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A table of contents for the *Congregational Studies Conference Papers* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_congregational-studies-conference_01.php

***Jonathan
Edwards
His Message
and Impact***

Congregational Studies
Conference 2003



**Jonathan
Edwards
His Message
and Impact**

Robert E Davis

**Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2003**

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Contents

Foreword by John Semper.....	5
‘What Must I do to Be Saved?’ Jonathan Edwards and the Nature of True Conversion	7
Jonathan Edwards: A Father of the Modern Mission Movement.....	29
Jonathan Edwards and Britain: 18th Century Trans-Atlantic Networking.....	61

The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual the contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his papers.



Rev. Robert E Davis
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Foreword

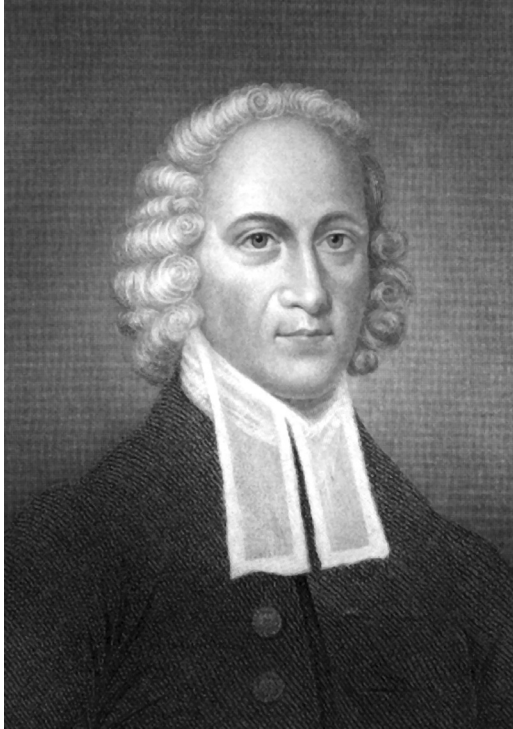
Although we have had two previous papers on Jonathan Edwards at Conferences in 1986 and 1990, we have felt it was right to devote the whole of this year's gathering to a study of this great Congregationalist, to commemorate the 300th Anniversary of his birth. The papers themselves cover aspects of his writings and activities which we have not touched before. We are most grateful to the Rev. Robert Davis, the minister of First Congregational Church, Millers Falls, for his willingness to travel from western Massachussetts to share with us some of the fruits of his studies in Edwards, whose volume of writings was phenomenal. He comes from an area quite close to the places most particularly associated with Edwards, Northampton and Stockbridge; and is thus well-acquainted with what remains from his day at literally grass-roots level.

Since I wrote the last foreword, the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches has suffered the grievous loss of its General Secretary, the Rev. Alan Tovey. We want to express our continuing sympathy with, and prayerful concern for, his wife Lucy. It would also be right for us to pay tribute to his scholarship, as evidenced in part by the papers he contributed to the Conference over the years. Not least, those of us who have had responsibility for selecting the subjects to be considered and finding the speakers to research them, have been most grateful for the wealth of ideas and historical connections which he drew to our attention, and for his many contacts with those who would eventually give papers. This work was done modestly and behind the screens, but was of great value; it will be sorely missed.

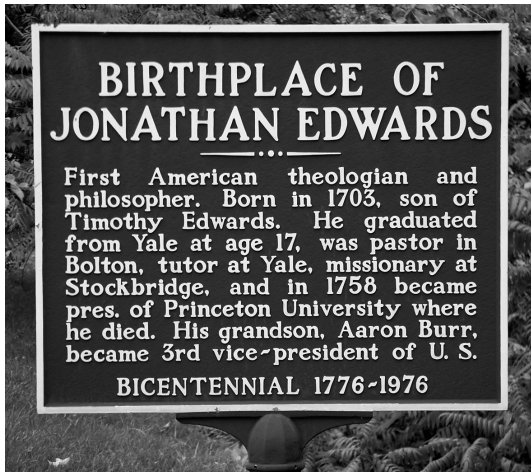
For next year's Conference, we shall be returning to the usual pattern of three papers, on different subjects, given by three different speakers. May we again encourage you to be there and to influence others from your churches to join you. God willing, the Conference will take place at Westminster Chapel on Saturday, 13 March 2004.



John Semper
Wigtown



Jonathan Edwards



BIRTHPLACE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

First American theologian and philosopher. Born in 1703, son of Timothy Edwards. He graduated from Yale at age 17, was pastor in Bolton, tutor at Yale, missionary at Stockbridge, and in 1758 became pres. of Princeton University where he died. His grandson, Aaron Burr, became 3rd vice-president of U. S.

BICENTENNIAL 1776-1976

Sign marking the birthplace of Jonathan Edwards at East Windsor, Connecticut.

‘What Must I do to Be Saved?’

Jonathan Edwards and the Nature of True Conversion

‘What must I do to be saved?’ The cry of the Philippian jailer has been on the lips of many a sinner. Countless men and women have known the heavy weight of conviction and struggled under it, finally finding true relief and grace in Jesus Christ.

Today we are in need of sound thinking and a careful examination of the means, the fruits and the evidences of true conversion. Much of the Church has either dispensed entirely with the notion of religious conversion or has so confused the manner of it and its signs to such an extent that few are able to articulate the Biblical standards. Yet this is a vital subject, as both believer and unbeliever need to know their true spiritual condition.

Reflection on the extensive work of Jonathan Edwards, the earliest and arguably the greatest of American philosopher-theologian-preachers, brings to prominence the questions that rise in connection with our subject, the nature of true conversion and the marks of true religious affections. Four questions confront a serious enquiry. What Edwards said in response to each of them provides an effective entry to the important doctrinal and exegetical bequest he has left to us. While we can look at only a few selected aspects of those responses at this time, we may see in them a clear unfolding of the Biblical revelation concerning the condition of sin and the possibility of redemption that explains the human condition. We also see the insights provided by an intensely devotional and clear-sighted grasp of a true Biblical psychology. Edwards’ dissection of the capacities and status of the human soul, not only in such highly sustained and closely reasoned treatises as his *Freedom of the Will* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, but also in his sermons and his more pastoral *Religious Affections*, continues to provide direction to our thought and practice at the present time.

The questions arise as to, first, what is the human condition and problem that makes divine redemption necessary? Second, what is the nature of the new life that is created in the soul of the sinner who is brought to saving faith in Christ? Third, what are the marks of the genuineness of that new life that can be known by the person himself or herself? And fourth, importantly for those of us who bear pastoral responsibility, how, if at all, can one know that another person is in possession of such newness of life, or that another’s profession of faith is true?

Edwards’ answers to those questions are spread, in not always a systematic manner and often discursively, throughout his four main treatises that bear on the

subject.¹ His answer to the first question is clear, as we shall see. The second question, which it not possible to discuss at adequate length on this occasion, is treated extensively in Edwards' *Religious Affections*, though he defers that treatment until he reaches the seventh of his 'signs of truly gracious and holy affections'. He had spoken in the preface to the *Religious Affections* of 'the saving grace of God, and the new and divine nature', and after discussing the ways in which one may falsely infer one's condition of soul, an expansive discussion of the meaning of the new life is presented. That occurs in the discussion of 'the change of nature' that necessarily attends true 'gracious affections'. At that point the 'change of nature ... being born again; becoming new creatures; rising from the dead; being renewed in the spirit of the mind, dying to sin, and living to righteousness ... a being made partakers of the divine nature ...' are discussed in penetrating terms consistent with the soundest Reformed theology. 'Conversion is a great and universal change of the man, turning him from sin to God'.² It follows that 'They that are truly converted are new men, new creatures ... sanctified throughout in spirit, soul, and body.'³

Edwards' answer to the third of our questions is most penetrating and is addressed at greatest length, and it takes up the very important matter of the possibility of an individual's self-deception. What, in other words, are the true marks of Christian conversion as an individual may perceive them in himself and what are the ways in which, to the contrary, he may be deceived as to his true state? As to the fourth question, the answer is again twofold. On the one hand it is clearly acknowledged that it is not possible for one to make a definitive judgement as to the state of soul of another individual. But at the same time reasons exist why, in such a case, observable and credible marks warrant the judgement in charity that true conversion has occurred.

While much of Edwards' expansive discussion of these questions and issues cannot be addressed at present, his biblical understanding of their importance influences the narrower focus we must adopt. We are concerned, then, with the nature of true conversion and the signs that attest its reality. We might at this stage state two of Edwards' principal conclusions that interested him repeatedly. First, in a long concluding section to his *Religious Affections*, he lays particular emphasis on the importance of observing 'Christian Practice' as a confirmatory sign of true conversion. That, he explains at length, provides a 'chief sign to others'

¹ The four treatises are *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737); *Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God* (1741); *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742); and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746).

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols (originally published London, 1834. This edition Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), vol. 1. pp. 266–67. (Hereafter, *Works* (Edinburgh)).

³ *Ibid.* p. 313.

and ‘the chief sign to ourselves’. Edwards invokes repeatedly the Scriptural datum that ‘by their fruits you shall know them’.

Second, it is, at the end of all that can be argued or contemplated, the perseverance in the faith that attests true conversion. In that same final section of the *Religious Affections* Edwards concludes that ‘all true saints ... do thus persevere in the practice of religion [and] that perseverance in obedience ... is chiefly insisted on in the Scripture as a special note of the truth of grace’.⁴ And the matter is summed up for Edwards, citing Revelation 21:7, ‘He that overcometh shall inherit all things’.⁵ The fruit of the gospel life, on the one hand, and perseverance in fruit-bearing on the other, attest the truth of Christian conversion.

The Perennial Problem

The professing Christian who lacks true conversion lives in a world of sinful delusion and self-deception. He thinks he is safe, while he is still of the world and following the desires of his own heart. He is a hypocrite, but sits comfortably in a church that neither challenges his profession nor convicts him of his sinfulness. He is happily on the road to hell and does not know his current position or his final destination.

The genuine believer may also be in a condition of uncertainty concerning his true state. Unable to see the Biblical signs and marks of saving faith, he weakly wonders if he really belongs to Christ. His lack of assurance hinders his walk and witness. His feeble hope is often crushed by discouragement and despair.

Many contemporary and instructive works examine these problems from different perspectives and with different emphases. But our purpose today is to see what Jonathan Edwards has written on the point. This will be helpful for two reasons. By God’s grace Edwards was uniquely placed and gifted in his ministerial work. He had both ample opportunity and remarkable ability to answer the question ‘What must I do to be saved?’

As a preacher who witnessed hundreds of conversions under his ministry, Edwards was often engaged in the pastoral duty of helping a troubled soul discern the marks and signs of a true work of the Holy Spirit. Such frequency of application taught Edwards how to distinguish between truth and delusion. This practice was informed by Edwards’ comprehensive grasp of the Scriptures and the doctrinal foundations of the faith. It is widely recognised that his depth of insight and mental acuity have rarely been matched in the history of the Church. JE Smith in his introduction to *The Religious Affections* writes; ‘... the whole of his [Edwards’] thought might be viewed as one magnificent answer to the question, ‘What is

⁴ Ibid. p. 312.

⁵ Ibid. p. 378.

true religion?’⁶ Edwards’ first biographer, Samuel Hopkins, notes, ‘Toward this, perhaps no one has taken more pains, or laboured more successfully, than he’.⁷

As a further measure of God’s grace to his Church, Edwards was able not only to help those of his own parish but also to record his experiences and insights for publication. His sermons, pamphlets, tracts, and treatises demonstrate Edwards’ ability and were a stabilising force during revival when excesses and foolishness were rampant. It is to these writings we turn today to assist us in our quest for truth regarding the nature of true conversion.

Yet the question lurks at the corners of our mind, ‘Are Edwards’ answers valid and true for us today?’ or ‘Is this quest a mere antiquarian interest with little or no contemporary relevance?’ Aside from the chronological snobbery that such questions might imply, we in the Church must begin our answer with a rousing declaration of the continuing relevance and imperatives of the Scriptural truth that Edwards so effectively presents to us. While our culture and setting are different from Edwards’, the nature of the human soul and its condition are unchanged. The question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’, still demands a Biblical, reasonable reply. And that is precisely what we find in Edwards, a Biblical, reasonable answer that he discovered, advocated, and taught.

It is my hope that a brief review⁸ of Edwards’ thought on this particular point may provide us with the direction and correctives we need as we try to help others in their discernment of their true condition. It may stimulate us to ask whether we have been properly concerned with the issue. And finally, it may encourage us to engage in healthy self-examination concerning the most vital questions of all, ‘What is the state of *my* soul?’

Edwards’ Personal Conversion

Jonathan Edwards was one month shy of his thirteenth birthday when he enrolled at what was to become Yale University.⁹ His formative years at home under his father’s able instruction had well prepared his mind for the rigour of the academy. But he still had no peace in his soul. Two of his sisters had recently professed

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, General Editor, Perry Miller, succeeded in 1963 by John E. Smith. 19 volumes to date (New Haven: Yale, 1959), vol. 2, p. 2. (Hereafter, *Works* (Yale)).

⁷ Samuel Hopkins. ‘Life of Jonathan Edwards’ in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sereno Dwight, 10 volumes (New York, 1829–30), vol. 8. (Hereafter, *Works* (New York)).

⁸ As Edwards wrote voluminously and the subject before us was of utmost concern, this paper will only begin to analyse his thought on the matter.

⁹ The Collegiate School of Connecticut, founded in 1701 in reaction to the theological drift at Harvard, was moved several times until it finally settled in New Haven, Connecticut. Edwards began his studies at Wethersfield, Connecticut, only 10 miles from his home. A building was finally erected in New Haven, Connecticut in 1718.

faith along with their mother and had joined the church in East Windsor, Connecticut where his father was pastor. (Imagine the stir in town when the minister’s wife is converted!)¹⁰ Yet still no stirrings were evident in the soul of young Jonathan.

While at Yale, Edwards was engaged in the academic rigour of a curriculum that progressed through languages in the first year (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), to logic, natural sciences, geography, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Undergirding these courses was instruction in basic Christian doctrine, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, regular worship, and devotional exercises.

At Yale, Edwards experienced ‘violent inward struggles’ as he continued to fight against his ‘old ways of sin’. His conviction of sin and the need for repentance was of the essence of his realisation of his true condition, as will later become clear. At one point he had forsaken secret prayer, yet with repeated resolutions and strivings he sought to ‘seriously ... practice his religious duties’.¹¹

My concern was now wrought more by inward struggles, conflicts, and self-reflections. I made seeking my salvation the main business of my life. But yet, it seems to me, I sought in a miserable manner, which has made me sometimes since to question, whether it ever issued in that which was saving; being ready to doubt whether such miserable seeking ever succeeded.¹²

But a change did come. During his final year of undergraduate studies at Yale he came to the realisation that he needed a change in the inner man, to leave off the sinful struggling and striving of religious duty, to repent of such, and to seek Christ himself. ‘I was indeed brought to seek salvation in a manner that I never was before; I felt a spirit to part with all things in the world, for an interest in Christ.’¹³ It was in a growing understanding of what Edwards later called the ‘exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet’ doctrine of God’s sovereignty that Edwards found soul-comfort and peace.

Edwards noted that he now had new soul delights and longed to be in prayer and meditation on the things of God. He had a new understanding of God, a new appreciation for his mercies and grace, and new ideas of Christ, the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. ‘The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, “Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory forever and ever, Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17). As I read the words, there came into my soul ... a

¹⁰Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987). pp. 19–20.

¹¹*Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. xii.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him forever!¹⁴ ‘Prayer seemed to be natural to me, as the breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent. The delights which I now felt in the things of religion, were of an exceeding different kind from those before mentioned.’¹⁵ Even his view of nature changed, as he saw God’s glorious handiwork and power in the created realm.¹⁶

I quote this at length for it is instructive to see Edwards’ understanding of his own experience. We shall see later how this is reflected in his studies on the nature of true conversion. Throughout his life he would return to this topic in his writings, dozens of sermons, and countless personal conversations. Many of his treatises were forged in the fires of revival and thus speak directly to such dramatic times. But Edwards rightly believed that revival was God bringing his *ordinary* convicting mercy and grace to an *extraordinary* number sinners at the same time. Therefore, the principles of conversion in times of revival or spiritual dryness were the same. It is to those reflections and studies we shall now turn.

Two Foundational Principles

Instead of analysing each of Edwards’ works on the subject of conversion, we shall attempt to draw common principles from his writings and summarise his thinking. We begin with two foundational points stated by Edwards and shared by all those who, like Edwards, considered themselves to be the descendants of the Protestant Reformers.

There is little question among Edwards’ readers as to where his theological affections lay. He was a Calvinist. But that did not in any sense limit his thinking to a slavish following of one man’s thought. Such was his own ability of mind and his understanding of the Scriptures that he arrived at the Calvinistic and Reformation truths quite independently. For Edwards, ‘Those doctrines of Calvinism, which have been most objected against, and given the greatest offence, appeared to him scripturally reasonable and important; and he thought that to give them up, was in effect to give up all.’¹⁷

Let us look then, at two fundamental points expressed by Edwards and fully in line with the teaching of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and a host of English

¹⁴Ibid., p. xiii.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶These changes in Edwards apparently occurred in the spring of 1721 when he was 17 years of age. See Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁷Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (New York), vol. 1, p. 54.

and American Puritans before him, including his grandfather and mentor, Solomon Stoddard. The points, most simply put, are, that man has no ability to save himself, and that God is able and willing to save his own elected people.

1. Human Inability

It is interesting to note that Edwards, who possessed such considerable human abilities, should emphasise the inability of man, particularly in relation to his salvation. But clearly, he had no other choice. His own experience taught him the futile struggles of a soul seeking God in his own strength. His studies led him to see the Biblical principle clearly stated in such texts as Romans 3:10, ‘There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God’. And Romans 8:7, ‘The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.’ Finally, his many experiences of comforting and confronting convicted sinners confirmed his understanding of human inability to seek or come to God. The doctrine of human inability was therefore foundational to Edwards’ understanding of conversion.

In his first book, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, published in 1737, Edwards described recent events in the tiny frontier town of Northampton, Massachusetts. Benefited by Gospel preaching since the mid 1660s, there had been five spiritual ‘harvests’ under his grandfather who pastored the church for 57 years. But, by the 1730s, there was a certain deadness to the things of God and a declining religious fervour in the town. Edwards assumed the pulpit ministry upon the death of Stoddard in 1729, after assisting him for two years.

In 1734, under Edwards’ preaching, God again graciously visited the village of Northampton with reviving grace. Such a *widespread* outpouring of God’s Spirit had not been seen before. ‘There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.’¹⁸ Fully one quarter of the town’s inhabitants were brought into the church as communicant members in less than six months.

But we are getting ahead of our story. Three years earlier, in what was to be his *début* on the larger ecclesiastical stage, Edwards had been invited to give the Public Lecture in Boston, on 8 July 1731. Considering the wealth of preaching talent in Boston at that time, this was an honour for young Edwards, one that he must have approached with some fear and trembling. The ministers of Boston, leading churchmen, and many others gathered at this annual event and expected to hear a learned discourse from the Scriptures. In 1731 they were not disappointed. Edwards chose as his text 1 Corinthians 1:29–31, ‘That no flesh should glory in

¹⁸Jonathan Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative’ in *Works* (Edinburgh). Vol. 1, p. 348.

his presence ... and he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord'. The doctrine propounded was, 'God is glorified in the work of redemption in this, that there appears in it so absolute and universal a dependence of the redeemed on him'.¹⁹

In his lengthy discourse Edwards argued that man is entirely dependent on God, not only for redemption, but also for faith itself and the work of the Holy Spirit enabling that faith. That is necessary, Edwards said, because man in himself is completely unable to know God, due to the pervasive and debilitating effects of sin and the Fall. 'The redeemed are in everything directly, immediately, and entirely dependent on God: they are dependent on him for all, and are dependent on him in every way.'²⁰ Edwards argued that this dependence exalts and glorifies God, particularly in God's work of redemption. Thus, says Edwards, 'whatever ... scheme is inconsistent with our entire dependence on God for all and in each of those ways, of having all *of* him, *through* him, and *in* him, it is repugnant to the design and tenor of the gospel, and robs it of that which God accounts its lustre and glory.'²¹

The principles expounded in this sermon, which was the first of Edwards' works to be published, were seen by Edwards to be operative in Northampton during the revival of 1734. What he had found in the Scriptures concerning man's inability and absolute dependence on God, he then saw clearly reflected in the lives of his neighbours and friends when the Spirit of God was mightily at work in their midst.²²

2. Conversion Necessarily a Work of the Holy Spirit

Because of man's own inability, Edwards realised the necessity of supernatural grace to bring a person to saving faith. The formula is really quite simple. Man is unable to save himself. God is not only able, but also willing to save his people.

In his rightly celebrated sermon, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*,²³ Edwards emphasised the necessity of God bestowing regenerating grace by the Holy Spirit before anyone will come to faith. That is followed by a new comprehension of gospel truth. Indeed it is only when the light of truth illuminates the dead and sin-darkened soul that the glories of the gospel are manifest.

¹⁹'God Glorified in Man's Dependence', originally preached to the church at Northampton in the Autumn of 1730. Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Yale), *Sermons and Discourses*, vol. 17, p. 202.

²⁰*Ibid.* p. 202.

²¹*Ibid.* p. 213.

²²For a further discussion of man's inability see Jonathan Edwards, 'On the Freedom of the Will' in various editions.

²³Jonathan Edwards, 'A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, shown to be both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine', *Works* (Yale), vol. 17, p. 408.

While many agree with Edwards on these two foundational points, Edwards’ major contribution to the subject of conversion comes from his treatment of the question, ‘Precisely how does the Holy Spirit bring fallen man to saving faith?’ To that we now turn our attention.

How are Men Saved?

It is of primary importance in this discussion to note that any attempt to discern or develop a stereotyped pattern of conversion will fail. Repeatedly Edwards remarks on the amazing variety of God’s sovereign workings in the human soul. In his *Faithful Narrative* Edwards writes, ‘... there is a *vast variety*, perhaps as manifold as the subjects of the operation’.²⁴ As we shall see, Edwards always looked for such signs as conviction of sin, repentance and faith in Christ. But the manner in which these were realised varied tremendously. We have time to note just two.

The Speed of Conversion

Today, it is often expected that we should be able to date the time and place of conversion. Edwards saw that so deep a ‘work’ of God is involved that it is rather difficult to place the moment of one’s conversion within an hour or day, or even a month or a year. Some may come to Christ suddenly and dramatically, Edwards realises, but others may be brought by very slow and often painful steps. The principle is that while God does the work, he does the work differently in different individuals. In times of revival Edwards noted the incredible speed of the Spirit’s work. ‘God has seemed to have gone out of his usual way, in the *quickness* of his work, and the swift progress his Spirit has made in his operations on the hearts of many. It is wonderful that persons should be so *suddenly* and yet so *greatly* changed. Many have been taken from a loose and careless way of living, and seized with strong convictions of their guilt and misery, and in a very little time, old things have passed away, and all things have become new with them.’²⁵ Edwards emphasised that the speed of conversion was in no way determinative of its efficacy.

The Age of Conversion

One amazing feature of the revivals was the wide range in age of those converted. In his accounts of the saving work of the Spirit Edwards particularly notes the conversion of younger people. In the *Faithful Narrative* he tells the story of four-year-old Pheobe Bartlet. Her prayerful search for peace is most compelling. But her case was not unique. He writes, ‘In the summer and fall, the children in various parts of the town had religious meetings by themselves, for prayer, sometimes

²⁴Jonathan Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 350.

²⁵*Ibid.*

joined with fasting; wherein many of them seemed to be greatly and properly affected, and I hope some of them [were] savingly wrought upon.²⁶ 'It has heretofore been looked on as a strange thing, when any have seemed to be savingly wrought upon and remarkably changed in their *childhood*. But now, I suppose, near *thirty* were, to appearance, savingly wrought upon between ten and fourteen years of age; *two* between nine and ten, and *one* of about four years of age.'²⁷

On the other hand he noted many conversions among the elderly, some who had spent their whole lives under the preaching of the Word. 'There was a remarkable instance of an aged woman, of about seventy years, who had spent most of her days under Mr *Stoddard's* powerful ministry. Reading in the New Testament concerning *Christ's* sufferings for sinners, she seemed to be astonished at what she read, as what was *real* and very *wonderful*, but quite *new* to her.'²⁸ 'It has been heretofore rarely heard of, that *any* were converted past middle age; but now we have the same ground to think that *many such* have at this time been savingly changed, as that *others* have been so in more early years. I suppose there were upwards of *fifty* persons converted in this town above forty years of age; more than *twenty* of them above fifty; about *ten* of them above sixty; and *two* of them above seventy years of age.'²⁹

While there is a great variety in these and other aspects of the revivals, there were certain distinguishing marks of conversion that Edwards did look for, though the presence of them did not guarantee converting grace. The common influences of the Spirit are often mistaken for saving grace. In other words, the fact that this room is light does not mean that the sun is shining; the lighting may be artificial. Let us look first at the most necessary sign of regenerating grace that is often completely missing in a modern understanding of conversion.

Conviction of Sin

Eighteenth-century America was in a sorry state spiritually. Almost *any* sense of religious feeling was counted as sign of true conversion. What Edwards referred to as 'carnal security' was quite common. The high water mark of the first few generations of godly immigrants had passed. Archibald Alexander, writing in 1714, commented on the current state of affairs. 'The habit of the preachers was to address their people as though they were all pious and only needed instruction and conformation.'³⁰ Murray writes of that period, 'It had become assumed that

²⁶Jonathan Edwards, 'Letter to Rev. Thomas Prince, Dec. 12, 1743' in *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, p. 118.

²⁷Jonathan Edwards, 'Faithful Narrative' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 350.

²⁸*Ibid.* p. 356.

²⁹*Ibid.* p. 350.

³⁰Solomon Stoddard, *A Guide to Christ* (1714, reprinted 1763), p. xix, quoted in Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

men could be savingly related to Christ without any prior conviction about the sin which made their salvation necessary. Men were treated as saved who never knew they were lost.³¹ In a sermon decrying the congregation’s indifference to the gospel Edwards referred to some ‘as senseless and as stupid as stones’.³² They were accustomed to come to the meeting house, to hear the preacher set forth the terrors of hell and the beauties of heaven, yet they remained unaffected and unchanged. Edwards, however, had confidence that the word of God preached by men and applied by the Holy Spirit would bring about the necessary true conviction of sin.

Such conviction of sin is normally God’s way of working in a sinner prior to his endowment of regenerating grace. That preparatory work reveals to a sinner the danger of his mistaken sense of security in himself. This conviction does not in any sense entitle the sinner to salvation, but it brings the sinner to the end of himself, longing for mercy and grace.³³ The sinner must see that he is mortally ill before he will ever approach the heavenly Physician. The means by which God does this is through the careful application of the law to men, manifesting in it the majesty of God and his holy requirements.³⁴

Yet Edwards was clear that conviction of sin was not itself regeneration nor does it infallibly indicate or necessarily imply a final work of grace.³⁵ But the Holy Spirit will normally bring persons to this point prior to shining the light of saving grace into their hearts. Edwards’ experience was that,

Persons are first awakened with a sense of their miserable condition by nature, the danger they are in of perishing eternally, and that it is of great importance to them that they speedily escape and get into a better state ... *Some* are more *suddenly* seized with convictions ... their consciences are smitten, as if their hearts were pierced through with a dart. *Others* are awakened more *gradually*, they begin at first to be something more thoughtful and considerate, so as to come to a conclusion in their minds, that it is their best and wisest way to delay no longer, but to improve the present opportunity. They have accordingly set themselves seriously to meditate on those things that have the most awakening tendency, on purpose to obtain *convictions*; and so their

³¹Murray, op. cit., 125.

³²Jonathan Edwards, ‘Stupid as Stones’ in *Works* (Yale), vol. 17, p. 178.

³³This Puritan emphasis can be seen in many 17th century writers. William Guthrie’s *The Christian’s Great Interest*, 1658 (reprinted Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969).

³⁴A look at the sermons preached by Edwards during this period confirms the necessity and power of preaching such to the conscience. See Murray, op. cit., p. 130, and *Works* (Yale), vol. 17.

³⁵Jonathan Edwards, ‘A Divine and Supernatural Light’ in *Works* (Yale). vol. 17, p. 410.

awakenings have *increased*, till a sense of their misery, by God's Holy Spirit setting in therewith, has had fast hold of them.³⁶

Thus, as a sinner saw his true and fallen state before a holy God, fear was a natural result. In the early days of the 1734 revival in Northampton, Edwards reported, 'It ... was a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons' minds were intent upon, was to *escape for their lives*, and to *fly from the wrath to come*.'³⁷ Edwards did not make the distresses and agonies of the soul his goal, but he saw clearly that they were an expected work of the Spirit on the way to full conversion.

To be sure, Edwards was well aware of the danger of mistaking all that glitters for gold. Rushing to comfort those afflicted with the least sign of guilt was a sure way to bring them to a hardened state. Crying 'peace, peace when there was no peace' was to bandage a wound that needed yet to be opened even deeper and cleansed.

This conviction might last for some time. As we have seen in his own spiritual struggle, Edwards had learned that recognition of sin and a man's fight against it in his own strength might go on for some time before he comes to a sense of the overwhelming defeat of his own power. It is then and only then that he will run to Christ.

In the midst his pastoral work Edwards wrote a small tract, possibly for use by other ministers who might face similar circumstances, considering how to best determine the state of a sinner's soul and the nature of the work. He notes the conviction must be grounded in recognition 'of the sinful defects of their duties, their not being done from a right principle; and so as having no goodness at all mixed with the bad, but altogether corrupt'.³⁸

This was the key, and of fundamental importance to Edwards' understanding of the process of salvation. Sinners must see that even their best efforts were sin before God. They must be 'convinced of their guilt, in offending and affronting so great a God: One that so hates sin, and is so set against it, to punish it. They must be convinced ... that their pretences of a sense of sin of *heart* be not without reflection on their wicked *practice*; and also that they are not only convinced of sin of practice, but sin of *heart* ... Sinners must see that they are convinced of their spiritual sins, consisting in their sinful defects, living without love to God, without accepting Christ, gratitude to him.'³⁹ A pastor must see 'that they have

³⁶Jonathan Edwards, 'Faithful Narrative' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 350.

³⁷Ibid. p. 348.

³⁸Jonathan Edwards, 'Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences' in *Selections from the Unpublished Writings of Jonathan Edwards of America*, ed. Alexander B Grosart (Printed for private circulation, 1865), p. 2.

³⁹Ibid. p. 1.

not only pretended convictions of sin; but a proper mourning for sin. And also, that sin is burdensome to them, and that their hearts are tender and sensible with respect to it ... the object of their care and dread.’⁴⁰

Edwards notes that in some individuals, sadly, this conviction would result in an attempt to save themselves by means of good works, a striving to do better next time. Such endless pursuit of *self*-improvement will only end in despair. For upon conviction,

They set themselves upon a new course of fruitless endeavours, in their own strength, to make themselves better, and still meet with new disappointments ... If they are told that they trust too much to their own strength and righteousness, they cannot unlearn this practice all at once, and find not yet the appearance of any good, but all looks as dark as midnight to them. Thus they wander about from mountain to hill, seeking rest, and finding none. When they are beat out of *one* refuge, they fly to *another*; till they are as it were debilitated, broken, and subdued with legal humblings ...⁴¹

Yet in others the conviction of sin leads to further grace and true reformation. Some are brought,

immediately to quit their sinful practices; and the looser sort have been brought to forsake and dread their former vices and extravagances. When once the Spirit of God began to be so wonderfully poured out in a general way through the town, people had soon done with their old quarrels, backbitings, and intermeddling with other men’s matters. The tavern was soon left empty, and persons kept very much at home; none went abroad unless on necessary business, or on some religious account, and every day seemed in many respects like a Sabbath-day. The *other* effect was, that it put them on earnest application to the means of salvation, reading, prayer, meditation, the ordinances of God’s house, and private conference; their cry was, *What shall we do to be saved?* The place of resort was now altered, it was no longer the tavern, but the minister’s house that was thronged far more than ever the tavern had been wont to be.⁴²

Thus the Spirit of God was operative in bringing about a conviction of sin. But conviction itself did not necessarily lead to conversion. Edwards was careful to distinguish man’s natural conscience, which may convict him of his sin, from the work of the Spirit which will differ ‘in degree but not in kind from the unaided work of conscience’.⁴³ While many in his and our day take *any* conviction to be

⁴⁰Ibid. p. 3.

⁴¹Jonathan Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 352.

⁴²Ibid. p. 350–351.

⁴³John H Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: Evangelist*, originally published as *Steps to Salvation the Evangelistic message of Jonathan Edwards* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, reprinted Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 42.

a sure sign of regeneration, Edwards noted that much agony over sin may simply be a fear of the just punishment of a holy God, which is really, at its core, self-centred interest, grounded only in the natural conscience of man.

We have dwelt on this at length because many today dismiss conviction of sin as unimportant or unnecessary. But such conviction, as Edwards saw it, brought by the Spirit, is a necessary first step in true conversion. It was a sign that Edwards consistently looked for, even while the manner, strength, and length of that conviction varied with different individuals. Following conviction, Edwards sought to see a further work of grace while carefully distinguishing between uncertain marks. It is to those that we now turn.

False Signs Following Conviction

Edwards is particularly helpful when he writes about what does *not* constitute true signs of conversion. From his *Faithful Narrative*, to *Distinguishing Marks*, to *Religious Affections*, each written for a different purpose, Edwards' thoughtful analysis of conversion matures.⁴⁴ A common theme was that religious experiences do not in themselves necessarily mark true conversion.

Religious Experience not Necessarily Conversion

The modern naïvety concerning the change wrought by God in a sinner's heart is not new. Edwards saw a similar lack of discernment in his day. Exciting experiences are not a guarantee of God's grace. Excitement can be generated by many things, not the least of which may be a football match. Edwards noted that there might be demonstrative displays of religious fervour, but those were not necessarily sure signs of conversion. Indeed, 'It is difficult to conceal great affections, but yet gracious [a result of grace] affections are of a much more silent and secret nature, than those that are counterfeit'.⁴⁵

Edwards attempted to get to the heart of this issue in the *Distinguishing Marks*, which was published in 1741 during a time of general revival throughout the colonies, particularly in his own parish. In it he attempted to sort out the Biblical evidences of the Spirit's work. Edwards was confident that the Word gave ample direction. His design was to 'show what are the true, certain, and distinguishing evidences of a work of the Spirit of God, by which we may safely proceed in judging of any operation we find in ourselves, or see in others'.⁴⁶

⁴⁴While one may note the maturing of his thought there is a general unity. See *Works* (Yale), vol. 2, Introduction, for a discussion of the differences between *Distinguishing Marks* and *The Religious Affections*.

⁴⁵Jonathan Edwards, 'The Religious Affections' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 312.

⁴⁶Jonathan Edwards, 'Distinguishing Marks' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 2, p. 260.

Five years later Edwards published *Religious Affections*, his greatest work on this topic, answering in it the question ‘What is the nature of true religion?’⁴⁷ This extremely popular book was often republished without his permission and many editions cut and chopped huge sections, usually removing the careful theological underpinnings, leaving his conclusion dangling in thin air.⁴⁸ Modern day Christians, from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to advocates of the ‘Toronto Blessing’, have quoted Edwards approvingly. A careful reading of the full text, however, might dissuade some of his current fans, as Edwards would not find their beliefs and practices Biblical or consistent with his own.

Edwards noted that much religious excitement and fervour could exist in a person without their being truly converted. One key mark was the difference between the public and private manifestations of religious affections. He notes; ‘There is a strange unevenness and disproportion in false affections, at different *times*; so there often is in different *places*. Some are greatly affected when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it in secret, in close meditations, secret prayer, and conversing with God, when alone, and separated from all the world.’⁴⁹

Others seem to show an inordinate amount of religious enthusiasm. But ‘the degree of *grace* is by no means to be judged of by the degree of *joy*, or the degree of *zeal*; and ... we cannot at all determine by these things who are gracious and who are not. It is not the *degree* of religious affections but the *nature* of them that is chiefly to be looked at. *Some* that have had very great raptures of joy, and have been extraordinarily *filled* (as the vulgar phrase is), and have had their bodies overcome, and that very often, have manifested far less of the temper of Christians

⁴⁷This single work is worthy of much careful study. To summarise: Edwards notes 12 signs that are not certain marks of a religious affection. They are; 1. A great religious zeal or fervour, 2. Effects on the body, 3. Talking about religion, 4. Source other than self, 5. Ability to recite the Scriptures, 6. The appearance of love to others, 7. Multiple affections, 8. A pattern of affections, 9. Devoting much time to religion and worship, 10. Praising and glorifying God in public, 11. Self-confidence in religious experience, 12. Outwards signs that may even convince true Christians. On the other hand, signs that are certainly marks of a true conversion are: 1. The affections are spiritual, supernatural and divine, 2. A delight in things not for self-interest, 3. A love of divine things for their inherent beauty and excellency, 4. Rightly understanding divine things, 5. Conviction of the reality and certainty of divine things, 6. Humiliation, a sense of unworthiness and insufficiency, 7. A change of nature, 8. Christ-likeness; love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, mercy as well as boldness and zeal, 9. A tender sensitive heart, 10. Reflecting the whole image of Christ, no disproportion of true affections, 11. Spiritual hunger for spiritual growth, 12. Bearing fruit of righteousness as the main business of life. Summary taken from Jonathan Edwards, *Resolutions and Advice to young converts*, ed. Stephen J Nichols (Phillipsburg, NJ: Prsbyterian & Reformed, 2001), p. 117.

⁴⁸Charles Wesley thought it ‘contained much wholesome food ... mixed with much deadly poison’ so he prepared a ‘new improved’ edition. It was reissued in America many times and as late as 1855. He discarded 4 of the 12 signs including the vital 3rd. The American Tract Society also circulated improved editions toning down the Calvinism and elevating pietistic Methodism.

⁴⁹Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 311.

in their conduct since than some others that have been still and have made no great outward show. But then again, there are *many others* that have had extraordinary joys and emotions of mind, with frequent great effects upon their bodies, that behave themselves steadfastly, as humble, amiable, eminent Christians.’⁵⁰

Edwards is noting that the degree of one’s affections is not as vital as their nature, and that true affections will issue in a change in the Christian’s conduct. These are important points worthy of further investigation.

Clear Evidences

While there were many signs that might or might not reflect a true work of grace, Edwards was able to identify many that were clearly ‘gracious’. We can summarise these into two categories, a change in the inner man and a change in his outward behaviour.

An Inner Change

A true work of God on the soul of man will change him inwardly. To discern if indeed this change has taken place, one must ascertain ‘that the operation be such upon the will or heart, not on the imagination, nor on the speculative understanding or motions of the mind, though they draw great affections after them as the consequence’.⁵¹ ‘And also see to it that the convictions ... seem to be deep and fixed, and to have a powerful governing influence on the temper of the mind, and a very direct respect to practice.’⁵²

These inward changes were clearly known best to the convert himself. But the outward manifestations should be clear to others. Edwards believed that while true conversion involved an inward change, such would always be displayed in an outward expression of a changed life. In those truly converted, ‘their discoveries and illuminations and experiences in general, are not superficial pangs, flashes, imagination, freaks, but solid, substantial, deep, inwrought into the frame and temper of their minds, and discovered to have respect to practice’.⁵³ But just what would these ‘practices’ look like?

Outward Behaviour

Good fruit is what Edward sought. True conversion radically changed the way people viewed themselves, the world, and their God, and therefore changed the way they lived. Having been convicted of their own sinfulness, the true converts saw their Saviour God as gracious, full of beauty and holiness and worthy of all

⁵⁰Jonathan Edwards, ‘Letter to Rev. Thomas Prince, Dec. 12, 1743’, *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, p. 126.

⁵¹Grosart, op. cit., p. 1.

⁵²Ibid. p. 2.

⁵³Ibid. p. 3.

praise and worship. Their attitude and practice towards the things of God and especially the means of grace took on a profound shift. ‘Persons after their conversion often speak of religious things as seeming *new* to them; that preaching is a *new* thing; that it seems to them they never heard preaching before; that the Bible is a *new* book: they find there *new* chapters, *new* psalms, *new* histories, because they see them in a new light.’⁵⁴ Saving grace turns people to the means of grace. ‘The minds of the people in general appeared more engaged in religion, showing a greater forwardness to make religion the subject of their conversation, and to meet frequently for religious purposes, and to embrace all opportunities to hear the word preached.’⁵⁵

A converted person acts differently and while that may not be immediately observable, in due course the change will become apparent. ‘A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship, and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it; but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind to converse with God in solitary places. And this also has its peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging its affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer.’⁵⁶

This emphasis on outward signs was not merely a theoretical expression. In 1742 Edwards and his congregation subscribed to a lengthy covenant, and the clear emphasis in it was a renewal of Christian duties and responsibilities in their relationships with one another. Their declared desire was to have their outward actions consistent with the faith that they professed.

Certain areas of the Christian life were to be particularly noted. Edwards looked to see that a convert would, ‘long after HOLINESS, and that all their experiences increase their longing. Let them be inquired of concerning their disposition and willingness to bear the cross, sell all for Christ, choosing their portion in heaven, etc. and whether their experience have a respect to PRACTICE in these ways. [See] that their behaviour ... inclines them to repent for past ill practice ... and makes them long after perfect freedom from sin, and after those things wherein holiness consists.’⁵⁷

Edwards looked for humility as a sign of grace. In noting the work of God among the people of Northampton he writes that they have not ‘appeared with the assuming, self-conceited, and self-sufficient airs of enthusiasts, but exceedingly the contrary. They are eminent for a spirit of meekness, modesty, self-diffidence, and

⁵⁴Jonathan Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 356.

⁵⁵Jonathan Edwards, ‘Letter to Rev. Thomas Prince, Dec. 12, 1743’ in *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, p. 116.

⁵⁶Jonathan Edwards, ‘The Religious Affections’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, pp. 311–12.

⁵⁷Grosart, op. cit., p. 3.

a low opinion of themselves. No persons appear so sensible of their need of instruction and so eager to receive it, as some of them; nor so ready to think *others better than themselves*. Those that have been considered as converted amongst us have *generally* manifested a longing to *lie low* and in the dust before God; withal complaining of their not being able to lie low enough.⁵⁸ Indeed, ‘The surest character of true divine supernatural love—distinguishing it from counterfeits that arise from a natural self-love—is that the Christian virtue of *humility* shines in it; that which above all others renounces, abases, and annihilates what we term *self*.’⁵⁹

Edwards looked for a true sense of God and his glory as a mark of divine grace. This could be seen in recognition by the sinner that salvation is God-centred and not man-centred. In that, God is glorified in the work of redemption. Edwards sought evidence ‘that their conviction of the truth of divine things be discerned to be truly some way or other primarily built on a sense of their divine excellency; That God and divine things are admirable on account of the beauty of their moral perfection; That there is to be discerned in their sense of the sufficiency of Christ, a sense of that divine, supreme, and spiritual excellency of Christ, wherein this sufficiency fundamentally consists; and that the sight of this excellency is really the foundation of their satisfaction as to his sufficiency.’⁶⁰

There are many more marks, which Edwards carefully describes, particularly in *Distinguishing Marks* and *Religious Affections*, though he readily admits the difficulties in discerning such. In his observations of the christian life of David Brainerd, Edwards notes the importance of distinguishing between what he calls meteors and stars. Brainerd’s ‘religion did not consist in unaccountable flights and vehement pangs; suddenly rising, and suddenly falling; at times exalted almost to the third heavens, and then negligent, vain, carnal, and swallowed up with the world, for days and weeks, if not months together. His religion was not like a blazing meteor, or like a flaming star ... flying through the firmament with a bright train, and then quickly departing into perfect darkness; but more like the steady lights of heaven, constant principles of light, though sometimes hid with clouds’.⁶¹ A true believer is not one who will flash through the sky with brilliant light only to fade but one who constantly shines for years on end with true christian character. Perseverance is thus the final sign. ‘All true saints ... do thus persevere in the practice of religion, [and] that perseverance in obedience ... is chiefly insisted on in the Scripture as a special note of the truth of grace’.⁶²

⁵⁸ Jonathan Edwards, ‘Faithful Narrative’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, pp. 356–7.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Edwards, ‘Distinguishing Marks’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 2, p. 268.

⁶⁰ Grosart, op. cit., p. 3.

⁶¹ Jonathan Edwards, ‘Life of Brainerd’ in *Works* (Yale), vol. 7, pp. 508–9.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 312.

Edwards is quick to admit his naïvety concerning men’s hearts. He noted how difficult it was to determine the reality of the marks.⁶³ He often comments on the great resemblance between sinners and saints. He writes of what he calls ‘Evangelical hypocrisy’—a form of self-deception—where the hypocrite is so blind to the truth that they deceive not only others but even themselves.⁶⁴

This self-deception was an abiding concern for Edwards. While surely there were many true conversions under his ministry and the work of the Spirit in the revivals was extensive, in a letter to Thomas Gillespie in 1751 Edwards admitted that many were deceived. Hope was built on wrong evidence. People often looked too much to the excitement of conversion and conviction and too little at an *abiding* sense of faith and the true temper of their own hearts.⁶⁵

In this same letter, which sadly relates the events of his own dismissal from the Northampton pulpit (in part for declaring the necessity of conversion prior to receiving the Lord Supper), Edwards reflected on his own failure of discernment: ‘If I had had more experiences, and ripeness of judgement and courage, I should have guided my people in a better manner, and should have guarded them better from Satan’s devices, and prevented the spiritual calamity of many souls, and perhaps the eternal ruin of some of them; and have done what would have tended to lengthen out the tranquillity of the town.’⁶⁶

But such was not to be in the providence of God. And thus this mighty prophet of God, who laboured so diligently to discern the nature of true conversion, was cast out of his church.

Conclusions

According to Edwards, two sure characteristics of conversion are that they are ‘mysterious’ and ‘various’. There is nothing formulaic about what is to be looked for. Yet, there are key elements that must, in some form, always be present: a conviction of sin, true repentance toward God, and a saving trust in Christ. The surest sign of regenerating grace and a true conversion was a changed life, perseveringly lived to the glory of God. The appointed means to show sinners that they are deathly ill and need a physician is preaching to the conscience, trusting that the Holy Spirit will use the application of the law and gospel to bring the sinner to conviction and faith.

We have but glanced at the extensive writing of Edwards on the nature of true conversion. I have tried to highlight points that I believe are crucial in our

⁶³Jonathan Edwards, ‘The Religious Affections’ in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, pp. 260–262.

⁶⁴*Ibid.* pp. 257ff.

⁶⁵‘Letter to Thomas Gillespie, July 1, 1751’ in *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, pp. 383–384.

⁶⁶‘Letter to Thomas Gillespie’ in *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, p. 384.

day. A closer examination of Edwards' writings will show slight inconsistencies in his thought, but also a careful reliance on the Scriptures, a prudent hesitancy toward the expectation of uniformity in the work of the Spirit, and a judicious eye for discerning marks and signs of converting grace.

As we have noted, Edwards was uniquely placed and gifted to think much about the nature of true conversion. Often engaged in the pastoral duty of helping a troubled soul discern the marks and signs of a true work of the Holy Spirit, he coupled such experience with a profound grasp of the Scriptures and the doctrinal foundations of the faith. While the numbers coming to us in this day may not be many, we have, nonetheless, the same responsibility. We must have a biblical understanding of the Spirit's converting work. Who knows but that we might see such days as Edwards described in his *Faithful Narrative* when the village was so joyously changed and so many were hopefully converted. When, he writes,

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 unto them; *parents* rejoicing over their children as new born, and *husbands* over their wives, and *wives* over their husbands ... Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was *alive* in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every *hearer* eager to drink in the words of the *minister* as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, *in tears* while the word was preached; *some* weeping with sorrow and distress, *others* with joy and love, *others* with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbours ... Our *young people*, when they met, were wont to spend the time in talking of the *excellency* and *dying love* of JESUS CHRIST, the glory of the way of *salvation*, the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God, his glorious work in the *conversion* of a soul, the *truth* and certainty of the great things of God's word ... Those amongst us, who had been *formerly converted*, were greatly enlivened, and renewed with fresh and extraordinary incomes of the Spirit of God ...⁶⁷

If such a work of grace came to your church, how would you assist these people? How would you instruct them, assure them? Edwards' great longing and desire was to discover the distinguishing marks of God's grace so as to assist himself and his people in knowing the true state of their souls. This was perhaps Edwards' great labour, and greatest contribution to the church. For as he notes, it is a 'point of infinite consequence to every single person; each one having to do with God as his supreme judge, who will fix his eternal state, according as he finds him to be with or without true religion'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Jonathan Edwards, 'Faithful Narrative' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 348.

⁶⁸Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated; or Experimental Religion, as Distinguished From Formality on the One Hand, and Enthusiasm on the Other, Set in a Scriptural and Rational Light. In Two Discourses. With a preface by the Rev. Mr Edwards* (Boston: S Kneeland, 1750).

May we learn well from Edwards and others like him who have attempted to gain from the Word of God what are the true marks and signs of gracious conversion. May we do so that we might set them before others, and before ourselves, so that no one would falsely think himself converted who is not, and no one would doubt and despair of hope who is truly saved by the Lord’s marvellous, matchless grace.

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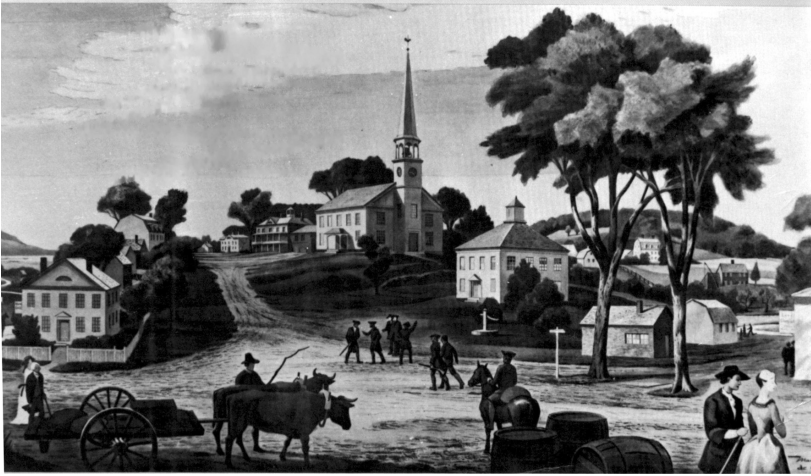
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*Northampton, Massachusetts in the 18th century
with the first and second meeting houses.*



The 18th century Mission House at Stockbridge, Massachusetts,

Jonathan Edwards: A Father of the Modern Mission Movement

Almost anything we can say about Jonathan Edwards has most likely been said, at least once, and probably with greater clarity. The tremendous focus on Edwards in recent years has produced a multitude of articles and books on almost every conceivable aspect of his life and work, even to the point of examining the paper and ink he used. Academically he is studied in the History, Philosophy, and English, as well as in the Theology departments. The life and work of Edwards is well-ploughed ground. Yet, with all this scholarly interest, one particular topic of study has been largely ignored—that of ‘Edwards and Missions’.¹

Not only have his contributions in this area been overlooked, they have even been denied. As long ago as 1814 the Rev. Francis Brown charged that Edwards ‘failed to act’ regarding missions.² Mission historian James Manor has written that for Edwards, ‘missions work was a digression from the mainstream’ of his life, ‘more important as a means than an end’, and his theology restrained him ‘from the preoccupation with [mission] activism, which will be so marked in the succeeding generations’.³

But wasn’t Edwards a great evangelistic preacher? Well yes, but many say that his Reformed theological system kept him from being truly interested and active in evangelism and mission. However, we might argue, Edwards himself served as a missionary in Stockbridge, Massachusetts for over six years. True, but at least one writer has stated that Stockbridge was ‘an interim’ post after his dismissal from Northampton,⁴ and others suggest that he went there only to have the peaceful place and time to write, not to serve as a missionary.

The now too common view of Edwards is that he was a recluse who hid in his study thirteen hours a day, disdainful contact with anyone. His pastoral inabilities and rigid view of the Lord’s Table led to his dismissal from the Northampton church and virtual exile to the wilderness in Stockbridge. Yes,

¹ I am indebted to a key work by Ronald E Davies, ‘Jonathan Edwards: Missionary Biographer, Theologian, Strategist, Administrator, Advocate—and Missionary’ in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21, no 2, April 1997, pp. 60–67.

² Francis Brown preaching to the Maine Missionary Society (quoted in Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Viking, 2nd Edition, 1986), p. 204.

³ James Manor, *The Coming of Britain’s Age of Empire and Protestant Mission Theology, 1750–1839* in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, no 61, January 1977, Heft 1, p. 38.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.

Edwards the profound philosopher, Edwards the tedious hell-fire preacher, Edwards the manipulative revivalist, but not Edwards the mission-minded evangelist.⁵

To the contrary, one modern writer has suggested that we could call Edwards the ‘grandfather of the modern Protestant mission movement’.⁶ Evidence points to Edwards not only as a missionary himself but also as supporting, encouraging and advocating missionary work in a manner quite ahead of his time. I shall therefore attempt to demonstrate just how central missionary evangelism was to Jonathan Edwards. Not only was he *concerned* about gospel dissemination, but also he actively wrote about, prayed for, and served the missionary cause. We will see that he encouraged, inspired, and trained missionaries. And, beyond his personal involvement, his publications and correspondence served to further the missionary endeavour in America and abroad. I shall argue that his influence was so foundational and important that we can legitimately refer to Edwards not as a ‘grandfather’ of the modern Protestant mission movement but as a ‘father’ and as a full participant himself. Hopefully, this recognition of his contributions to missions will enable us to expand our understanding of this great and multifaceted man, dispel some common misunderstandings of his life and work and, finally, challenge us to examine our own mission mindedness as we see Jonathan Edwards as a model for mission.

Mission Activity Before Edwards

When we think of modern mission beginnings, most minds familiar with Christian history will tend to consider William Carey leaving Britain for India in 1793. Indeed, Carey and the Baptist Missionary Society were pioneers.⁷ But much work had been done long before Carey ever set sail. Setting aside, for our purposes, all pre-Reformation missionary activity, we note that the earliest attempts by the English to establish plantations in the Americas were not only economic ventures but spiritual endeavours as well. Mission history is closely inter-woven with Britain’s colonisation of the New World. Clearly, the work among the American Indians was a catalyst for later developments. Yet many mission historians ignore or understate these endeavours.⁸

⁵ One wonders how the facts about Edwards can be so variously understood. Apart from the fact that the unbelieving scholar often misunderstands much of what Edwards wrote, an equal difficulty is a misunderstanding of motivation. Iain Murray in the introduction to his biography of Edwards has an excellent analysis of why there is such a wide variety of interpretation of Edwards and his work (Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. xix–xxxi).

⁶ RE Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁷ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Mission Society 1792–1992* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), p. 7.

⁸ JH Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), for one, skips over anything occurring on American soils as if it never happened.

The religious climate in Britain in the early and mid-17th century and the attendant persecution and desire for religious freedom drove many of the early settlers to the New World. The Separatist Pilgrim Fathers landing in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 *primarily* wanted to find a place for themselves where they could freely worship according to the dictates of conscience. Yet, included in the Mayflower Compact was an expressed purpose to emigrate for ‘the glory of God, and the advancement of the Christian faith’.⁹ When the tide of English Puritans began to flood the shores in 1640, the Royal Charter of Massachusetts Bay Colony included the statement, ‘to win and incite the natives of that country to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Saviour of mankind and the Christian faith ... is the *principal* end of this plantation’.¹⁰ The colonial seal of Massachusetts shows an Indian¹¹ with the words coming out of his mouth ‘Come over and help us’.¹² In the midst of these waves of English immigration, sermons were preached on both sides of the Atlantic concerning the enlargement of Christ’s kingdom by the conversion of the heathen. In 1646 the General Court of Massachusetts directed colonial ministers to appoint two of their number each year to work among the Indians.

Sadly, even with such great intentions, early work with the Indians was minimal, as the primary concern was colonial survival. Productive mission work really began in the 1640s with John Eliot. After many years of preparation and witnessing he preached the first sermon to the Indians in their own language on 28 October 1646. Eliot eventually established 14 separate Indian villages in eastern and central Massachusetts where he preached and gathered churches. He wrote tracts urging the English to support the work among the Indians, such as ‘The Day Breaking if Not the Sun Rising on the Indians in New England’.¹³ His motto was ‘Prayer and pains through faith in Jesus Christ will accomplish anything’.

Another early missionary was Thomas Mayhew who laboured among the Indians on the offshore islands of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket. For 15 years he preached until he was lost at sea. After his death his father, then 70 years of age, took over his son’s work and soon learned enough of the Indian language to preach. He travelled about, often walking 20 miles to declare the gospel, continuing in the work until his death at the age of 93.

⁹ Henry Steele Commager, *Documents of American History*. 6th ed. (New York: Appleton, 1958), p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 18 (my italics).

¹¹ ‘Indian’ will be used in this paper to refer to Native Americans. It is the term used by Edwards and others. There were, of course, many distinct tribes with different languages, a difficulty to be overcome in early mission work.

¹² It is still on the seal, much to the dismay of some.

¹³ For more on Eliot see, Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *John Eliot ‘Apostle to the Indians’* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968)

If greatness of accomplishment can be determined by numbers (a perilous practice) we see that both Eliot and Mayhew were highly successful. Ola Winslow calculates that by 1675 there were 4,000 'Praying Indians' in New England and a like number who, while not yet professing faith, were living in the Indian towns under the influence of the gospel. Together these probably represent 'one-fourth of the total Indian population' of New England.¹⁴ By 1700 there were 30 Indian churches.

So profitable was this early work that it caught the attention of the English Puritans and Cromwell himself through the information provided in Eliot's numerous tracts which, of course, were written for that very purpose. The House of Commons records that 'having received intelligence that the heathens in New England are beginning to call upon the name of the Lord, we feel bound to assist in this work'. Thus on 27 July 1649 an ordinance was passed in Parliament establishing 'A corporation for the promoting and propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ in New England'.¹⁵ A collection produced £12,000 that was used to purchase property in England. Sixteen members of the corporation were designated to oversee the income from the property. Known as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England they appointed commissioners and a treasurer in the colonies. From the invested funds they hired and maintained itinerant missionaries and schoolteachers in New England and eventually in New York State.¹⁶ In 1660, the year Eliot baptised the first Indian, the Society was dissolved as all acts of the Long Parliament were reversed by the restoration of the monarchy. Yet the court of Charles II recognised the benefit and need of such work and the Society for Propagating the Gospel in New England was rechartered on 7 February 1661–2. The Society was also behind the printing of Eliot's translation of the Old and New Testaments into Algonquian.¹⁷ When Eliot died in 1690 his Indian converts carried on his work.

¹⁴Winslow, op. cit., p. 168.

¹⁵Henry Scobell, *A Collection of Acts and Ordinances of... Parliament* (London: Henry Hills and John Field, 1658), pp. 66–68.

¹⁶Cromwell also conceived a project for converting the old Chelsea College into a great missionary institution, dividing the world into four great mission fields and directing the work in them by four secretaries paid by the state; but his death and the Restoration put an end to those ideas.

¹⁷The New Testament was published in 1661 and the Old Testament in 1663. The difficulty of his task of mastering and reducing the Algonquian language to writing was tremendous. Centuries before modern linguistic theory, there was no written text, no dictionary, no grammar, and indeed no alphabet. Algonquian is a heavily inflected language. Words are often created by combining other words. Compounds, not prepositions and conjunctions, express relationships between words. Thus words of great length can be created. One word, 'catechism', is rendered by Eliot as 'Kummogokdonattoottammocitaeongannunnonash'.

Thus the Society for Propagating the Gospel in New England is the oldest Protestant missionary society. For more than 120 years, halted only by the American War for Independence, it financed mission work. For its first 50 years it was alone in the field.

In 1707 the Scots attempted to join the work in the colonies with the founding of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Its primary mission was to the Highlands and the many Scots living abroad, but it expanded its vision and gave the Presbyterians of New York and New Jersey a grant to maintain two missionaries. The memorial that led to its foundation invited attention to the missionary labours of John Eliot. While begun in 1707, it was not until 1717 that the Society had any real resources with which to work.¹⁸ By the 18th century there were other missionary endeavours but these two societies figure largely in our account.¹⁹

The successes of these early efforts were dramatic when one considers the setting and the difficulties they faced. Yet they are usually overlooked in mission histories. Hundreds if not thousands of Indians were hopefully converted during the first century of colonial expansion in America,²⁰ and glory will reveal just how effective these missionary pioneers really were.

Thus a mission consciousness and practice existed in New England prior to the birth of Jonathan Edwards in the parsonage of East Windsor, Connecticut on 5 October 1703. Jonathan's infant ears may well have heard the word 'Indian' for the first time when he was just under 5 months old. On 29 February 1704, French soldiers, aided by Mahican Indians, attacked the English settlement at Deerfield, Massachusetts. Fifty-six settlers were massacred, and 112 were taken captive, of which 21 died on the long winter trek to Canada. Among them were distant relatives of the Edwards, Rev. John Williams and his family. Some of the

¹⁸Dr Williams bequeathed an estate to be transferred to the Scottish Society 'that they might send 3 qualified ministers to infidel and foreign countries'. Mackichan, *The Missionary Ideal in the Scottish Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), p. 70. This encouraged the Society to make a beginning. After much correspondence with authorities in the colonies they engaged 3 missionaries to undertake work with Indians. All of them had to be recalled. In 1743 David Brainerd was commissioned.

¹⁹Others include The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698). This Anglican society was not originally intended as a missionary endeavour but to support Anglican colonists in the New World. In 1701 The Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts received a Royal charter. The Dutch East India Company, formed in 1602, had chaplains for their own employees, but was adamantly opposed to mission work among indigenous populations. In 1661 George Fox and the Friends sent three men to China but they never reached their destination. Other attempts include: Spener at Halle and Franke's Danish Halle Mission at Tranquebar, India in 1705, and the Moravians under Zinzendorf in the 1730s and 1740s.

²⁰To explore further the history of early colonial missions works see, Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust reprint, 1979)

survivors fled to nearby Northampton and others recovered in East Windsor itself.²¹

From his earliest days, Edwards was well aware of the American Indian.²² But apart from attempts to bring the gospel to select tribes in the eastern part of the colonies, little evangelism was being conducted among the Indians in the frontier towns of western New England. East Windsor, the village of his birth and early life, had only recently been carved out of the wilderness. In the 1660s it was supposed that there were nineteen Indians to one Englishman.²³ This situation had changed somewhat by the turn of the century but it was still the frontier.²⁴

While Indians were certainly around young Jonathan, the subject of missions or Indians did not appear in Edwards' early writings or correspondence, which are scant.²⁵ Jonathan was tutored at home until he matriculated at Yale College just one month before his 14th birthday. We know little of his years at Yale except that he was precocious, graduating with Bachelor of Arts at the age of 17 at the head of his class. It is only as he enters the ministry that we see his developing concern for missions. Let us look, then, at Edwards' missionary efforts under three heads: pastor, writer and missionary.

Edwards the Pastor

Early Years

Upon graduation from Yale, Edwards was called as supply preacher to a Presbyterian church in New York City. He was just 19 years old. Documents from Edwards'

²¹ Stephen Williams, the 'Boy Captive of Old Deerfield' was captured and taken to Canada. Later released, he was to become the pastor of Longmeadow, Massachusetts for 66 years. He was well known by his distant relative Edwards. He joined Edwards in a concern for the Indians' spiritual condition.

²² The American Indians did not know a homogenous society. The various tribes were often at war with each other. Those cooperating with the French were at odds with those who sided with the English. Successful evangelism with some tribes led to their being ostracised by other tribes. It is a complex picture and not very helpful to refer to them collectively as 'Indians', but for the sake of brevity and simplicity I shall do so.

²³ Murray, op. cit., p. 7

²⁴ Keep in mind the nature of the frontier. East Windsor on the Connecticut River was one of only 129 settled towns in 1700 in New England. It was one of the farthest westward settlements, which were often attacked by Indians as late as the mid-18th century. This possibility was with Edwards until the end of his life. While Edwards lived in Northampton an Indian attack occurred in Deerfield in 1746 killing five men and a girl. In 1748–9 nearly 150 persons were killed or captured by Indians in Western Massachusetts. Indians attacked Stockbridge between worship services on Sunday morning in September 1754 killing four.

²⁵ There are only nine extant letters of Edwards prior to his going to Northampton in 1723. George S Claghorn, *Edwards' Works: Letters and Personal Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959. Hereinafter *Works* (Yale)), vol. 16, pp. 29–48.

early ministry are few, yet in them we already see a growing concern for the evangelisation of the world.

In his personal narrative, possibly written during his time in New York, Edwards recalls,

I had great longings for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom in the world; and my secret prayer used to be, in large part, taken up in praying for it. If I heard the least hint of any thing that happened in any part of the world that appeared in some respect or other to have a favorable aspect in the interests of Christ's kingdom, my soul eagerly caught at it; and it would much animate and refresh me.²⁶

Yet there is little or nothing in his early sermons to suggest an interest in reaching the Indians.²⁷ After a brief nine-month ministry he returned to Yale as a tutor.

After labouring at Yale for several years, a difficult period in his life, Edwards was called by the people of Northampton, Massachusetts on 29 August 1726 to assist his aging maternal grandfather, the Reverend Solomon Stoddard.

Mission Organiser

Interest in the Indians was high in the frontier village of Northampton. The local tribe, the Nonotuc, was quite friendly, and had been given permission to build a fort within the town in 1664. English and Indian mutually defended each other. Other villages existed to the north and south along the Connecticut River valley, but to the west there were no significant settlements until one reached the town of Albany on the Hudson River, 75 miles away. The Rev. Mr Stoddard himself was concerned about the evangelisation of the neighboring tribes. Early in his ministry he had shown indifference to Indian missions, but by 1727 he was advocating the duty of New Englanders to work towards the Indians' conversion. He argued that the periodic troubles with the Indians were God's judgement on the English settlers for not evangelising the heathen.²⁸ Edwards would certainly have known and probably read these arguments of his famous grandfather, and they may have been instrumental in developing his own thinking.

It might have been the influence of Grandfather Stoddard that led Edwards to write in his 'catalogue' that one book he wanted to read was 'Millar's *History of the Propagation of Christianity*'. If in fact he read it, he would have discovered that this account of Christian mission from the time of the Apostles urged that

²⁶Sereno E Dwight, 'Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards' in *Works* (London: 1834, reprinted Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974. Hereinafter *Works* (Edinburgh)), vol. 1, pp. xii–xlvi.

²⁷Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 10, *Sermons 1720–1723*.

²⁸Solomon Stoddard, *An Answer to Some Cases of Conscience Respecting the Country* (Boston, B Green, 1722) and *Question: Whether God is not angry at the Country for Doing so Little Towards the Conversion of the Indians?* (Boston: B. Green, 1723).

the work continue. It especially noted the necessity of prayer, a point Edwards himself later advocated, as we shall see.²⁹

Edwards was to spend only 2½ years under his grandfather's guidance as Stoddard departed this life in February 1729. Edwards' focus as the sole pastor of the church was much that of Stoddard's, the preaching of the word three times a week. But something else entered the mix. As Neill the historian notes, 'Jonathan Edwards put missions at the centre of his programme'.³⁰

We see the beginnings of such an emphasis in March of 1734 when Edwards attended a meeting held in the home of Col. John Stoddard, Solomon's son, and uncle and friend to young Jonathan. Stoddard was well known for his knowledge of the local tribes and also for his desire to see their conversion to Christ.³¹ The meeting's agenda was to plant a wilderness settlement in order to evangelise the Indians. These organisers were acting under the Commissioners for Indian Affairs in Boston, who were agents for the Society for Propagating the Gospel in New England, the same organisation that had supported John Eliot.

The result of the meeting was the establishment of the Stockbridge mission on the Housatonic River, 35 miles west of Northampton. Young John Sergeant served as its first missionary until his death in 1749. Following graduation from Yale, this young man had lived and studied theology in the Edwards' parsonage, as was the practice in that day. 'He had felt a call to missionary work among the Indians for a number of years but had shared it only with intimate friends ...'³² Surely Edwards knew of this interest, encouraged it and recommended young Sergeant for the position. Of course in later years it is Edwards himself who filled the post in Stockbridge, but we shall come to that.

Edwards had other mission interests besides Stockbridge. He was in close contact with several ministers in the New Jersey, New York City area who had begun another work with neighbouring tribes. Edwards had visited that region in 1735 and had made the acquaintance of three pastors: Jonathan Dickinson, later first president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton), Aaron Burr, later to become Edwards' son-in-law and president of Princeton,³³ and Ebenezer Pemberton, pastor of the church Edwards had served in New York.³⁴ These men had written to the SSPCK

²⁹See Ralph G Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards the Preacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1958), pp. 30–35, for a review of the Catalogue.

³⁰Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

³¹Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

³²Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 66, note 4.

³³Burr was the father of the infamous Aaron Burr Jr, who was vice president of the United States. Dying in 1836 after a notorious life, Burr asked that he might be buried as near as possible to the feet of his father and grandfather in Princeton. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

³⁴Actually the congregation had split into two prior to Edwards' coming. One reason for his departure from New York was to encourage and enable the two to reunite, which they did and remained so under Pemberton.

and had been appointed correspondents with authority to act on their behalf to employ missionaries. Edwards knew of this endeavour and was involved in at least a peripheral way.³⁵ It was this group that supported the work of David Brainerd.

Mission-Minded Pastor

A good sign of a mission-minded pastor and church is the sending of one of their own to the mission field. This occurred in the Northampton church in 1747. Job Strong, a church member in Northampton, was recommended to the Commissioners in Boston as a missionary candidate by David Brainerd.³⁶ Strong began to labour with David Brainerd's brother John, who was soon to take on his deceased brother's mission. After training in missionary practice and work with the Indians, Strong was sent back to the Edwards' parsonage for further theological training.

Edwards trained other men for the ministry and many of these went on to missionary service. Beside John Sergeant, he mentored Samuel Hopkins who was later considered for (though he did not accept) the post at Stockbridge and became a leading advocate of missions. Others were Joseph Bellamy who was a leader of the growing missionary movement in the latter part of the 18th century, and Joseph Hawley who became a missionary and often returned to the Edwards' home for consultation and encouragement.

Edwards' shadow extended to the next generation as well. Edwards own son, Jonathan Jr, was heavily influenced by his life in the Northampton parsonage and his years on the frontier in Stockbridge. At the age of nine his parents sent him off with missionary Gideon Hawley for a year-long mission trip that he might learn the Indian languages. He later became a pastor and published a grammar of the Mahican language in 1788. While not a missionary himself, he encouraged the sending of such and was one of three men who drafted the Constitution of the Connecticut Missionary Society.³⁷ John Sergeant Jr followed in his father's footsteps as a missionary. He grew up at Stockbridge during Edwards' tenure, as he stayed with his mother after his father's death.

Thus we see that the Northampton church under Edwards was very concerned about the evangelisation of the Indians. They were instrumental in establishing an Indian preaching station which served as an incubator for young pastors in training who were to become the leaders of mission work in the next generation.

But perhaps the most significant event for Edwards' connection with future world evangelisation occurred on 28 May 1747 when David Brainerd rode into

³⁵ See Edwards, *Letters and Correspondence, Works* (Yale) Vol. 16 pp. 184ff.

³⁶ Brainerd had struggled into Boston accompanied by Edwards' daughter Jerusha. He then managed to return to Northampton just prior to his death.

³⁷ James R Rorher, *Keeper of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the decline of Congregationalism 1774-1818* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 82.

the parsonage yard. He did not come to be trained as a missionary; indeed his work was all but finished. Having served as missionary to the Indians in what is now Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey, he was dying of tuberculosis. For unknown reasons he presented himself at the Edwards' doorstep.³⁸ 'At the very time Edwards was thinking, writing, and praying about the coming era of world missions, a flesh and blood trail-blazer of that future age had come to his door.'³⁹ At that date we note an interesting confluence of mission-minded men, as Eleazar Wheelock was also sick at the Northampton parsonage when Brainerd arrived. One begins to think that the Edwards were running a missionary training school and convalescent home. Wheelock was to recover and become founder and president of Dartmouth College, which was established to train both English and Indians for missionary service.

While not intimate friends, Brainerd and Edwards had had a growing respect for each other since their first meeting at New Haven in 1743.⁴⁰ Commissioned by the SSPCK in New York City in April 1743 for the purpose of 'gospelling the Heathen',⁴¹ Brainerd had trained under John Sergeant at Stockbridge. Though called to a Long Island, New York pastorate, he had maintained his ministry to the Indians in various locations.⁴² Largely frustrated in his early work, he had seen and experienced the mighty hand of God's Spirit while ministering at Crossweeksung, New Jersey in the summer of 1745. Here he saw revival similar to that known by many English congregations in the early 1740s. He soon baptised 38 Indian converts. From the accounts in his journal⁴³ we can see that God was working in amazing ways through this young man. Edwards was well aware of these events as he communicated them to his correspondents in Scotland.⁴⁴ But Brainerd's ministry was to be a brief one. After his arrival at Northampton his health continued to decline, and he died at Edwards' home on 9 October 1747.

³⁸Some want to find a romantic reason, Brainerd being attracted to young Jerusha Edwards, or a medical reason. Dr Mather, a local well-known physician, lived in Northampton. Perhaps we could find a reason closer to our theme. Edwards was a well-known and respected advisor of young missionaries, a wise and godly man whose counsel was sought.

³⁹Murray, op. cit., p. 307.

⁴⁰See Murray, op. cit., p. 300ff., for the details of their acquaintance and also Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, ed. Edward Williams and Edward Parsons (Leeds, 1806–11), vol. 3, p. 288.

⁴¹Ibid. vol. 3, p. 127.

⁴²Mahican in Kaunameek, New York; Delaware Indians in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

⁴³Brainerd's journal is the account he kept for the SSPCK. It was published in two parts, *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos; or the Rise and Progress of a Remarkable work of Grace, Among a number of Indians ... Justly represented in a Journal, Kept ... by David Brainerd* (Philadelphia 1745). Part two was titled *Divine Grace displayed; or the Continuance and Progress of a Remarkable work of Grace Among some Indians belonging to the provinces of New Jersey and Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: 1746). Brainerd's *Diary* was his personal account.

⁴⁴See Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, pp. 180ff.

Brainerd left his personal papers in Edwards' care to be 'used for God's glory and the interest of religion'.⁴⁵

Thus Edwards undertook the task of publishing *An Account of the Life of The Reverend Mr David Brainerd*.⁴⁶ Iain Murray reminds us that this 'was the first biography ever printed in America to gain international recognition and the first full missionary biography ever to be published'.⁴⁷ The impact of this work on others must have far exceeded Edwards' expectations. Historians have noted the tremendous influence of this biography. William Sweet observes that because of the popularity of Edwards' *Life*, 'David Brainerd dead was a more potent influence for Indian Missions and the missionary cause in general than was David Brainerd alive'.⁴⁸ Another writer notes, 'The most fruitful result of the labours of this apostolic man David Brainerd was not the number of converts he had won, but the missionary enthusiasm awakened by his example and through the publishing of his diary. To this widely read diary the Christian Church is indebted for many missionaries; in number exceeding the converts he had made'.⁴⁹ These remarks are in danger of underestimating the success Brainerd did enjoy, though they do point to his diary as a potent force in the missionary enterprise. Let us look at Edwards' writing in general and Brainerd's biography in particular to demonstrate the wider influence Edwards had on the course of worldwide missions.

Edwards the Writer

Brainerd's *Life*

It is hard to overestimate the impact of this work on the evangelical movement at large and evangelical missions in particular. Perry Miller claims that of all Edwards wrote, Brainerd's biography had the greatest influence on the American people.⁵⁰ More editions and reprints of the *Life* have been issued than any other of Edwards' works.⁵¹ In the second half of the 18th century it was reprinted many times in America, Scotland, England, and Holland. It was the first of Edwards' work to reach a larger European audience.

Edwards compiled the biography largely from Brainerd's own papers. Brainerd had kept a journal for the SSPCK as they had requested. Additionally, he wrote

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 2 p. 315.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 7.

⁴⁷ Murray, op. cit., p. 307.

⁴⁸ William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York: Harper, 1930), p. 236.

⁴⁹ Mickichan, op. cit., p. 71.

⁵⁰ Perry Miller, review of Philip E Howards Jr, ed., 'The Life and Diary of David Brainerd' in *New England Quarterly*, 23, 1950, 277.

⁵¹ Joseph Conforti, 'Jonathan Edwards' Most Popular Work: "The Life of David Brainerd" and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture' in *Church History*, vol. 54, no 2, June 1985, p. 191.

his own personal diary. Edwards compiled these into a life that is a true picture of this self-sacrificing missionary, yet is not uncritical. In publishing Brainerd's *Life*, Edwards wanted the world to know about the efforts and success of this missionary pioneer, and he made it clear that he saw in Brainerd many characteristics of the faithful Christian life, the life of a truly converted man. Edwards' notes in the back of the original publication entitled *Reflections and Observations* are 'the most important descriptive pages on the Christian Life which Edwards ever wrote'.⁵² Sadly, many subsequent editions omit these. Edwards was not setting out to canonise Brainerd. He knew the young man had his faults. Brainerd had been expelled from Yale in 1742 because of his over-enthusiastic comment that one of his tutors possessed 'no more grace than a chair'. Edwards recognised that Brainerd was often too introspective and suffered prolonged bouts of depression. While Edwards' editorial work has been severely criticised by some modern scholars there is no underestimating the impact of the book on that or subsequent generations.⁵³

Through the publication of his memoirs, Brainerd became the principal model of early missionary spirituality. Countless references in missionaries' diaries reflect the value of their reading the life of this man. Henry Martyn paraphrased a line from Brainerd's diary and used it as his missionary motto: 'Let me burn out for God!'⁵⁴ John Ryland said of William Carey, that 'Brainerd's diary was a second Bible to him'.⁵⁵ Evangelicals continued to be attracted to missions by the story of Brainerd. Samuel Mills, often referred to as the father of Congregational missions in America, recollected that he was first attracted to his vocation by

⁵²Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

⁵³Norman Pettit, the editor of the Yale edition of Brainerd's *Life*, charges that Edwards 'tampered' with Brainerd's diary and 'took great liberties' (Edwards, *Works* (Yale)), vol. 7, pp. 22, 24, 79. 'But what has not until now been known is that the literal record did not serve Edwards' purpose for he was enlisting Brainerd in his war against Arminianism. Toward that end Edwards shaped narrative events, and at times excluded unsuitable material to render Brainerd a fitting soldier in the ranks' and, 'Indeed, what has not until now been stressed is that Brainerd took up preaching to the Indians *only* [italics in the original] because he was expelled'. (Norman Pettit, 'Prelude to Mission: Brainerd's Expulsion from Yale' in *New England Quarterly*, vol. LIX, March–Dec. 1986, p. 29). Pettit assumes he knows why Edwards deleted or included the material in the diary. Pettit suspects that the Edwards' publication of the diary is wholly flawed, yet we have only 33 pages of Brainerd's original to compare it to.

⁵⁴Quoted in CS Kilby, 'David Brainerd' in *Heroic Colonial Christians*, ed. Russell T Hitt, (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1966), p. 200. The original phrase is 'to burn out in one continued flame for God' (Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 3, p. 253). Perhaps Brainerd picked up this idea from Richard Baxter who wrote 'What have we our time and strength for, but to lay them out for God? What is a candle made for, but to burn? Burned and wasted we must be; and is it not fitter it should be in lighting men to heaven, and in working for God, than in living to the flesh? What comfort will it be to you at death, that you lengthened your life by shortening your work? ... Our life is to be esteemed according to the ends and works of it, and not according to the mere duration' *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust reprint, 1974), p. 218.

⁵⁵Quoted in EA Payne, 'The Evangelical Revival and the Beginnings of the Modern Missionary Movement' in *Congregational Quarterly*, 21, 1943, 228.

stories of Brainerd and John Eliot that his mother told him.⁵⁶ Adoniram Judson also remembered hearing of Brainerd in his early days.⁵⁷

John Wesley saw the value of Brainerd's *Life*. He prepared an abridged version, which was reprinted seven times between 1768–1825. Wesley wrote in the preface, 'Let every preacher read carefully over the *Life of David Brainerd*. Let us be followers of him, as he was of Christ, in absolute self devotion, in total deadness to the world, and in fervent love to God and man.'

It was the American Tract Society reprint that made it possible for literally tens of thousands in the world to know of Brainerd. First issued in 1833, Edwards' *Life* was reprinted many times over the next 60 years and over 70,000 were distributed. So well known was Brainerd by 19th century evangelicals that Sereno Dwight (Edwards' great grandson) stated in 1822 'the veneration felt for his [Brainerd's] memory, by the Church, approaches that with which they regard the Early Evangelists and Apostles'.⁵⁸

Evangelical diaries and memoirs are replete with references to Brainerd and the influence of Edwards' *Life*. Yet the credit often goes to Edwards, not Brainerd. 'Brainerd did less in his lifetime than his biography, by President Edwards, did after he was gone. In its pages is presented the picture of a man of God such as is rarely seen. No book has, directly or indirectly, borne richer fruit. It exercised a definite spiritual influence upon William Carey, and Samuel Marsden and Henry Martyn and Thomas Chalmers, and, through them, indirectly, countless multitudes.'⁵⁹

Nineteenth century missionaries who learned to pack light as they left home and family—often for good—still included Brainerd as a necessity. Pliny Fisk, Congregational missionary to Egypt in 1823, noted in his diary that one Sabbath while reading Edwards' *Life of Brainerd* he was led 'to contrast this monument of Brainerd and his character' with the character and accomplishments of the pharaohs. 'All their cities, mausoleums, temples and pyramids seemed insignificant compared with the crown of glory which Brainerd won.'⁶⁰

Others who read Brainerd with profit include Isaac Backus, Thomas Coke, Andrew Bonar and Robert Murray M'Cheyne. At Andover Seminary, the centre

⁵⁶Gardiner Spring, *Memoir of Samuel John Mills* (Boston: 1820, reprint New York: 1829), p. 10.

⁵⁷Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Mission for Life: The Story of Adoniram Judson ...* (New York: Free Press, c1980), pp. 25, 235.

⁵⁸Jonathan Edwards, *Memoirs of Brainerd*, ed. Sereno E Dwight (New Haven: 1822), p. 8–9.

⁵⁹Eugene Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society* (London: CMS, 1899), p. 27.

⁶⁰Alvan Bond, *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, AM, Late Missionary to Palestine* (Boston: 1828), p. 249. Quoted in Conforti, op. cit., p. 195–6.

for training American missionaries in the nineteenth century, Brainerd was required reading.⁶¹

So popular was Edwards' *Life of Brainerd* that young missionaries had to be cautioned not to emulate Brainerd too closely. Joseph Tracy observed in 1842 that too many missionaries had a 'failure of health . . . in about the same length of time' as Brainerd, as his lifestyle had 'hurried him to his grave'.⁶² Levi Parson, the first America missionary to Palestine, exhibits this thinking when he observed in his farewell address, after citing Brainerd's example: 'Better, my brethren, wear out and die within three years than live forty in slothfulness'.⁶³

Just 50 years ago, Jim Eliot, martyred missionary to the Auca Indians of South America, wrote in his journal, 'I see the value of Christian biography tonight as I have been reading Brainerd's Diary . . . was much encouraged to think of a life of godliness in the light of an early death'.⁶⁴

How many other countless young men and woman went to a foreign mission field or stayed at home fervently praying for their friends or relatives because of this work we do not know. But Joseph Conforti notes that the influence of the *Life* on missionaries can be summed up by this fact: 'When the American Board established its first Indian mission among the Cherokees in 1817, the missionaries named the post "Brainerd"'.⁶⁵

The model for mission seen in the *Life* was one well equipped to deal with the apparent failures so often faced in the field. Brainerd, while seeing much success, endured many trials and disappointments. Edwards' *Life* advocates principles that serve a missionary well. These include the practice of self-denial and trusting in the sovereignty of God's plan, enduring the cross, despising the shame, and as Brainerd said, 'to burn out in one continuous flame for God'.

While David Brainerd's life and the publication of his biography by Edwards were instrumental in prompting many to heed the call to missions or to be encouraged while suffering for Jesus' sake in foreign fields, Edwards' other writings were just as vital, particularly in calling for the foundational prayer for mission that was so necessary both in his time and today. Let us look at just one of Edwards' works that issued that call.

⁶¹ Leonard Woods, *History of Andover Theological Seminary* (Boston: 1885), pp. 168–9. Quoted in Conforti, op. cit., p. 196.

⁶² Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston: 1842, reprint Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 238.

⁶³ Daniel O Morton, *Memoir of Levi Parsons, First Missionary to Palestine from the United States* (Burlington: n.p. reprint, 1980), p. 407, quoted in Conforti op. cit., p. 197.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Elliott, *Shadow of the Almighty* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 108.

⁶⁵ Conforti, op. cit., p. 198.

An Humble Attempt

Edwards believed that it was the duty of the minister to be Christ's co-worker in bringing the heathen to a saving knowledge of the gospel. To that end he preached and wrote. But Edwards applied this idea to *all* church members not just to ministers. He also set it in a universal context. His book *An Humble Attempt*⁶⁶ was, in part, a call to prayer for missions. In it Edwards showed from the Scriptures that the coming of the kingdom was to be expected, that God would do it, but that before the righteousness and blessedness would come, God required that all Christians worldwide unite in extraordinary prayer, a worldwide concert of prayer.⁶⁷

This idea did not originate with Edwards but with a group of Scottish ministers, some of whom were in regular correspondence with Edwards. In 1744 these ministers gathered to pray for a worldwide extension of the kingdom and its prosperity and development through the spreading of the gospel. They proposed that Christians gather at set times every Saturday evening and on the first Tuesday of every quarter for that purpose. When this idea was relayed to Edwards it caught his imagination. He wrote of his agreement and attempts to implement it in his own congregation and spread the news to others. He replied to his friend in Scotland, William McCulloch, 'I have taken a great deal of pains to promote this concert here in America, and shall not cease to do so, if God spares my life, if I have opportunity, in all ways I can devise'.⁶⁸

Brainerd too was captured by the concert of prayer. While lying in bed at Edwards' home Brainerd sent word to his Indian church in New Jersey urging them to take up the prayer cause themselves, which they did, a wonderful instance of the recently converted praying for the salvation of others.⁶⁹ Initially, Edwards and Brainerd felt very much alone in this interest. Brainerd spoke with dismay of how few in the colonies wanted to join with the Scots in united extraordinary prayer.

Edwards, to further encourage his own congregation, preached a sermon from Zechariah 8:20–22, *Thus saith the Lord of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come*

⁶⁶Jonathan Edwards, 'An Humble Attempt' in *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 2. pp. 278–313.

⁶⁷For a good overview of the Concert of Prayer see R Pierce Beaver, 'The Concert of Prayer for Missions: An Early Venture in Ecumenical Action' in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. X, no 4, July 1958, pp. 420–427.

⁶⁸Letter quoted by Sereno Dwight, 'A Memoir of Jonathan Edwards' in Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 2, pp. 278–312.

⁶⁹Norman Pettit in Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 7, p. 697.

to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord.’ He developed this sermon into an essay entitled *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer, for a Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture Promises, and Prophecies Concerning the Last time*. Despite an initial lack of interest in America, his essay was published in Boston in 1748 and in Britain the following year. The individual and corporate prayer that flowed from it was a powerful instrument in broadening the horizons of many Christians, making them aware of a lost and dying world.

An Humble Attempt set forth a theological foundation for the expansion of Christ’s church through missions.⁷⁰ In this treatise Edwards promotes prayer in general but specifically places this in the context of the advancing kingdom of God. He declares that it is the duty of all believers to pray that the Spirit of God will so work in the church that the gospel will go to the ends of the earth. Edwards believed that the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s was a sign that the last days of history were about to begin—an era that would be marked by the spread of the gospel throughout the globe.⁷¹ This latter day expansion would not come without ‘extraordinary united prayer’. This would happen ‘very swiftly, yet gradually’.⁷² It probably would not be completed until the year 2000. Edwards believed that God would gradually bring about the conversion of the Jews, the Mohammedan and heathen nations. The Gospel would go forth ‘throughout all parts of Africa, Asia, America and Terre Australis’. This would come about as God’s people sought him in prayer.

Edwards’ compelling motivation for missions was a Biblical principle found throughout his writings and perhaps best expressed in his work *The End for Which God Created the World*. Here Edwards argues that God’s glory overshadows all other purposes and motivations. ‘God’s “inner glory”, his “fullness”, the “excellency” of the divine being consist in the mutual happiness, delight, and love of the persons of the Trinity.’⁷³ ‘The great and universal end of God’s creating the world was to communicate himself ... to intelligent beings... God created this world for the shining forth of his Excellency and for the flowing forth of his happiness.’⁷⁴ God would show this glory, through his Son, by communicating himself to his people that they might love him, enjoy and delight in him. The whole work of

⁷⁰A look at *An Humble Attempt* along with *History of the Work of Redemption, Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival and The End for Which God Created the World* can give one insight into Edwards’ theology of mission.

⁷¹Stanley, op. cit., p. 4.

⁷²Ibid., p. 458.

⁷³Davies, op. cit., p. 61.

⁷⁴Harvey Townsend, ed., *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 130.

God, creating and redeeming, is to that end, the glory of God. The saving of souls is his chief delight in that through grace, men are brought into a knowledge of God and glorify him. The work of missions is to preach this glorious gospel to the world that men will be saved and God will be glorified. While this theme was foundational to Edwards, it was his writing on prayer that was most influential.

His call to prayer, powerfully set forth by the now well-known Edwards, was a great incentive to others. The subsequent impact of this on world prayer for mission has been enormous. As the Scottish leaders of this prayer movement were also some of the leaders of the SSPCK they, with Edwards and his connections to mission work in America, tied the prayer movement and the missionary endeavour together.

But Edwards did more than just encourage prayer on behalf of world evangelisation. He believed that God's people were to be found inhabiting even the uncivilised regions of the world and that God had ordained that he would come to them through answers to prayer and by the means of missionary labours. Mission historian R Pierce Beaver notes, 'By advocating united action on prayer and relating this human offering to the action of God, he prepared the way also for that important motivation on American Missions half a century later, the duty of being co-workers with God. Above all he provided ... a potent influence for common action during the next seventy-five years, and ... enlarged the horizon of rank-and-file church members, bringing into their prayerful concern and thinking all the unevangelised peoples of the earth.'⁷⁵

Influence on Others

Limiting our examination to these two written works, Brainerd's *Life* and *An Humble Attempt*, we can trace Edwards' influence on world missions in later years. This will lead us to what many consider to be the beginning of the modern missionary movement, William Carey's departure for India. Thus we shall see that Edwards can rightly bear the title a Father of the Modern Protestant Missionary Movement. This influence is recognised by some missiologists.

Herbert Kane, in his history of missions, notes that 'the chain that led to William Carey's pioneering missionary initiative of 1792 was forged by a gift from a Scottish Presbyterian to an English Baptist of a book by an American Congregationalist'.⁷⁶ The explanation of that remark offers an intriguing look at how God in his providence orders the affairs of men.

One of Edwards' long-term correspondents was the Scot, Dr John Erskine, then of Edinburgh. Many years after Edwards' death, on 23 April, 1784, John Ryland, the young co-pastor of College Lane Baptist Church, Northampton,

⁷⁵Beaver, op. cit., p. 424.

⁷⁶Kane, op. cit., p. 79.

England, received a parcel of books from Erskine. Among them was the booklet written by Edwards *An Humble Attempt*. The booklet had a profound effect on Ryland, his friend John Sutcliff of Olney, and Andrew Fuller of Kettering. By this time Fuller was already acquainted with Edwards' writings, especially the *Life of Brainerd*. The editor of Fuller's *Works* notes in his preface to Fuller's *The Gospel worthy of all Acceptation* (1781) that 'reading the lives and labours of such men as Eliot, Brainerd, and several others, who preached Christ with so much success to the American Indians, had an effect upon him.'⁷⁷ 'He had also read and considered ... President Edwards' *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will*.'⁷⁸

This latter work led the 'Particular Baptists to restore the concepts of human responsibility and moral obligation to the very centre of their theology of salvation.'⁷⁹ Edwards' finely-struck balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility was immensely appealing to these young pastors who had struggled with these concepts.

When the Northamptonshire Association of Baptist churches gathered in Nottingham on 2/3 of June, 1784, Edwards' *Humble Attempt* 'dominated the meeting'. These men presented this idea of united prayer to the Association, which called for monthly prayer meetings. They moved that the 20-plus churches in the Association meet every month for prayer for the revival of religion at home and the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe, with the optimistic hope 'who can tell what the consequences of such united effort in prayer might be'.⁸⁰ 'Before long the prayer movement had spread further and reached the churches of Warwickshire, Yorkshire and Bristol'.⁸¹ By end of 1784 the movement was so widespread that Sutcliff issued a British edition of *An Humble Attempt*, and by that action showed that the spark of the prayer movement was indeed Edwards' work. Though dead, he was yet speaking.⁸²

Onto the scene came young William Carey. Carey, a member of Sutcliff's church, saw that Edwards was making the logical and biblical connection that the theology of human responsibility meant preaching the gospel to all the earth.

⁷⁷ Andrews Fuller, *Works*, 8 vols (London: Holdsworth, 1824), vol. 1, p. 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Stanley, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁰ Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁸¹ Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸² In 1785 Fuller issued a piece that rebutted the then current hyper-Calvinism as unbiblical. Claiming that human agency, especially in prayer, was part of God's plan for evangelism, Fuller was largely dependent on Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*. His desire was to refute the argument that sinners are under no moral obligations to repent since they are incapable of such by their total depravity. 'This book [of Fuller's] was of primary importance for laying and the preparing the ground for the Baptist Missionary endeavour precisely because it enabled the Particular Baptists to restore concepts of moral obligation and human responsibility to the very centre of their theology of salvation.' Stanley, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

By the time Carey was ordained by the Northampton Association in 1787 he had read Brainerd, the writings of Eliot, the accounts of the Moravians and at least some Edwards (not to mention the recently published voyages of Captain Cook). Carey was ready to sail to the ends of the earth to preach the gospel.

In 1791–1792 Carey published his *Enquiry into the obligation of Christians to use Means for Converting* . . . It was a call to missionary action. In the final section he explored the necessary connection between prayer and responsible human action. Following Edwards' teaching in *Humble Attempt* on the basis of Zechariah 8:12–13 Carey writes: 'We must not be contented with praying without exerting ourselves in the use of means for the obtaining of those things we pray for.'

To cut a long story short, in 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was founded and soon sent Carey to India. In 1795 The London Missionary Society established the Monthly Concerts of Prayer for Missions on the first Monday night of every month and it became, on both sides of the Atlantic, a mighty movement influencing missionary dedication and support. Churches 'in all the principal cities and towns of the Kingdom' and also in 'Holland, Switzerland, Germany, India and Africa' joined 'in fervent prayer to God for a blessing on the gospel and those missionaries who are now engaged in the arduous undertaking of preaching the gospel to the Indian nations'.⁸³

In 1814 'once again Jonathan Edwards was called upon to stoke the fires of zeal and faithfulness'.⁸⁴ The LMS published in that year an abridged edition of the *Humble Attempt*. In the preface the secretary of the LMS wrote, 'Thus an immense number of praying persons are engaged at the same hour in their supplications to the God of all grace, in behalf of a world lying in the Wicked One, and for the spread of that glorious gospel which is the power of God to human salvation; and thus the plan of union, which good Mr Edwards so strongly recommended, is, in no inconsiderable degree, adopted in the Christian world.'⁸⁵ Perhaps we can say that the most influential tract for urging onward the powerhouse of prayerful churches in the cause of world missions was that of Jonathan Edwards.

What of Edwards' impact on other missionaries of future generations? We read of Missionary Hawley who served at Stockbridge as schoolmaster during Edwards' tenure. He later became a missionary to the Six Nations, finally spending many years as faithful pastor to the Old Indian Church at Marshapee, dying there in 1807. He carried Edwards' edition of Brainerd's *Life* in his saddlebag along

⁸³In an article 'Remarks on the Prophecies and Promises Relating to the Glory of the Latter Day' reprinted in the *New York Missionary Magazine*, vol. II, no 6, 1801, pp. 452–453.

⁸⁴Beaver, op. cit., p. 426.

⁸⁵Jonathan Edwards, *United Prayer For the Spread of The Gospel Earnestly Recommended* (London: R Williams, 1814), preface.

with his Bible.⁸⁶ John Wilson of India wrote in 1824 ‘the memoirs of David Brainerd and Henry Martyn gave me great blessing’. And what of Eleazar Wheelock, friend and student of Edwards who developed a strategy of educating Indian and English youth together in a school and then sending them out as missionaries? He stressed the missionary obligation of all Christians, a concept developed by Edwards. Wheelock declared that this was an obligation imposed from heaven upon God’s covenanted people. The failure of the New England people to press forward in the work of evangelising the Indian was displeasing to God. It incurred his wrath. Previously this was a note struck by Stoddard.

In other writings, Edwards’ book, *The Nature of True Virtue* is seen as the incentive for Samuel Hopkins to develop his idea of disinterested benevolence, which became a powerful theological concept, motivating countless missionaries to give themselves to the cause of Christ.

We know of the great Henry Martyn. Accounts of his conversion say that God used his reading of Edwards’ *Life of Brainerd* to bring him not only to missionary service but also to Christ himself.⁸⁷ Edwards was Martyn’s favorite writer. While at Bombay, he celebrated his 30th birthday. He wrote: ‘This day I finished the thirtieth year of my unprofitable life: the age at which David Brainerd finished his course, I am now at the age at which the Savior of men began his ministry, and at which John the Baptist called a nation to repentance.’⁸⁸ ‘But above all other divines the man of Martyn’s heart was Jonathan Edwards’.⁸⁹ He had read his *Great Doctrine of Original Sin* and the *History of Redemption* and loved *Religious Affections*. He especially treasured *The Life of Brainerd*. He wrote, ‘I read Brainerd, and felt my heart knit to this dear man, and really rejoiced to think of meeting him in heaven.’⁹⁰

How many other unknown people were influenced by Edwards himself and the works he wrote we may never know. But we can see Edwards’ influence with particular individuals in his correspondence.

Correspondence

As one may wonder what our forefathers might have done with modern technology, one imagines what Edwards the correspondent might have done with e-mail.

⁸⁶Richard Hall, *The Neglected Northampton Texts of Jonathan Edwards* (Studies in American Religion, vol. 52, Lewiston, NY: Edwin & Millen, 1990), p. 147. Cf. Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards 1703–1758* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 273.

⁸⁷Winslow, *Edwards*, p. 274.

⁸⁸Neil Richards, ‘Henry Martyn: A Life to Inspire’, *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, February 2002, issue 462, p. 13.

⁸⁹Constance Padwick, *Henry Martin: Confessing the Faith* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1932), p. 95.

⁹⁰Richards, op. cit., p. 13.

Surely he would have been less productive in his other writing, as he would have had to answer a flood of unsolicited correspondence. As it was, he kept up regular communication with several men, which provided a link not only between Edwards and the eastern cities of the colonies but also across the Atlantic.⁹¹ This correspondence figures largely in his work on behalf of missions. Indeed it is most interesting, in reading the extant Edwards' correspondence, to see the large percentage of letters that mention or are concerned with prayer and the work of missions. Without making an extensive analysis of his correspondence we can note that his letters to Britain, Boston, and New Jersey were often partially, if not wholly, concerned with mission matters.

Following the Scottish publication of his *Faithful Narrative* of the revival of 1734, several leading ministers in Scotland wrote to Edwards and received replies. Over the next several years Edwards developed and maintained correspondence with many of the leading evangelical Scottish clergy.⁹² One correspondent was John Erskine who at that time was ministering at old Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh.⁹³ Keeping in mind the difficulties of cross-Atlantic communication—letters taking months or even years to reach their destination—the correspondence is quite amazing.

Erskine was a mission-minded pastor himself. He was 'one of the most vigilant and useful members' of SSPCK.⁹⁴ He was also responsible for shepherding through the press many of Edwards' writings. In a sermon preached to the SSPCK on 5 January 1756, 'The Influence of Religion on national happiness: Isaiah 55:3', Erskine said 'The success of the mission in those dark places of the earth full of habitations of cruelty, is a proof that glorious things might be expected from an increase of funds so wisely and carefully applied.' His plan 'employing a complement number of missionaries in those parts by building towns for the Indians on the frontiers of our colonies and by maintaining ministers and school masters to instruct them'⁹⁵ reflects that advocated and practised by Edwards in Stockbridge. To that we shall now turn.

Edwards the Missionary

In the spring of 1751 Edwards moved his family for the first and only time. Having spent 23 years in Northampton, his dismissal as pastor was surely a heart-breaking

⁹¹The letters of Edwards are now available for the general public by the publishing of Edwards' *Works* (Yale), vol. 16. *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S Claghorn.

⁹²These included John M'Laurin of Glasgow, James Robe of Kilsyth, William M'Culloch of Cambuslang, Thomas Gillespie of Carnock and John Erskine of Kirkintilloch and later of Edinburgh.

⁹³Murray notes that this correspondence continued with Edwards' sons and grandson over a period of fifty-six years, op. cit., p. 291.

⁹⁴Thomas Erskine, *Theological Dissertations* (London: McDowell, 1809), p. xiv.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 335.

time for his family. Now they were moving from the relative comfort and security of that town to the still unpredictable frontier village of Stockbridge. There Edwards would undertake the duties of missionary to the Indians and pastor to the small English flock that lived in the vicinity.⁹⁶

With all the evidence of Edwards' concern for the Indians and the rest of the world's unconverted, it is still strangely charged that he took the post of missionary at Stockbridge simply because he 'needed a parish'. It has been said that he was largely ineffectual there and that, 'the mission marked time under him'.⁹⁷ In fact, he had other offers for ministry in Virginia and Scotland; the mission flourished under his management and he clearly believed that he had been called there to do the work of the Lord. Into his labours there he threw himself with all his regular diligence and zeal. Finally, when he was called to the Presidency of the College of New Jersey, he was reluctant to leave. All this points to his desire and calling to the work of a missionary pastor.

There was little mystery about what he was getting into when he went to Stockbridge in 1751. He was instrumental in the mission's formation in Northampton in 1734 and had continued to be actively involved. He and Colonel Stoddard were named as recipients of funds being collected for an Indian school in Stockbridge in 1743. Of course, during his years at Northampton he had been well informed of developments there, maintaining his contact with John Sergeant.

Prior to his going to Stockbridge he had spent two months there determining the state of the mission and was encouraged by what he saw. He preached 15 times to the Indians. Of the 200 Housatonic Indians who were there, 42 had become communicant members under Sergeant. They apparently responded well to Edwards' ministry during this visit.⁹⁸ Also present at that time were some 90 Mahican Indians from a tribe that was beginning to move there in large numbers.

Certainly Edwards was not drawn by the prospects of the English members of the church. They were small in number—only 12 families—and included the powerful and antagonistic Williams family, antagonistic to Edwards that is. Other members of the Williams clan had been largely instrumental in Edwards' removal as pastor in Northampton.

Contrary to the all-too-common view, Edwards did not see Stockbridge as forced exile, nor as only a quiet retreat for reflection and writing. He was in fact deeply concerned about the evangelisation of the Indians. Prior to his dismissal from Northampton Edwards had written a letter to the commissioners of the

⁹⁶For a good overview of this period in Edwards' life, see chapters 19 and 20 in Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 371–397.

⁹⁷Beaver, 'American Missionary Motivation Before the Revolution' in *Church History*, vol. XXXI, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁹⁸See Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

Stockbridge mission advising that they needed to fill the post with a man of sound principles and a pious character.⁹⁹ In less than two years Edwards was the man. Murray notes ‘He may have felt that a ministry in that location would lead, in some measure, to be a fulfillment of his own long-continued prayer for the advancement of the gospel among the Indians.’¹⁰⁰

Edwards was not marking time while he was at Stockbridge. His insight into missionary principles and education methods for the Indians is noted by several scholars of our day as being far ahead of his time. Referring to a letter to the Boston Commissioners for the mission of 18 February 1752, Ola Winslow notes the profundity of his insight and solutions to mission concerns. His letter ‘sets forth the conflict between commercial and religious interests, the waste of public moneys, the duplication of effort by rival missionaries, and outlines a plan of centralised effort, with education the main objective, which sounds more like missionary planning a century later than that of pre-Revolutionary days’.¹⁰¹ Winslow believes that Edwards had ‘a grasp of the larger aspects of the missionary problem surprising for the mid eighteenth century’. He had the detachment of an administrator, and saw the problem, which lay underneath the details of a given situation.¹⁰² This certainly does not look like one who was merely ‘marking time’.¹⁰³

At Stockbridge he was progressive, developing an educational programme for girls as well as boys. He preached regularly to both the English and Indian congregations, writing different sermons for each. He held four services every Lord’s Day, one for the Mahicans, one for the Housatonics, and two for the English congregation. He catechised Indian and English children, visited the day school, served as able administrator of the mission and correspondent to the commissioners in Boston and the Board in London, and developed plans for future mission work in other locations. Gideon Hawley was sent out from Stockbridge with the express purpose of developing new mission initiatives among other tribes.

Charged with simply reusing old sermons at Stockbridge, the evidence is that he may have begun with previous notes and worked out new applications and

⁹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Yale), vol. 16, p 301.

¹⁰⁰ Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

¹⁰¹ Winslow, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 254–5.

¹⁰³ Just keeping the mission on a sound financial footing was a tremendous task. The London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel under the direction of the Boston Commissioners for Indian Affairs partially funded the mission and Edwards and the legislature of the colony and the English congregation at Stockbridge also contributed. English philanthropist Isaac Hollis made an annual contribution as long as there were at least 12 Indian boys enrolled in the school. Edwards had to keep these supporters satisfied with news, reports and paperwork.

points for his English congregation, but that he constructed fresh sermons for the Indian congregations. Surviving sermon notes show that he laboured to fit his sermons to the Indians, giving a clear call for them to come to Christ. He also told them they must learn the English language so that they could understand the word of God.¹⁰⁴

Timothy Dwight wrote at the end of the 18th century that the Stockbridge Indians obviously benefited from Edwards' years among them. 'Their reverence for him was very great and his family are still regarded by their descendants with peculiar respect.'¹⁰⁵

After Edwards departed Stockbridge for Princeton, Samuel Hopkins preached to the Indians the following Sunday. He said, 'Christ has been sowing the seed of his word among you. Mr Edwards has been here a good while, sowing the word among you. He has sowed a great deal of good seed among you and watered it with his prayers and counsels and tried to make it grow. But now he has done sowing the good seed among you, and is gone; and now you ought to sit down and consider what is become of the good seed that is sown'.¹⁰⁶ There is ample evidence that Edwards was faithful in planting seed and much good for the kingdom came of his years as missionary in Stockbridge.

Conclusions

One danger in studying the life of a great man is that we look for him to have reached the heights in every aspect of thought and life. We should call no man master nor expect that any one man will exhibit excellence in all aspects of his life and thought. Even so, Jonathan Edwards was an amazingly gifted and diversely able man. His work on behalf of Christ's Church was profound during his life and he continues to have a great influence even today. His particular emphasis on mission and evangelism should not be overlooked amidst his other accomplishments.

By continuing and developing the work of pioneers such as Eliot, Edwards advocated a theology and practice of missions that was foundational to modern mission work. While his vision was worldwide, and he advocated prayer and missionary labor to extend to the ends of earth, his particular concern was for the unreached people groups with whom he shared the New England wilderness, the North American Indians.

¹⁰⁴ Grosart, *op. cit.*, p. 13, sermon on 1 Timothy 3:16.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (London: W Barnes and Son, 1823), vol. 4, p. 383, quoted in Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

¹⁰⁶ Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 47, quoted in Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

The gospel Edwards preached in New York and New England to predominately Anglo-Saxon congregations was the same gospel that he preached to the Indians.¹⁰⁷ It was the gospel of Jesus Christ, declared by Paul, Augustine, the Reformers and the Puritans, that provided both the content of the message and the motivation for its dissemination. Edwards' Calvinistic views did not hinder but in fact supported and motivated his evangelistic work. His concern for the Indian was a natural outgrowth of his theology. Missiologist J Herbert Kane, noting the racism of later mission work, says of Edwards and others 'A consistent view of human solidarity in depravity shielded the first missionary generation from some of the worst excesses of racism'.¹⁰⁸ Edwards' view of the Indian as fully human and thus totally depraved spurred him to preach the gospel as the Indians' only sure hope. His emphasis on the glory of God in saving sinners compelled him to preach to all who would hear. His eschatological expectation that the kingdom of God would expand and grow motivated Edwards to evangelise. He viewed the entire planting of New England in the light of God bringing forth his kingdom. Edwards' understanding was that the church can be and should be a growing entity. His Reformed doctrine—far from keeping him from evangelism—propelled him to it. He believed that the Kingdom of God was advancing and that revivals were a sign of God's increasing work within the world.

Edwards' theology impacted not only the content and motivation of the missionary enterprise but the form as well. The men who went to the Indians went as preaching pastors. They were largely expected to undertake the normal course of education for church pastors. Many, in fact, functioned as pastors of English congregations with a wider outreach to the Indian neighbours. There was little distinction in thinking or practice between a man preaching to the Indians or the English. These men were also theologically astute. In Edwards' day Colonial America was just beginning its wrestling with Arminianism and Edwards was a leading figure in combating this sub-biblical theology. The overwhelming expectation was that the ministers trained as missionaries would be well-versed in the Reformed faith and capable of preaching, teaching and defending the whole counsel of God.

Missionary work under Edwards was the work of the church. While organisations were formed to oversee the commissioning, sending, and support of these men, churchmen, largely pastors, led the Societies. The church ordained the missionaries.

¹⁰⁷ Further work could be done in this area by looking at the sermons Edwards preached to the Indians and the English, comparing content and form. Representative sermons and treatises of Edwards on evangelism have been collected and helpfully contrasts Edwards' theology and methodology with modern trends in William Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards' Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies* (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ Kane, op. cit., p. 79.

Further study on the nature of colonial missions may provide helpful lessons to the modern church as we have often lost a sense of the broader scope and history of God's redemptive work and how we fit into that greater context. Edwards' example of a theological grounding as the basis for the form, content and purpose of mission would also provide a helpful corrective to the too often careless and thoughtless 'outreaches' of today.

We have only scratched the surface of this theme, wanting only to show Edwards as a mission-minded pastor. But, as he has such depth and breadth, Edwards the Mission Leader is worthy of more careful and detailed attention than we have given in this paper. As we think about the foundations and practice of our mission outreach we should be eager to see effective and biblical models in others. Edwards' ministry to the church *and* also to the unreached people around him is instructive to us who may too sharply divide the two. Edwards' perspective on the hope of gospel glory and kingdom expansion may serve as an encouraging corrective to the pessimism so common in the church today. Edwards' willingness to suffer privation and hardship for the sake of the glory of God is certainly a helpful corrective to the materialism and ease so often sought by Christians today.

All this is not to say that Edwards was perfect. We can see certain deficiencies in his thinking and procedures. For example, he showed little inclination to provide the Scriptures in the Indians' native languages, preferring to teach them English language and culture instead. But we must try to understand the thinking of his age. We must be careful that our 21st century expectations do not attempt to make Edwards a modern missionary with insights gained since Edwards' day. His labours in the mid-18th century were on the cutting edge. We must also recognise that many things hindered Edwards. Early and mid-18th century Americans endured physical and economic privations that we today know little of. His health was rarely good, and several times he thought himself near death, losing months of productivity. Yet, even with these struggles, as a pastor, missionary trainer, writer, correspondent and missionary himself, Edwards surely deserves a place in the missionary roll of honour.

We study the history of the church in order to be inspired, instructed, and convicted. Hopefully we have seen another aspect of Edwards' great influence for the cause of Christ. His work is exemplary and influential. It calls us to be like-minded. Though he spent the majority of his life in small New England towns, Edwards was a major influence in developing enthusiasm for foreign mission work around the world. His writings and practices were the sparks for much of the American and British mission work of the late-18th and early-19th centuries and continues today.

Therefore we should take courage, we who labour in small churches, in dark days. God can and does use small things for mighty purposes. The briefest letter, the word fitly spoken in a sermon, the missionary taught and trained, the pamphlet written, the book published, may well have an influence beyond our imaginings. We are not Jonathan Edwards. But God will use faithful men and women to do his bidding. We must never cease to speak, write, act, encourage and labour for the spread of the gospel. Perhaps we could even dare to do so with the fervency of David Brainerd or Henry Martyn, Jim Elliot, or Jonathan Edwards, to burn out in one continued flame for God.

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- which are here printed at Large with Marginal notes, or abbreviated: Being a continuation of that Work from the end of Mr Pulton's Collection. In two parts Together with several tables of the Titles of and principal matters contained in the said acts and ordinances; and likewise of such as being of more private and particular concernment, or less use, are omitted* (London: Henry Hills and John Field, Printers to His Highness the Lord Protector, 1658, Second part).
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The Edwards' family memorials in Bridge Street Cemetery, Northampton, Massachusetts. David Brainerd's grave is close by. Edwards himself is buried at Princeton University.



Edwards' memorial plaque in First Church, Northampton, Massachusetts



Stone marking site of the meeting house, Enfield, Connecticut, where Edwards preached 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' with great effect.

Jonathan Edwards and Britain: 18th Century Trans-Atlantic Networking

In the state of South Dakota, carved into the side of Mount Rushmore, are the huge faces of four American presidents. Referring to that monument, church historian Martin Marty has repeatedly posed the following question to varied audiences: ‘If the four faces on Mount Rushmore had been religious leaders rather than political whose should they be?’ He has discovered one almost unanimous choice for inclusion—that of Jonathan Edwards.¹

No such enduring monument for Edwards exists in America, nor perhaps will there ever be one. The world at large has not appreciated this giant of intellect, this colossus of piety. Yet, slowly but surely, in the last century there has been a renaissance of interest. Yale University has undertaken a fairly complete publication of his works.² Countless books and articles are produced every year on Edwards’ life and thought. Scholars examine what made Edwards tick, what he produced and what effect he has had on America, and the world. Let us explore just one small, yet vital facet of that by looking at Edwards and his connections with Britain. We shall see that beneficent influences run in both directions.

Influence of Britain on Edwards

No fan of the theatre, Edwards would nevertheless have been able to sing, though without the Gilbert and Sullivan flourish, ‘I am an Englishman’. The American colonist in the first half of the 18th century still considered himself a citizen of England, or if he had come from another part of the realm, Welsh, Scots, or Irish.

Actually, Edwards could trace his heritage to Wales. However, in 1620 his ancestor the Rev. Richard Edwards moved up to London. On his death in 1625, his wife Ann remarried and with her new husband and 18-year-old son of her previous marriage, William Edwards, they emigrated to America. There, in what is now the state of Connecticut, William begat Richard, Richard begat Timothy, and Timothy begat Jonathan. Yet, even with two generations of American-born ancestors, Jonathan considered himself an Englishman. There was really no other way of looking at things. American colonists, as settled as they were becoming, still faced eastward across the Atlantic. Paper and cloth, manufactured goods and

¹ Michael J McClymond, ‘The Protean Puritan: The Works of Jonathan Edwards vols 8–16’, *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 24, no 4, Oct. 1998, p. 361.

² Yale plans to publish a total of 26 volumes. If they were to include all Edwards wrote they would need to have 55 volumes of 500 pages each. The great bulk of his manuscripts are sermons or notes. Of his sermons there are 1,200 manuscripts of which 650 are fully written out, the rest are outlines. Most of these will not be available as they plan to publish only 125 sermons in 6 volumes.

finished products, books and ideas were still largely imported from the home country. The colonists were quite dependent on Britain for nearly everything except natural resources—of which they had a providential abundance. At the time of Edwards' birth, New England numbered only 250,000 inhabitants, 10 percent less than the city of London.

Edwards' father Timothy was also a pastor. He was settled in the small Connecticut River town of East Windsor and taught his own 11 children, Jonathan and his 10 sisters, and other children of the village. Timothy's training had been accomplished at Harvard, the only American university in his day, but even that was a product of English Puritanism and scholarship. The Puritans of New England, if we can continue to call them that as they had certainly given up on 'purifying' the Church of England, were heirs of the godly men who lived and laboured in Britain. America in its infancy produced not a few divines of its own; but in the 17th century many were still products of English training received at Cambridge or Oxford.

Jonathan was not to attend Harvard. The theological liberalism of the day had infected its faculty, so a new school was proposed and started in Connecticut, far away from the cosmopolitan influences of Boston. Yale University, as it was to become, enrolled less than 25 students at the time of Edwards' tenure and, of course, still read largely British authors.

The overwhelming majority of the books Edwards read and owned were products of Britain. Men like Perkins, Manton, Owen, Baxter, Charnock, Foxe, Flavel, Watts, Milton, Sibbes, and Gill.³ He read Thomas Boston's *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (1720) and, 'liked it exceedingly well'. *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (1623) by Ames was the standard theological text used by both Timothy at Harvard and Jonathan at Yale. Edwards owned Bernard's *The Faithful Shepherd* (1607). This standard work on the pastor's duty included helps on sermon preparation and the whole of the minister's work. Puritan preachers in New England still followed the methods set down by William Chappell in *The Preacher and The Art and Method of Preaching* (1656) along with William Perkins' *The Art of Prophecy* (1618). From these works and others Edwards adopted what is referred to as the 'plain style' of preaching. The sermon text was dissected and analysed, a proposition made, logically defended from the Scriptures, and applied to the particular people and situation.

³ These were all divines though Edwards' reading was by no means confined to such. See Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards' Moral Thought and its British Context* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1981) and 'A Select Bibliography of Jonathan Edwards Reading', David Coffin Jr, in John H Gerstner (ed.), *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, 1993), p. 605.

After graduation from Yale, Edwards served a Presbyterian church in New York City for nine months. Presbyterianism was a fairly new import to the colonies from Scotland, just beginning to take hold in the middle and southern colonies but largely held out of New England by the strong Congregational influence. Edwards then returned to Yale in the fall of 1724 as a tutor. There he found himself picking up the remains after an English invasion.

The invasion was not of a military, but an ecclesiastical variety. The reestablishment of English episcopacy in 1660 had little immediate effect on New England. Congregationalism was still the norm and as late as 1720 there was not a single Episcopalian clergyman in the colony of Connecticut. Yet, in 1722 the president of Yale, a tutor, and two neighboring ministers declared that they could no longer hold to the Congregational way. Fully convinced that no polity could be determined from the Scriptures, they appealed to tradition as the only safe course. This, they believed, led inexorably to episcopacy. This defection to Anglicanism rocked the college and the colony. By the time Edwards arrived on campus the teaching staff was skeletal and without a head. After two trying years, Edwards was glad to leave the confines and difficulties of life at Yale when he was called to assist his aging grandfather, Solomon Stoddard at Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1726.

His move to the wilderness of Northampton by no means removed him from the influence of Britain. Although Northampton was considered, at best, an outpost, the 1,200 or so residents 'were almost homogenous stock—drawn from Essex, Lancashire and other parts of their native land'.⁴ News, settlers, and goods still came from England, albeit it very slowly.

To remain current on international affairs and the latest publications, Edwards apparently subscribed to the *The Present State of the Republic of Letters*, a learned journal that kept men up to date on new books and ideas. He regularly received the *London Magazine* as well as the *Glasgow Weekly History*. A Boston magazine, *Christian History*, related recent news from Scotland, including letters exchanged between the ministers of both countries. But the quickest and most efficient way to stay in touch was by personal correspondence.

Trans Atlantic networking

Edwards was a letter writer. From his extant correspondence, now available in published form, we can glean much about his day-to-day life, concerns, and connections, particularly with other divines in Scotland.

Young Edwards in Northampton was an unknown pastor far from the centres of colonial life. Only slowly did he develop contacts with men in England and

⁴ Murray, Iain, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 86.

Scotland, some of whom would serve as life-long friends, even though they never met. Letters sent by Edwards would take days to reach Boston, whence they might be sent in a timely manner by ship, or might lie in a warehouse or desk pigeon-hole for months.⁵

The primary purpose of his letters was to keep up to date with new publications from abroad, particularly of a theological nature. He requested his ministerial colleagues to forward these works which were a valuable resource for a brilliant mind far from the nearest theological bookshop.

In a letter to John Erskine dated 31 August 1748, Edwards thanked him for sending several books. He wrote, ‘These books . . . may probably be great use to me. It might be of particular advantage to me here in this remote part of the world to be better informed what Books there are that are published on the other side of the Atlantick, and especially if there is anything that comes out that is remarkable.’⁶

Apparently his friends might send books unrequested. Asking if Edwards knew of or wanted a particular volume and receiving his reply could involve a year or more. Thus, packages would sometimes arrive unannounced and unrequested and might well contain books that were unappreciated. But a man who needs such gifts will never shun them. Having received from a Scottish friend a scholarly work in French—which he could not read—Edwards dismantled the volume and used the wide page margins for his own notes, paper being a very precious commodity, especially for one trying to keep up a vast personal correspondence. This correspondence increased as the need developed to spread the exciting news of revival. It is here that we see Edwards’ greatest influence on Britain.

Edwards’ Influence on Britain

A century after Edwards the traffic of theological ideas and persons was more like the Gulf Stream, flowing from American shores to warm the British.⁷ But in Edwards’ day trans-Atlantic influence was largely one-way, flowing east to west. Nevertheless, Edwards in his life, and even more so after his death, had a tremendous impact on the British. It was his letter that became a book that brought Edwards to the attention of Britain and established him as an American authority on revival.

The revival of 1734 in Northampton and other parts of New England preceded by several years the events that came to be known as the Great Awakening. Such

⁵ This was a particularly vexing problem for Edwards as one of his Boston correspondents was notorious for mislaying Edwards’ letters intended to be sent overseas.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Correspondence*, vol. 16 (Yale), p. 247–250.

⁷ Americans Charles Finney and, particularly, DL Moody were to be very influential on British Evangelicalism.

revival was largely unknown at that time. Benjamin Coleman and other ministers in Boston, curious to know the truthfulness of the accounts reaching their ears, wrote to Edwards requesting his report. Edwards replied with a relatively short letter describing the events he had witnessed. Coleman forwarded this to his correspondents in London, including Isaac Watts. Watts shared the news with his congregation, which prompted an immediate request for more information. Eventually, friends in London encouraged further correspondence by sending five pounds. Finally, Edwards' entire account was sent and published in 1737 as *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.⁸

England was electrified by the news. Murray states 'Edwards' *Faithful Narrative* was possibly the most significant book to precede the great evangelical awakening on both sides of the Atlantic'.⁹ Sales were amazing. It went through three editions and twenty printings in three years. John Wesley recorded that he read the *Narrative* in 1738, exclaiming 'Surely this is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes'.¹⁰ It was a significant work as many in the churches were not only unaccustomed to the events of revival but doubted it was needed or even of the Lord. It also thrust Edwards onto the international stage. His name and the little village of Northampton were soon better known in Britain than young Jonathan might ever have dreamed.

Indeed, it was the shared phenomenon of revival that most effectively solidified the Anglo-American connection in the mid-eighteenth century. The revival of 1740–3 was not only trans-Atlantic, but the criss-crossing letters formed a network of interconnectedness between both those who supported the revival and those who opposed it. George Whitefield was the strongest link, crossing the Atlantic thirteen times. Whitefield spent a few days at the Edwards' parsonage in October of 1740 and recorded in his journal, 'Mr Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian ... I think I have not seen his fellow in all New England'.¹¹

The American revival was a topic of great interest in Scotland because the events at Cambuslang and Kilsyth in 1742 were so similar. Defenders of the Scottish revival employed Edwards' *Distinguishing Marks* as a clear response to critics, printing editions in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1742. The preface to the Glasgow edition included Whitefield's hearty endorsement, 'Tis the best thing of its kind I ever saw. You would think the author had been at Cambuslang'.¹²

⁸ The full title was *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversions of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England*. Thus we see a printer's error. Edwards was in the county of Hampshire in the colony of Massachusetts, not the colony of New Hampshire.

⁹ Murray, op. cit., p. 122.

¹⁰ Quoted in Murray, op. cit., p. 122.

¹¹ George Whitefield's *Journals* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1960), p. 476.

¹² Quoted in Murray, p. 206.

And, as we have seen in a previous paper, the impact of Edwards' call to united prayer for revival changed many a life in Britain, America, and the world, as God used it to stir up the work of missions.

While there were many who regularly corresponded with Edwards and many more who were affected by his published writings, let us look at just a few who came under his influence.¹³

The endless stream of correspondence across the Atlantic often included a letter from Edwards to John Erskine. In his extant correspondence there are many letters to Erskine over a period of 10 years. Erskine often remarked how indebted he was to Edwards and in 1745 published a sermon in which he took pains to declare his dependence on him. In later years when trouble brewed in Northampton and Edwards was forced to leave his pastorate, Erskine invited him to come to Scotland and minister there. Of course this required asking if Edwards would be willing to subscribe to the *Westminster Confession*. Edwards replied that the difficulty with the plan was not confessional, but that he hesitated to uproot his large family and embark on a new life across the Atlantic. Hearing of Edwards' troubles, other Scots gathered a collection for him. With Scottish fiscal wisdom they did not send the money as cash but used it to purchase goods, which were sent to Boston and sold, thus gaining 20% more for the Edwards. Upon learning of Edwards' death in 1758 Erskine wrote, 'I do not think our age has produced a divine of equal genius or judgement'. It was Erskine who arranged the Scottish publication of Edwards' works and commissioned the portraits of Jonathan and Sarah to be painted and then shipped to Scotland. They now hang at Yale University.¹⁴

As Erskine was Edwards' champion in the last half of the eighteenth century, Thomas Chalmers was his advocate in the first half of the nineteenth. He said of Edwards, 'He is the most exciting and interesting of all theological writers, combining humility and plainness and piety ...'¹⁵ 'His is by far the highest name which the New World has to boast of. Never was there a happier combination of great power with great piety.'¹⁶ One of Chalmers' last recorded utterances was 'My theology is that of Jonathan Edwards'.¹⁷ When one considers the huge influence of Chalmers on subsequent men in Britain we see Edwards' influence was multiplied even more.

¹³See Murray, op. cit., especially chapter 23.

¹⁴*Humble Attempt* (Edinburgh, 1749), *Life of Brainerd* (Edinburgh, 1765), *History of Redemption* (Edinburgh, 1774), *Miscellaneous Observations on Important Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1793), *Observations of Important Theological Controversy* (Edinburgh, 1796).

¹⁵GD Henderson, 'Jonathan Edwards and Scotland' in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. XVI, 1944, p. 49.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 49.

Another Scot to be influenced by reading Edwards was Robert Murray M'Cheyne. The awakening during M'Cheyne's ministry at Dundee in the early 1840s resembled what had occurred in Northampton.¹⁸ John Ryland was so influenced by Edwards that he named one of his sons Jonathan Edwards Ryland and another David Brainerd Ryland.

Edwards' British influence continued with the publication of his *Humble Attempt* and *Brainerd's Journal*. Both had been published in America in the late 1740s but received limited exposure until the British editions many years later. Countless lives and ministries were changed by the publication of these books.

Conclusion

Edwards was a product of a theology that was thoroughly Scriptural in its origins and moulded by the hands of English Puritans. Edwards took the best of those doctrines and practices, and redeveloped, reshaped and refined them. Then, by means of his letters and books, he sent his piety and theology back across the water. Sadly, the church in England was not in a condition to receive his writings. His acceptance and influence there was to wait a generation. His impact on Scotland was much more profound and immediate.

The strongest bond between Edwards and Britain was a spiritual one. The common spiritual needs of men and the similar workings of the Holy Spirit in revival unified the Christians of both lands in a way that political ties would fail to do in the years following Edwards' death. Yet, even the fracturing and destruction of the American War for Independence did not destroy the growing influence of Edwards on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a day when both America and Britain find ourselves again in similar spiritual conditions, in desperate need of reviving mercy, may we once more join together as in Edwards' day, to pray that the Lord of Grace would come down, knit our hearts together as one, and revive his glorious Gospel work. To the Glory of God alone.

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¹⁸Murray, op. cit., p. 465.

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