with ser-

mons in their pockets for any emergency invitations."³⁶ The *modus operandi* was to precede the coming of the revivalist with liberal and often exaggerated claims of his homiletical prowess, high spirituality, and past successes at the salvation of men's souls. Following the revival, reports would be sent to other towns which contained such pertinent data as "the size of the audience, the distance many had traveled to hear him, the fact that they had stood in the rain, or assembled at five a.m., that many had fainted, that the outcries of the repentant had drowned the voice of the speaker, and that the collection plate had not been large enough for the offerings poured into it."³⁷ The local newspapers also published primers with "directions on how to hear sermons preached by the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield." Another factor which contributed to the success of the revivals of 1740 was the constant exhortations and prayers of the local clergy and especially Jonathan Edwards to return to the now dormant zeal of 1734. These elements led to revivals so successful that they became the norm, at least in outward appearances, for subsequent revivals.

The revivals of 1740-1741 impressed certain expectations and ideas on the collective soul of New England so as to preclude the maintenance of Calvinistic theology. The theology of revivalism was a type of Americanized Arminianism; its primary emphasis was on man's innate ability to effect his own destiny and salvation.³⁸ That such a theology should be associated with revivalism is not a mere accident of history. Though promoted by Calvinists, revivals were both culturally and inherently Arminian in nature.

Named after the Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), Arminianism attacked Calvinistic doctrine at almost every crucial point. It taught that salvation was not the result of God's sovereign decree of election, but of man's free choice. The natural condition of man was not depraved, as Edwards and Calvin taught, but each man was a free moral agent and the master of his own destiny. The "means of grace" were dependent for their power, not upon God's sovereign decree, but upon the arbitrary choice of the people who heard these means. The final result was a view of the relationship between God and man in which the roles had been reversed from Calvinistic theology. God, no longer the arbitrary Sovereign who damned and saved as He pleased, had, in Arminian theology, lost His divine prerogative and spent His existence responding to the whims and choices of His creatures.³⁹ A final aspect of Arminianism worthy of note was its emphasis on the role and responsibility of the individual, often irrespective of corporate involvement and commitment. Uniformity, in Arminian thought, was not a virtue. While Arminianism in New England was not formally taught as a system of theology, by

Edwards' time it had nevertheless become entrenched among both clergy and laity. It was a popular and "native American variety of human self-sufficiency which expressed itself within the forms of Covenant theology."⁴⁰

George Whitefield, tended to make revivals culturally incompatible with Calvinistic theology. Whitefield, like almost all churchmen of his day, claimed to be a Calvinist. His loyalty, however, was not to any doctrinal system and his preaching often assumed an Arminian flavor. Salvation, to Whitefield, was given to whomever desired it. His "whosoever will" emphasis, while well received on American soil due to its democratic overtones,⁴¹ was an explicit denial of Calvinism. Whitefield's sermons placed the responsibility for conversion upon man. An example is his sermon, "Abraham's Offering Up His Son Isaac." A winsome masterpiece of oratorical skill, he narrated the sacrifice of Abraham and related it to the sacrifice of God's Son. But in his conclusion he spoke of unfeigned faith as though its existence were the responsibility of the believer rather than God:

But if you are only talking believers, have only a faith of the head and never felt the power of it in your hearts, . . . unless you get a faith of the heart, a faith working by love, you shall never sit with . . . Jesus Christ in the kingdom of heaven.⁴²

Statements like "unless you get a faith . . .," outwardly returned the people to the Puritan fold, but also inculcated in them ideas that their salvation was, to some degree, their own achievement. Ola Winslow explained the effect Whitefield's preaching had upon the lost sheep of New England:

Under his impassioned preaching each hearer felt himself alone in the whole world pursued by God. If he were to escape damnation and obtain the key to heaven, *he must do it today*.⁴³

The most popular revivalist of all time had changed the theology to which his audience was accustomed. Later revivalists such as James Davenport, Tennant, and Charles Finney in the nineteenth century were more extreme in their Arminianism. A second factor from a cultural perspective, which made Calvinism and revivalism inconsistent was the necessity of human impetus for the success of the revival. No true and consistent Calvinist could ever plan salvation; only God could undertake such a venture. Yet the revivals of 1740-1741 and all subsequent revivals were painstakingly planned to the smallest detail before they commenced. Whitefield's American tour was announced in both press and pulpit. The preachers encouraged people to expect some great work of God through the efforts of the revivalist.⁴⁴ Such planning gave the impression that the normally feeble efforts of mankind had now tapped the awesome powers of God. Edwards himself,

during the years between the two "Awakenings" at Northampton, was not reluctant to chide the people for losing the fervor of 1735.⁴⁵ These chidings, as well as his constant exhortations to repeat the experience, laid the responsibility for "the surprising work of God" upon the shoulders of His creatures. Even the end of the 1735 revival was the result of human activity. On June 1, 1735, Edwards' uncle, Joseph Hawley, killed himself by slitting his own throat. While Edwards blamed the action on the rage of Satan,⁴⁶ and attributed Hawley's actions to "the disease of melancholy,"⁴⁷ this suicide proved to be the turning point in the religious excitement that had possessed the town for months. ⁴⁸ Not only were the revivals commenced by man, but their conclusions were often effected by distinctively ungodly forces. Further evidence that human impetus caused the success was the itinerancy to which revivals became so closely associated. In Calvinist theology God is not bound to a visiting clergy, but this innovation became a mark of the revival after 1741 because it had worked so successfully for Whitefield.

Revivals were also culturally inconsistent with strict Calvinistic theology because of the interpretation Jonathan Edwards placed upon them relative to the millennialistic fervor of the age. Edwards identified New England as the site which God had chosen to bring about His second glorious rule of Christ on earth.⁴⁹ He also interpreted the success of his revivals as proof that his millennialistic interpretations were accurate. But since the revivals were dependent upon man for their commencement, continuance, and recurrence, it was easy for New Englanders to think that the ushering in of the kingdom of God was their own responsibility. Until the time of Edwards most theologians believed that the millennium would be preceded by an age of great trials and apostasy.⁵⁰ By challenging this view Edwards not only established himself as America's first post-millennial thinker; he also opened the door for the liberal, and decidedly Arminian, view that America was the master of her own destiny. "The encouragement it [his doctrine] gave to the efficacy of human effort made it a natural ally to the new doctrine of human ability which already had begun to make inroads on the older Calvinism."⁵¹

The Connecticut Valley revivals of Edwards and Whitefield did not have to involve itinerant preachers, employ Arminian theologians, prepublicize the acts of God, or even stress Edwards' post-millennialistic views. Edwards' first revivals of 1735 lacked all such incidentals. The Northampton pastor was the first to understand that many of the outward manifestations of the revivals neither proved nor disproved their validity. In his famous apology for the New England revivals, *The Distinguishing Marks*, he listed nine such phenomena. Things like

the unusual manner in which conversions took place, actions of an imprudent nature, errors of judgment, the backsliding of many converts, or too much "hellfire and damnation" proved nothing to Edwards.⁵² What Jonathan Edwards did not discount were the actual revivals themselves. To his chagrin most criticisms of the revivals during the 1740's centered in the propriety of these incidental factors which Edwards himself conceded were no proof of the Spirit's activity. Men of less moderation such as James Davenport managed to obfuscate the whole issue by insisting on promoting the type of hysteria that even Edwards could not abide.⁵³ The value of the revival, divorced from many of its excesses, was never discussed. It was this type of revival which Edwards defended. In his estimation it resulted in many spiritual blessings such as a thirst for Scripture, a higher esteem for Jesus, and a love for God and man. "These marks are sufficient to outweigh a thousand such little objections, as many oddities, irregularities, and errors in conduct, and delusions and scandals of some professors."⁵⁴ But had these factors been absent in the New England of 1740, the revivals would still have conflicted with Calvinism, for the two are inherently incompatible.

Calvinism and revivalism were inherently contradictory because Calvinism, in principle, cannot bind God to a medium through which spiritual blessings are guaranteed. Edwards' mistake in his positive evaluation of the revivals was that he identified the work of the Spirit too closely to a specific medium. He effectively bound God to the revival, a medium over which, by Calvinistic definition, the Almighty had to be Sovereign. Edwards' reasoning, in *The Distinguishing Morals*, was essentially syllogistic:

- A. The Work of the Spirit results in (1) higher esteem for Jesus, (2) decreased desire for worldly things, (3) higher interest in the Scriptures, (4) increased ability to discern the things of the Spirit, and (5) love of God and man.⁵⁵
- B. The revivals most assuredly demonstrate these spiritual signs.⁵⁶
- C. Therefore the revivals are from the Spirit.⁵⁷

Such reasoning, though logical, ignored the essential Calvinistic doctrine of God's sovereignty. A pure Calvinistic syllogism would have been:

- A. The Work of the Spirit results in (1) higher esteem for Jesus, (2) decreased desires for worldly things, (3) higher interest in the Scriptures, (4) increased ability to discern the things of the Spirit, and (5) love of God and man.
- B. These signs of the Spirit are apparent today.
- C. Therefore the Spirit is working today.

Calvinism draws no conclusions about the revival. It is a means through which God may or may not work. All the Calvinist knows is that the Sovereign God works. Questions of how and when are left to His impenetrable discretion. Edwards' defense of revivalism demonstrates a weakness in orthodox Calvinism. Human nature simply cannot tolerate a God whose revelation and work are so inscrutable. People react to the unknowable God of Calvinism with either Arminianism or attempts, such as Edwards, to know God or identify His actions through some medium. Either way is a denial of Calvin's doctrine and both are ultimately an exaltation of human prerogatives over the divine. If Jonathan Edwards could not resist the temptation to bind God to a means, certainly his parishioners could fare no better.

The second reason for which Calvinism and revivalism are inherently incompatible is that revivalism necessarily stressed the relationship of an individual to God irrespective of the religious community. Puritanism, of course, rested upon an understanding of God's covenant in which all the people of the church were collectively involved. The task of the Puritan preacher was simply to bind the people together. Uniformity was good. Deviance was bad. Revivals, their universal appeal and occurrence notwithstanding, tended to isolate the individual spiritually from others in the group. There may have been a commonly expected experience, but how it occurred varied with the individuals.⁵⁸ For example, sin, in revivalism was not primarily the collective guilt inherited from Adam.⁵⁹ Rather sin is perceived almost exclusively as overt, individual sinful actions. One of the signs of the revivals was deliverance from such overt and actual sins. Among the five positive and beneficial results of the revival, to Edwards, no virtue which speaks of the cohesion of the religious community was listed. All five "marks of a work of the Spirit of God" apply to the individual.⁶⁰ Theoretically, a New Englander could have been saved and exhibit all the necessary signs without any commitment to the corporate covenant. Edwards, of course, tried to incorporate the converts into his congregation, but even he grew more enamored with the individual conversions within his flock than with the effects of

the revivals upon the assembly as a whole.⁶¹ Edwards exalted the individualistic nature of conversion so much that in his *Faithful Narrative* the two conversion experiences which he recounted, by his own admission, were the least typical.⁶² The message of Calvinism was corporate uniformity. The result of revivalism was individual deviation. Edwards was able to maintain the Calvinistic doctrine and still promote the revivals. His own parishioners⁶³ and the rest of New England saw the conflict more clearly with a decided preference for the revivals.

Perhaps the most significant factor which contributed to the inherent incompatibility of Calvinism and revivalism is the difference between exhortational preaching and didactic preaching. In the Calvinistic system preaching was primarily didactic. This style is consistent with Calvinistic theology. Since people are unable to convert themselves, no advice or imperative would be of any benefit. Instead God, through His spokesman the preacher, speaks to the people, teaching them of His anger and love. The people are passive, as all Calvinists must be, and God, through the preacher, is active. This is not to say that Calvinists were not exhortational on occasion. All the Puritans including Edwards encouraged their people to righteous living and the maintenance of the covenant. But since all good in the people was ultimately traced to God, persistent harangues to choose the right or to decide upon the righteous course were relatively rare. In Edwards' most celebrated sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached at the revival's peak in 1741, as well as his sermons which sparked the revival in 1734, he contented himself with presenting the doctrines of the Bible as he understood them. His almost morbid depiction of God's anger contains not a single imperative for the audience to follow. He breathes not a single word of exhortation except that the people "hearken" to his warning.⁶⁴

The revivals necessarily turned the roles around. Revivalistic preaching was viewed by the people as exhortational even if intended by the preacher to be didactic. Even so, Whitefield, Tennant, and almost all subsequent revivalist preachers of note regardless of theology have been predominantly exhortational in homiletical style. The revivalist preacher was not God's spokesman, but one of the people himself exhorting others to change their minds and so alter God's decisions by theirs. Edwards, of course, never wanted to assume this posture but his revivals implicitly forced the preacher into a less authoritative role and the hearers into an increasingly active position. Whitefield's sermon on Abraham serves as an appropriate example. In it his primary focus is not upon the mysteries of God, but upon the actions of Abraham. The sermon is not void of doctrinal content,

but it is lacking compared to its strong exhortational elements.⁶⁵ People came to the revivals not to be changed but to change, not to be "brought through," but to come through to salvation. Even if Calvinistic dependence upon God was preached, the revivalistic exhortations to believe implied, to the hearer, a natural ability to come to faith. Edwards could define the revivals as a "surprising act of God," but the people, for the first time in their lives were no longer passive in their religion. During the early revivals this may not have been apparent, but as more obviously Arminian revivalists continued to have success, it became clear that the doctrinal content of the revivals was purely secondary.⁶⁶ The sole purpose of revivals was "conversions," not doctrine. Preaching brings about the morphology of "conversion" when it exhorts, not when it teaches.

Conclusion

The tragedy of Jonathan Edwards shows that certain media are unsuitable for the propagation of certain messages. Revivalism was culturally and inherently unsuitable for Calvinism. Edwards could not have been expected to realize the implications of revivalism for Puritanism or for America. To him the revivals were sent by God as a means to reclaim the lost and as a proof of his theology. For Edwards to have opposed the revivals would, in his own mind, have been a denial of his own principles. In reality his support of the revivals was a denial of his Calvinistic doctrine. Revivalism, as a religious medium, stressed man's autonomy and free will and emphasized man's role in salvation. Calvinism, as a spiritual message, taught the total depravity of man, his dependence on God, and the sovereignty of the Almighty. The medium led man to plan his salvation. The message taught man his inability to plan. The medium inculcated individualism, an independent spirit, and the responsibilities of each man singly. The message promoted corporate culpability, federalism, and dependence on the mass of people for spiritual and social identity. The medium exhorted to faith. The message taught doctrine. Revivalism became an American religious institution and the necessary medium for the promotion of American Arminian Protestantism. Puritanism died in America. America's "Great Awakening" was Calvinism's "Great Wake."

FOOTNOTES

1. For example, Baptists, synergistic as they are, employ an altar call as a medium for their doctrine of conversion. Pentecostals find that the medium of "prayer and praise" meetings accommodates the propagation of their message. To them prayer and praise are vehicles of the Holy Spirit and means of grace. Lutherans have a particular affinity toward structured worship. This medium is consistent with the Lutheran doctrine that Word and sacrament are inherently and predictably powerful.
2. William Brigance, ed., *History and Criticism of American Public Address*, I (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1943), pp. 220-221.
3. Perry Miller, "The Objective Good," in *Jonathan Edwards: A Profile*, ed. David Levin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), p. 163.
4. Jonathan Edwards, *Selections*, ed. Clarence Faust and Clarence Johnson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1935), p. 317.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
6. *Selections*, p. 116.
7. Brigance, p. 221.
8. *Selections*, p. 124.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
10. Jonathan Edwards quoted by Courad Cherry, "Conversion: Nature and Grace," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, ed. William Shieck (Boston: G. K. Hall and Company, 1980), p. 80.
11. *Selections*, p. 95.
12. Robert Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
13. *Selections*, pp. 164-165.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
17. Conrad Cherry, who refers to Douglas Elwood, *The Philosphical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 147. Cf. also Brigance, who says "that there runs through Edwards' sermons a more pronounced strain of mysticism and pathos than is found in the works of most of his orthodox predecessors," p. 220.
18. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beridge, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), I, pp. 240ff.
19. Cherry, p. 80.
20. Robert Oliver, pp. 6-7.
21. Cf. Eugene White, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-71.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
23. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, New York, 1965), p. 91.

24. Charles Jones, "The Impolite Mr. Edwards: The Personal Dimension of the Robert Breck Affair," in Schieck, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-33.
25. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 12. This volume contains most of Edwards' publications on revivals in America, as well as an excellent introduction by the editor. Cf. also White, p. 54.
26. White, p. 54.
27. Goen, p. 15, and White, p. 59.
28. *The Great Awakening*, pp. 353,358.
29. Ola Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards: 1703-1758*, (New York: Collier Books, 1940), p. 155.
30. Goen, pp. 22-23.
31. Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, (Toronto: William Sloan and Associates, 1949), p. 134.
32. Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 135.
33. Goen, p. 31.
34. Winslow, p. 146.
35. Goen, p. 27.
36. Winslow, p. 178.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.
38. Goen, p. 10.
39. Goen, pp. 5-18. *Selections*, pp. xxxix-xliii. Oliver, p. 37.
40. Thomas Schafer, "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," *Church History*, 20 (1951), p. 55, cited by Goen, p. 10.
41. Edward Collins, "The Rhetoric of Sensation Challenges the Rhetoric of Intellect," in Dewitte Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
42. *Selected Speeches from American History*, ed. Robert Oliver and Eugene White (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1966), p. 19.
43. Winslow, p. 167 (emphasis mine).
44. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
45. Goen, p. 48.
46. *The Great Awakening*, p. 109.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Goen, p. 46.
49. *The Great Awakening*, p. 358.
50. C. C. Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology" in Scheick, p. 156.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
52. *The Great Awakening*, pp. 228-248.
53. Goen, *The Great Awakening*, p. 52; cf. also Collins *op. cit.*, pp. 98ff.
54. *The Great Awakening*, p. 358.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-258.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 260-270.

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57. *Ibid.*, pp. 270ff.
 58. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106, 308; cf. also Winslow, pp. 169-170.
 59. Edwards' theology reflects Calvin's doctrine of the imputation of Adam's guilt to all men collectively; cf. *Selections*, p. 316.
 60. *The Great Awakening*, pp. 240ff.
 61. Winslow, pp. 156-158.
 62. *The Great Awakening*, p. 191.
 63. Winslow, pp. 200-210.
 64. *Selections*, pp. 155-172.
 65. Oliver and White, pp. 9-19.
 66. Collins, pp. 109-112.

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