

## A Great Awakening Stirs the Colonies

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In the Massachusetts village of Northampton, a black-gowned Congregational minister of God knelt in prayer. He was burdened for the 1,100 souls of the little town who, he was convinced, were afflicted with the deadly spiritual disease of the day.

In a very few minutes he would be mounting the pulpit. Should he mouth the cushioning assurances of "election" that they wanted to hear? Or should he tell them what he really believed — that unless they had definitely experienced the new birth through faith in Jesus Christ, they were heading straight for Hell!

The decision was made. The tall, thin-faced man arose, adjusted his periwig and entered the little meetinghouse.

That day in 1734 marked the birth of what in many respects was the most notable revival of religion America has ever experienced. Nothing like it had happened before. Nothing quite like it has happened since.

The conditions that pressed Jonathan Edwards to his knees that Sunday seemed black indeed. Gone was the God-fearing generation that had settled the land. The new generation had forgotten God. Immorality, debauchery, self-interest ruled. Few worried about the next world. Even those who held to the externals of religion had lost the heart of it.

Church rolls were shriveling. Conditions had become so bad that in 1662 leading ministers of Massachusetts colony did something they thought would help, but actually made things worse. They adopted what was called the "Halfway Covenant." People who could make no profession of regeneration still could get their children baptized — so long as they could assent to the doctrine of faith and were not "scandalous in life." When the children grew up, if *they* couldn't testify to conversion, only one privilege was denied — they could not partake of the Lord's Supper.

These halfway members soon outstripped the members in full communion. Halfway membership was socially acceptable. Why bother about going all the way?

Eventually the bar to the Lord's Supper dropped away. And soon halfway covenanters filtered into the ministry.

There was a remnant of the godly left. They soon

realized that the Halfway Covenant was a terrible mistake. Something cataclysmic was needed to prevent the flickering flame of vital Christianity from being wholly snuffed out.

As He so often does, God chose a man to unlatch the windows of darkened churches to let in the light. That man was Jonathan Edwards.

The son of a minister, Edwards had a religious bent early in life. He spent hours in the woods observing nature. (His essay on the flying spider is still highly regarded.) He built a tree house where he went to pray with his friends.

### *Edwards Asks Questions*

But in his adolescence he began to ask questions. What kind of God is the God of Creation? He found it hard to accept the stern doctrines of predestination and the sovereignty of God.

The struggle continued during his student years at Yale. It nearly ruined his health. Agonizingly, he searched for assurance of salvation. Day after day, he besought God. It seemed he was getting nowhere. Then, finally, he came upon this passage in Paul's Epistle to Timothy: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Through that one sentence Edwards was brought "to a new sense of things" — a sense of the glory and presence of God different from anything he had ever experienced. He longed to be "rapt up to Him in Heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in Him forever!"

He was at peace. It was the beginning of a new life of submission to God — both as a God of love and a God of justice.

Five years after he had completed his theological studies he accepted the pastorate of the Congregational Church of Northampton, Massachusetts. His predecessor was Samuel Stoddard, his grandfather.

It was Stoddard who first opened the way to the Communion Table for the unregenerates, provided only that they were not "scandalous" in their way of life. Let the unregenerate come to the Lord's Table, he argued. It may help him. "Stoddard's Way" was soon accepted by

most New England churches.

Edwards grew increasingly concerned about the state of affairs in his parish.

In 1734 he began a series of sermons on "Justification by Faith Alone." He swept away the hopes of Heaven upon which so many of his congregation had been resting. Their morality, their membership in the church through the Halfway Covenant, their partaking of the Lord's Supper—all this availed nothing. They were made to see that God had not appointed anything for them to do before coming to Christ by faith; that all their previous works were unacceptable in His sight.

With no let-up Edwards hammered home an awe-inspiring concept of God's sovereignty. As sinners they deserved instant damnation, but for the mercy of God. There was nothing but to throw themselves on the mercy of God, who showed His overflowing goodness in giving His Son to die for them.

He did not stop with a general theological discourse. He relentlessly called the toll of the town sins. "How many kinds of wickedness are there?" he asked, and then answered: irreverence in God's house, disregard of the Sabbath, neglect of family prayer, disobedience to parents, quarreling, greediness, sensuality, hatred of one's neighbor. Every secret sin was held up for all to see.

The Holy Spirit used sharp edges of the sermons to cut deep. People couldn't sleep on Sunday nights. Next day they could talk of nothing but the amazing upheaval in the pulpit.

## *First Conversions*

It was in December that the first conversions came. There were five or six "savingly converted"—among them a young woman notorious as a "company keeper." The news of her conversion "seemed to be like a flash of lightning upon the hearts of the young people, all over the town, and upon many others."

"Presently upon this," Edwards wrote in his *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, "a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages; the noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things was soon thrown by."

People gathered in their homes to pray. Shops closed up business. The public assemblies were "beautiful, the congregation was alive in God's service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister."

Tears flowed—some weeping in sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors. Day and night people came to the parsonage to bring news of their conversion

or to seek the pastor's help.

Soon the revival spilled over into other towns. Before long 100 communities were affected.

In six months 300 were converted in Northampton (population 1,100). One hundred were received in membership before the next Communion.

In May 1735, the revival began to cool off, but it was only a flicker of greater things to come when twenty-five-year-old George Whitefield, colleague of the Wesleys in England, burst upon the scene.

Edwards had touched off the revival fire. George Whitefield swept the white-hot flames through all of New England and into the South.

Edwards was the flint, Whitefield the tinder.

Edwards was tall, spare, deliberate. Whitefield, only of average height, jumped about like a jack-in-the-box. Edwards spoke with quiet intensity, his thin tones reaching the dim corners of the galleries. Whitefield hurled Gospel truths like thunderbolts, his eyes flashing (one eye squinted, a memento of measles).

Edwards' sermons were masterpieces of theological thought. He built truth upon truth until the weight of them bore down on his listeners like a pile driver. Whitefield's orations, unremarkable from a theological standpoint, had the effect of a red-hot pitchfork thrust into a tub of butter.

But they had one thing in common: the conviction that the Gospel compels a personal decision that will change an ordinary man into a new being.

## *Powerful Preaching*

Edwards' peculiar power lay in his ability to paint pictures. His aim was to make Heaven and Hell, their joys and terrors, as real as if you could point them out in an atlas.

In his most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," he compared the sinner with some spider or loathsome insect suspended over the flames.

You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe and burn it asunder; and you have nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

Unconsciously people grasped the pillars and pews to keep from sliding into the pit.

A minister who was in the pulpit plucked Edwards' gown, exclaiming, "Mr. Edwards, Mr. Edwards, is not God a God of mercy?"

To be sure, it was not all Hell-fire and brimstone. He could create equally as vivid pictures of the love and

mercy of God and the beauty of Heaven.

Whitefield believed in using his voice. "I love those who thunder out the word," he once said. "The Christian world is in a dead sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it."

His enunciation was flawless. David Garrick, the actor, once remarked that if Whitefield were on the stage he could make an audience weep or tremble by his utterance of the one word, "Oh."

Benjamin Franklin, who often heard him preach, stated that "every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice was so perfectly tuned and well placed, that without being interested in the subject one could not help being pleased with the discourse."

Whitefield too could paint pictures. One time he compared the sinner with a helpless blind beggar wandering on the edge of a precipice. As he stumbles forward, his staff slips from his hands and falls into the abyss. Unconscious of his danger, he stoops down to recover it. Carried away by the vividness, someone exclaimed, "He's gone! He's gone!"

## *Whitefield Arrives*

When New England heard that Whitefield was coming, it trembled in anticipation. Sporadic revivals were still in progress, but it seemed that the people were holding their breath for the advent of the young man who had shaken England.

At Philadelphia, his first stop after founding an orphanage in Georgia, he spoke to thousands from the gallery of the courthouse on Market Street. Every word was distinctly heard, it is said, by seamen on board a sloop anchored at the wharf, 400 feet away.

From 1738 to 1770 he made seven journeys to America, preaching from Georgia to New Hampshire and Maine. In one seventy-five day period he preached 175 times and traveled 800 miles.

He preached in meetinghouses, in barns, in fields, from wagons. Everywhere it was the same—people convicted of sin, driven to the foot of the cross.

At none of the meetings was there an "invitation." Whitefield merely preached and then waited for the Spirit to move. There were no counselors, no decision cards. When people were converted they leaped up to tell about it or made it known later.

At Whiteclay Creek, N. J., several thousand gathered. Whitefield felt moved to sing "with unspeakable comfort" the Twenty-third Psalm. When he got to the line, "In presence of my spiteful foes, He does my table spread," "the melting soon began and the power increased more and more, till the greatest part of the congregation was exceedingly moved."

While preaching from a wagon in Basking Ridge, N. J., Whitefield noticed a little boy weeping "as though his

little heart would break." Whitefield broke off his discourse, had the boy picked up and put in the wagon. He announced that since old professors would not cry after Christ, the boy would preach to them. God, he said, was displaying His sovereignty, "out of an infant's mouth perfecting praise."

"God so blessed this," Whitefield testified, "that a universal concern fell on the congregation again. Fresh persons dropped down here and there, and the cry increased more and more."

Ministers were among the converts. At dinner with fellow ministers in Stamford, Connecticut, Whitefield spoke vigorously against the practice of sending unconverted persons in the ministry. Two ministers, with tears in their eyes, publicly confessed they laid hands on young men without so much as asking them whether they were born again of God or not.

After dinner one old minister called Whitefield aside. Speaking with difficulty through his tears, he said, "I have been a scholar and have preached the doctrines of grace for a long time. But I believe I have never felt the power of them in my own soul."

## *Others Take Up Revival Torch*

Other New England ministers took up the revival torch. Notable among them: Theodore Frelinghuysen, Samuel Blair, Presbyterian William Tennent and his four sons. (Tennent in 1730 founded a ministerial school in Neshaminy, Pa., known as the "Log College." It was the forerunner of Princeton Seminary.) Local ministers were also awakening their parishes.

A dramatic incident occurred at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. As an evening meeting was going on, the chimney of the house next door caught fire. The flames flashed on the windows of the meetinghouse. The cry went up: "Christ is coming to judge us!" People fell down in fear.

Even when the cause of the flash was explained, they continued to be alarmed. "If we're so unprepared for judgment that the light of a burning chimney throws us into consternation," they said, "how much in need we are of repentance!"

Afterward the minister visited their homes. He found "there was hardly any such thing as entering into a house in which there was not some poor, wounded and distressed soul." He was called into one house after another. The people begged him not to leave them until prayer had solemnly been offered in their behalf.

As the revival burned on, strange things began to happen. People went into trances, saw visions. They were seized by violent muscular contractions called "the jerks." Laymen began to preach on the spur of the moment, motivated, they said, by "impulses" from the Holy Spirit.

After a sermon in Lyme, Connecticut, “many had their countenances changed; their thoughts seemed to trouble them, so that the joints of their loins were loosed, and their knees smote one against another. Great numbers cried out aloud in the anguish of their souls. Several stout men fell as though a cannon had been discharged, and a ball had made its way through their hearts.”

People had to be carried from the meetinghouse.

At first ministers hesitated to do anything about the disorders. They feared it might hinder the revival. But eventually it became clear that something would have to be done.

In a sermon called, “Needful Caution in a Critical Day,” the minister at Lyme told his people to “watch against everything in principle and practice that has a tendency to bring any blemishes upon the work of divine grace.” He pointed out that bodily agitations might in themselves come to be counted valuable. People would seek after them and produce them at will, degrading religion into “mere nervous excitement.”

Because of these disorders, which the leaders of the revival were not able to keep in bounds, opposition to the whole awakening arose. Then, too, evangelists who took to preaching without permission in others’ parishes made themselves unpopular to the local ministers.

One evangelist, James Davenport, went from place to place denouncing the New England ministers. They were all unconverted men, he said, leading their flocks blindfold to Hell. He called on the converted to separate themselves from their unconverted brethren. Many did. The separatists denounced the churches as being made up of hypocrites, believed the Gospel could best be preached by uneducated—but converted—lay exhorters. Some held that bodily manifestation *must* accompany true conversions. Some laid down rules as to what feelings and experiences a professing Christian must describe to be regarded as converted.

### *Whitefield and Lukewarm Clergy*

Whitefield did not actively encourage the separatists. However, he and others did accuse the clergy of lukewarmness and lack of spirituality. On his second visit to New England in 1744 Harvard and Yale colleges published “testimonies” against him. They accused him of approving of the disorders, causing divisions and deluding people about the orphanage for which he was collecting funds. (The last charge was proved unfounded.) In June 1745, the General Association of Connecticut voted that it was not “advisable for any of our ministers to admit him to their pulpits or for any of our people to attend his ministrations.”

Edwards rose up to defend the revival.

In two treatises, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of*

*the Spirit of God, and Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, he spoke his mind on the emotional displays. He took a middle ground. Though he viewed them with deep concern, at the same time he insisted there might well be a connection between such manifestations and the unusual presence of divine power.

Anyway, he argued, we should not judge the revival by these. We should look at the work as a whole, which he was ready to declare was of God. If those who criticize, he said, “wait to see a work of God without difficulties and stumbling blocks, it will be like the fool’s waiting at the river side to have the water all run by.”

Later on he had more to say on the subject of religious experience. In his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, he reaffirmed his belief that conversion is undeniably an emotional affair. Though the intellect enters in, feeling, not thought, is the gateway to knowing God. He was not concerned by the nature of the outward displays. What counts, he argued, is whether or not they indicate an inner change which will not evaporate when the first flush of emotional upheaval wears away.

So well did he reason that his treatise has gone down as the chief factor in making sudden religious conversion intellectually respectable as well as scripturally sound.

If the separatists hoped for support from Edwards, they were mistaken. He took the wind out of their sails with his treatise on *Qualifications of Full Communion*. It bowled over the Halfway Covenant like a ten pin.

The point of the treatise: the Scriptures do not recognize two kinds of saints. There is but one class—those who profess a “renovation of heart” in addition to knowledge of the doctrine and decent living.

He did not, as the separatists did, say specifically what “inward experiences” must be related. Neither did he say the converted person must necessarily know the time and place of his conversion. Edwards’ view was eventually accepted almost without exception by the New England churches.

The controversies did not bog down the revival. In fact, it almost can be said that they were an evidence of it. For they showed that people were stirred. Revival upset the status quo. Things no longer ran smoothly. Satan opposed. And even those used of God were in danger of becoming proud, arrogant, rash. But Satan could not stop the revival.

The last embers of the Great Awakening did not die out until 1760; the revival had gone on for twenty years. What were the results?

Most obvious result was the ingathering of souls. Estimates run from 25,000 to 50,000 converts. Since the population of the entire New England colonies at that time was no more than 340,000, this had the impact 25

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million converts would make on the Church today. It is a matter of record that from 1740 to 1760, 150 new Congregational churches were founded. Separatist churches multiplied. So did Baptist and Presbyterian bodies.

Other immediate results: the awakening killed the idea (at least for a century) that an unconverted ministry might be tolerated. It gave an impetus to ministerial education. It advanced the cause of missions among the Indians. It struck a blow in the cause of religious liberty (the Great Awakening undoubtedly spurred First Amendment support for religious liberty). It made the ministries of traveling evangelists not only respectable but desirable.

## *The Verdict of History*

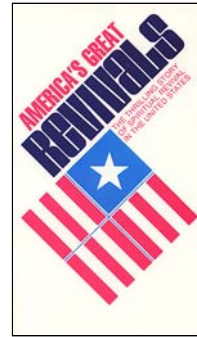
What is the verdict after two centuries have gone by?

A current, objective biographer of Jonathan Edwards terms the Great Awakening “the most potent, constructive force in American life during the mid-century.”

By it God undoubtedly fortified the Church against the onslaught of skepticism and rationalism soon to come from Europe. No one knows what effect it had on stabilizing the Colonies so that they could present a united front to Great Britain. But it is certain that the Awakening had a part to play in cementing Christian principles into the foundation of American government.

Most important, the Great Awakening revitalized the spiritual experience of the average man. Christianity once again became personal and important to him. With a clarity that staggered him, he saw that a man cannot be saved without experiencing new birth through Jesus Christ.

The Great Awakening defeated the enemies of spiritual indifference and theological fuzziness which threatened Christianity in the New World. But after the Revolution, Christianity was challenged by an entirely different enemy. How God moved to quell this adversary is the story of the next great American revival, “The Revival of 1800.”



In the 2004 issues of *Knowing & Doing*, the account of one of America’s great revivals will be featured, drawn from the republished accounts included in Bethany House’s *America’s Great Revivals*.

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